

David

Richard Jefferis

Richard
the
Writer

Self-published in Australia by Richard Jefferis,
aka Richard The Writer.

© Copyright Richard Jefferis 2021

The moral right of Richard Jefferis to be identified as
the author of this work has been asserted in accordance
with all relevant legislation.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may
be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or
transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic,
mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise,
without the prior permission of the above
copyright owner of this book.

This is a work of fiction and all characters herein
are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons,
living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Typeset, printed and bound by Richard Jefferis

www.richardthewriter.download

In the realm of theoretical physics, current thinking holds that there exists an infinite number of parallel universes. It follows, therefore, that if something can happen, it will either have already happened, is currently happening or will be happening in at least one of them.

What follows is a true and accurate account of something that happened.

Just not in our universe.

At least, not yet.

Chapter One

Begin at the beginning and end at the end, they say. Sounds simple, doesn't it.

Well, let me tell you, it isn't that simple. Time is a continuum and a multitude of events occur along that continuum and it is impossible to pinpoint the beginning of anything. Everything has causes and consequences and to say that this consequence begins with that cause is misleading as that cause is itself the consequence of another cause.

Does our, that is to say me and Angie's, experience begin with when we find out the truth or when we moved to Queensland? If we hadn't moved to Queensland we'd never have got involved but then again, if I hadn't realised a life ambition and retired early we would have still been in Sydney and never got involved. On the other hand, I could still have retired early and we could have moved to Queensland but if I hadn't opted to do a Masters in Computer Science back in the early 90s instead of continuing my Maths studies the consequences would have been vastly different. You could also argue that this has its beginnings back in the 1800s when explosions were heard in the Queensland Outback and Brisbane itself was a newly founded convict settlement. But even that far back isn't the beginning since the explosions were the consequence of some cause that had its origins still further back in time.

The same is true for the end. Nothing ever really ends for every event has a consequence and that consequence is the cause for something that happens afterwards. Certainly this account is a consequence but is it the end? No, of course not. There will be further consequences for myself and Angie as well as for everyone else involved and, I dare say, for those who weren't involved but still face the stream of consequences with no idea of the causes that lead to them.

It's a dilemma so, for want of anywhere better to start, I'll begin with the moment Angie and I were walking down the main street of Thrisk, the small town in Queensland that we moved to. She grabbed my arm and said ...

“Ohh, David, look! We must go in there!”

I turned to look in the direction she was pulling me and saw a small shop down a narrow lane that ran between Fruit and Root and Thrisk Valley Veterinary. It was a narrow lane, wide enough for two people to walk down its battered pavers but not wide enough for a car. There was an A board outside the shop, partially blocking the lane, which proclaimed to the world, or at least that part of the world that looked down the lane, that this was The House of Aatm Shaanti.

I don't imagine for one moment that it was the A board that had caught Angie's eye. After all, she would have had no idea who or what is or was Aatm Shaanti. I could, of course, be misrepresenting her but I very much suspect that what caught her eye, and this is based on extensive experience, were the brightly coloured clothes hanging from a rack behind the A board, blocking the rest of the lane, and the tasteful selection of dream-catchers, wind chimes and assorted paraphernalia of a certain type of shop. The type, incidentally, that Angie loves. I would also be misrepresenting myself if I said I didn't like such shops, it's just that I'm not into clothing. My body type is one that would give a fashionista nightmares. I do, however, like a nice wind chime and these places often have interesting other things and you never know what other things they might have unless you go inside and have a look. After all, from a marketing point of view, they'll put the things most likely to attract people outside but the esoteric specialities are tucked away inside.

Anyway, that is all by the by. The thing is, the board caught her eye and it marks the start of our new life. Moving house doesn't do that since you can move to another house and continue your old life more or less unchanged but The House of Aatm Shaanti marked, if only symbolically, the beginning of our integration into and acceptance of the small community of Thrisk (population 812, not including us) and our abandonment of the overcrowded and hustling community of Sydney (population well over 4 million).

"OK," I said and allowed myself to be pulled between the uneven brick wall of the old grocer's shop and the smooth concrete wall of the vet.

The House of Aatm Shaanti was the back room of the grocer's. No doubt in times past it had been a large store room for local produce

but now a lot of the local population went to the supermarket at Mossvale some 40 kilometres down the road where you could get your potatoes pre-cut into chips rather than have to peel and chop them yourself. I daresay it's more convenient over an extended period of time to drive the 80 km every now and then than it is to peel and chop potatoes every day and quaint charm is of little consequence to those who live their lives within it. We'd probably end up getting all our shopping from Mossvale as well soon enough.

Angie busied herself with the rack of long dresses, kaftans, saris and sarongs while I gave them a cursory glance then went to inspect the wind chimes. Our new house, half way up the small mountain on the western side of Thrisk valley, had a large verandah that was depressingly bare and simply crying out for a set or two of wind chimes. There were eight or nine hanging from a metal bar that stuck out from the wall and I simulated some wind with my thumb.

"I'm going inside," said Angie after a minute or two.

I looked up from my comparison of the auditory properties of two similar sized wind chimes and said "OK" before returning to my task. One had polished metal tubes and the other had knobbly bamboo tubes. The former had smooth clean visuals but sounded like any ordinary front door bell whereas the bamboo one clacked in a friendly way. It also had small green frogs painted on the tubes. Frankly it was not a difficult choice. I lifted the bamboo chime off its hook and followed Angie inside.

The place was slightly dark and smelt strange. Not in any nasty sense, more from an odd mixture of fragrances from several incense sticks that were burning. There seemed to be quite a lot of stuff on shelves, hanging from the ceiling and piled on small tables so I started to browse. Angie was looking through a pile of long, brightly coloured socks packed around a sign that proclaimed 'Sale ~ \$3 each'. No doubt she was looking for a pair that would go nicely with the red, yellow and green garment draped over her arm.

A lot of the stuff was the usual slightly tacky stuff that is offered to tourists in the hope that their holiday euphoria would lead them to buy something they normally wouldn't even consider. Sets of purple

plastic monkeys, for example, with their eyes, ears and mouth covered or those garishly painted China cats that sit on their backsides with one front paw raised that moves backwards and forwards and is supposed to bring good luck into your home. I moved around, touching the occasional item here and there then I spotted some Tarot cards and called Angie over.

“Ooooh!” she said and hurried over. She was an aficionado of Tarot cards and had quite a collection.

I left her to it and started to browse through some large squares of batik. I'd just found a rather nice one green one decorated with brown elephants and was holding it up to see it properly when the large Buddha sitting on the counter nearby sprouted another head and said “Hello!” in a cheerful, friendly voice. I jumped and did a double take.

“Like batik do you?” asked the Buddha.

“Some,” I said frowning at the head.

The Buddha's second head had a long plaited beard and long hair pulled back into a rough ponytail. A body emerged from behind the counter and the head came with it, which was something of a relief.

“They're hand made in Bali,” said the man.

Interestingly enough, he was dressed in tatty jeans and plain blue t-shirt rather than something esoteric but I was only assuming he worked there. He may not have done.

“Oh yes,” I said. “This one's nice. How much is it?”

He named a price and I winced.

“And this?” I asked holding up the wind chime. I winced again.

“David, look at this,” said Angie, bustling over with a pack of cards in her hand. “I've never seen Templar Tarot cards before. Oh, hello.”

“Hello,” beamed the man. “They're unusual, aren't they. Quite rare

too.”

“They have unusual designs,” said Angie. “15th century?”

“13th, I believe,” said the man. “I’ve got a book about them somewhere.”

He started to tap his front teeth with a finger nail while looking a little helplessly around the shop.

“I’m just not sure where Josephine put it,” he said.

“It’s probably with the other Tarot cards,” I said. “That would seem a sensible place to put a book about Tarot cards.”

“You would think so, wouldn’t you,” said the man.

He drifted over to where the sets of Tarot cards were arranged and studied them.

“Not to worry,” he said. “It’ll turn up. Are you passing through?”

“We’ve just moved here,” said Angie. “We were exploring the town and saw your shop.”

“How nice,” said the man. “I am Desmond.”

“Angie,” said Angie, “and this is David, my husband.”

“So if you’d like to pop in another day,” said Desmond. “I’ll asked Josie where she put that book and set it aside for you.”

“Oh, that would be great,” said Angie. “Do you want that batik, David?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “It is nice but ...”

“I’ll tell you what,” said Desmond, “if you’re having the cards, the sarong and the wind chimes, I’ll give you the batik as a welcoming present. Thrisk is a small place and we always welcome newcomers.

Where have you moved from?"

"Ohh, thank you," said Angie. "How nice. We're from Sydney."

"You'll find Thrisk very different," said Desmond. "I lived in Sydney for a year or so and hated the place. Whereabouts in Thrisk have you moved to?"

"We've bought a place on the other side of Mount Eyrie," said Angie.

I noticed a slight change come over Desmond's demeanour for some reason.

"Oh, how nice," he said in a way that didn't quite ring true.

"It's 12 acres," said Angie happily, not noticing, "and mostly woodland although it's on quite a steep slope. We love it there, don't we, David."

"Absolutely," I said as Desmond relieved me of the wind chime, "although it needs a fair amount of work."

"I can imagine," said Desmond, wrapping the chime in a couple of sheets of white butcher's paper.

"The first thing we have to do," continued Angie handing over the sarong, "is get a new driveway. The old one is almost impassable and we have to leave the car at the top and walk down. The removalists nearly got their truck bogged down."

Desmond folded the sarong neatly and put it on top the wind chimes.

"Yes, those places that side aren't well looked after," he said, taking the batik.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"I couldn't say," he said.

"Well," said Angie, "we couldn't have afforded it otherwise. Do you know anyone around here who does driveways? We'd rather have

someone local do it than get someone from Brisbane.”

Desmond thought about it while he found a paper carrier bag under the counter and put our purchases inside.

“Were you wanting bitumen?” he asked, “only I’ve seen signs by the road for someone over in Mossvale who does bitumen.”

“It’ll take a lot of bitumen to cover those ruts,” I said. “I don’t know enough about these things to know what needs to be done.”

“Best you talk with Shayne at the hardware and hire shop,” said Desmond. “He hires out ‘dozers and bobcats. He’ll know about driveways.”

“Is that the big place on the corner?” I asked.

“Sure is,” said Desmond. “Cash or card?”

“Card,” said Angie as she rarely carries more cash than is needed to buy a coffee or two. “Shall we go there now, David?”

“Might as well,” I said. “It’s not far.”

“So how are you liking Thrisk?” asked Desmond, pushing over the swiping machine.

“We haven’t seen much of it,” said Angie, keying in her PIN. “We had a quick drive around when we came up before buying the property but today’s our first chance to have a proper look around. There seems to be a lot of cafes.”

Desmond laughed. “It’s all tourists now,” he said as he tore off the little printout and slipped it inside the carrier bag. “Only thing keeping this town going.”

“That’s a shame,” said Angie, picking up the carrier bag. “I suppose people prefer to move to Brisbane.”

“That’s where the money is,” said Desmond. “Nice to meet you, Angie,

and you, David.”

“Don't forget that book,” said Angie. “I'll drop in again tomorrow.”

“No worries,” said Desmond. “Have a nice day.”

“Byee,” said Angie, walking outside.

“Oh, bye,” I said, following her.

“Interesting shop,” said Angie, “I'm going to like it here. Shall we have a coffee?”

“I want to talk to Shayne,” I said. “Get things moving with the drive.”

“Which way is it?” asked Angie.

“That way,” I said, pointing to the left at the end of the lane. “It's on the corner.”

We decided to walk as it wasn't far. The entire town centre was barely half a kilometre from one end to the other.

“So there's the veggie shop and the vet,” said Angie, “and a pub and a cafe. I don't see a butcher anywhere, or a bakery unless one of these cafes is a bakery as well.”

“Maybe that's why people go to Mossvale for their shopping,” I said, “or they get their meat from the local farmers.”

“And a hairdresser,” said Angie, as we passed it. “I need to get my hair done. I'll meet you at the hardware shop.”

“I won't be that long,” I said. “Just asking if they know anyone who does driveways. Maybe five minutes at most.”

“I'm not going to get my hair done now,” said Angie, turning back. “Just make an appointment.”

“Oh, OK,” I said. “Right, then.”

We went our separate ways and a minute or so later I pushed open the door to the hardware shop. It was by far the biggest building in town but seemed small and cramped inside with teetering piles of bagged fertiliser and cattle feed like World War One trench embankments. Through a narrow gap I spotted a counter with someone in overalls counting what looked like bath taps. I tried to find a way through the maze but couldn't so I squeezed through the narrow gap and pushed back a sack that was threatening to fall. A thin dribble of strong smelling black dirt trickled from a small slit near the end.

"Hello," I said.

The overalled figure looked up. He looked to be about 14 and wore sunglasses.

"Thirteen," he said.

"I'm sorry?" I said, puzzled. Was he telling me his age?

"Taps," he said irritably. "Should be fourteen."

"Oh," I said, wondering if he thought I'd taken one.

He scowled and wrote something on a dirty scrap of paper.

"What can I do you for?" he asked, the scowl staying put.

"Are you Shayne?" I asked.

"Depends who's asking," he said, looking around.

I felt a little lost. I'm not the greatest when it comes to social skills so I generally leave the talking to Angie who is an expert and this conversation was not going as expected. It didn't help that I couldn't see his eyes.

"Umm," I said. "I was told to talk to Shayne about driveways,"

"And who told you that?" he asked. "Uh hah!"

He pounced like a cat on a small cardboard box on the bottom shelf of a high rack and pulled out a tap.

"You little bugger," he said lovingly and crossed out what he had scribbled before and wrote something else down.

"Driveways, huh," he said beaming at me. "Whaddyah wanna know 'bout driveways?"

"I've just moved here," I said, disorientated by his sudden change of mood. "And the old driveway is just about impassable without a four wheel drive." I decided that he probably was Shayne.

"So get a four wheel drive," he said with a laugh. "You looking at bitumen or gravel?"

"I have no idea," I said. "What are they?"

"Bitumen's like yer road, out there," he said, nodding in the direction of what was probably the road. "Gravel's gravel with a bit of concrete mixed in to keep it stable, like."

"Oh," I said.

He moved the taps one by one to the end of the counter.

"So which is better?" I asked when it became apparent he'd finished talking.

"Depends on yer situation," he said with a shrug.

"Well, I have no idea," I said.

"You want us to have a look?" he asked.

"Do you know someone who does driveways?" I asked.

"We do," he said, pulling a dirty diary over and opening it. "I'll send Garth round. Tomorrow all right?"

“Umm, yes,” I said. “What sort of time?”

“’ee’s finishing another job tomorrow,” said Shayne, pushing a finger down the page. “Most likely before ’e starts.”

“OK,” I said.

“So where is it?” asked Shayne. He picked up a stub of thick pencil and licked the tip.

“3 Timber Court,” I said.

Shayne started to write the address then froze.

“That’ll be round other side of mountain,” he asked, his sunglasses pointing at me.

“Yes,” I said.

He stayed unmoving for a few moments then bent to finish writing the address.

“’Spose it’ll be right,” he muttered. “You’re not local. From outside?”

“Yes,” I said. “We’ve just moved up from Sydney.”

“Course, I’ll need the money up front,” he said, putting down his pencil firmly, “seeing as how you might be moving back.”

“We’re not planning on moving back,” I said. “How about half up front, if we decide to get the drive done?”

“Half up front and the balance when it’s done,” he said. “Can’t say fairer than that.”

“OK,” I said.

I heard a footstep somewhere behind me and looked around. Over the a pile of fertiliser I could just see the top of Angie’s head.

“Over here,” I called then turned back to Shayne. “So we’ll see Garth early tomorrow morning?”

“Reckon so,” he said.

“Great,” I said.

I looked around and Angie was peering at me through the narrow gap.

“Bye,” I said to Shayne

He nodded and closed his diary with a bang. I hesitated then squeezed back through the gap.

“Someone called Garth is coming round tomorrow morning to look at the drive,” I said.

“Great,” said Angie. She lead the way back out to the street. “Let’s go get a coffee. How about over there?”

“OK,” I said and followed her towards Beverly’s Country Cafe. “It was very strange.”

“What was?” asked Angie, pausing at the edge of the pavement. A large truck was coming towards us slowly.

“He said he wanted payment up front,” I said, watching the truck. “He seemed to think we’d be moving back to Sydney.”

Chapter Two

There is a very strong correlation between the sort of people who work best at night and the sort of people who are generally known by the label 'geek'. That doesn't mean there is necessarily a relationship as having a correlation merely says there's a similar pattern but that pattern may or may not have the same cause. The only reason I mention this is that I work best at night and I am, without a doubt, a computer geek. The job I walked away from in Sydney at the age of 50 was as Director of Research for a small, highly specialised computer company I had co-founded. Director of Research sounds pretty fancy but it wasn't really. The department only had one employee, me. I didn't even have a secretary, just a voice transcription system that saved and printed what I dictated.

Angie, though, was a morning person. She found the dawn fascinating and full of promise for the day ahead. On those odd occasions when I saw the dawn it was usually on my way to bed and I found dawns sad and depressing. In practical terms, I typically went to bed in the early hours of the morning and got up anywhere between 10am and midday, or sometimes later. Angie was usually in bed by 9pm and up before dawn. Elvis, our dog, had soon latched on to this. He got up with Angie and had first breakfast with her then went back to bed and got up and had second breakfast with me.

So, when I padded out onto the verandah with a cup of coffee and my ciggies in my dressing gown pocket the next day, Elvis was munching his way through a bowl of something crunchy that promised to do wonders for the glossiness of his coat and Angie had been up for 5 or 6 hours. No doubt she had had something that made her hair glossy as well.

"You were right," she said by way of greeting then went back to her book.

I stared at her blearily then slowly lowered myself into my chair and plonked my coffee down on the little table beside it.

I was tempted to say "and good morning to you too," but I hadn't even lit my first smoke and I simply couldn't be bothered. I looked out

over the woodland that lay beyond the verandah and noted that it seemed much as it had been the previous day then pulled out my smokes. I learned to roll cigarettes as a first year undergraduate in dire financial straits and, apart from a brief flirtation with tailor made cigarettes in my first job – I was trying to impress my boss with my sophistication and hadn't yet learned that the only thing a smoker can do to impress a non-smoker is to give up smoking – I had carried on hand rolling as I found the process soothing. There is a certain irony here, incidentally, as one day while I was outside the building being ostracised by the non smokers I was approached by a friendly woman who turned out to be a head hunter and poached me away to a rival company. Anyway, it was only after the fourth drag that I felt able to speak.

“Morning,” I said then took a sip of coffee. It was hot and sweet and I could feel the rejuvenating mixture of caffeine, nicotine and sugar course through my veins. I reflected that health food junkies must have a terrible time trying to wake up in the mornings.

Angie turned the page, looked up, smiled and went back to reading. She's used to my ways.

I stretched, yawned, scratched the inside of my thigh and halfheartedly speculated on what I might be right about. Nothing in particular came to mind.

“What was I right about?” I asked after a while. I started to roll another cigarette.

“Garth was round,” she said. “We had a long chat about drives.”

“Oh yes,” I said. “I don't know that I can take the credit for that though, his boss told him to.”

“Not that,” she said, a little impatiently. “You were right about it being strange.”

“It's strange that Garth does what he's told?” I asked, puzzled. “I've never met the guy. I wouldn't know about his attitude to authority.”

“No-oo, what you said yesterday,” she said.

Now, I know I'm not the most talkative of people but even I must get through a few hundred spoken words in a day and I don't pretend to remember all of them.

“Remind me,” I said.

“About moving back to Sydney,” she said, seemingly surprised that it wasn't at the forefront of my mind.

“We're moving back to Sydney?” I said. “But we've only just moved out.”

“No-oo,” she replied, closing her book. “It was something Garth said.”

“No, it was Desmond who said that,” I said. “I haven't met Garth.”

“Actually it was Shayne,” said Angie.

“Oh yeah,” I said remembering. “He wanted the drive money up front.”

“And Garth said the last owners did that,” she said.

“Well, what's strange about that?” I said. “People sell up and move all the time. Some of them must be moving to Sydney. It can't just be immigrants driving its growth.”

“They went to Melbourne,” she said.

“You're right,” I said, “that is strange. Why would anyone go to Melbourne when they could go to Sydney?”

“What are you talking about?” she said, looking puzzled.

“I have no idea,” I said. “Tell me what you thought was strange about Garth.”

“Well, everything, really,” she said and giggled.

"That's helpful." I wondered if it was unreasonable to have a third ciggie so quickly then noticed that the second had gone out so I re-lit it.

"He's doing the drive next week," she said. "Or maybe the week after. Depends when he can get the bulldozer. He's going to level it off then round it so the rain runs off the sides and make the turning circle in front of the house a little bigger and flatter."

"OK," I said. "Is he going to use bitumen?"

"Does bitumen use concrete?" she asked.

"I don't think so," I said. "I think it's like tar."

"Well, he's going to do something and sprinkle concrete dust on top and water it down," she said.

"Do you think he knows what he's doing?" I asked.

"He seemed to," she said.

"So did that guy who did our patio in Sydney," I said. "Just as well the guy who ripped it up after and re-did it knew what he was doing. Is it going to cost a lot?"

"He said Shayne would get back to us with a figure," she said.

"OK," I said. "You want a coffee?"

"I'll do it," she said getting up. "Only we were talking and Garth was saying that several people had had this place but all of them had sold up and moved somewhere else."

"It's a pretty old place," I said. "I'm not surprised it's had a few owners."

She paused in the doorway.

"He said they never stay long," she said. "Except one and they didn't

live here. Just had it as a weekender for a while then tried to rent it but didn't get any tenants."

"Most likely asking too much rent," I said. "You couldn't get city prices out here."

"I s'pose," she said. "But it made me think."

"Can I have tea instead?" I asked. "What did you think?"

"Sure you can," she said. "No, about Shayne thinking we'd move back pretty quickly and what you said about Desmond."

"You mean the way he froze?" I asked. "I could have imagined that."

"Still strange though," she said and disappeared.

I leaned back into the armchair and wondered about what was niggling at the back of my mind. Nothing surfaced immediately so I let my mind drift as that usually lets whatever is wanting to come out have the space to do so.

"Maybe it's too quiet here," I said when Angie came back out. "If they've lived in a city the silence here could get a bit unnerving. Maybe that's why the others sold up quite quickly."

"I guess," she said, "but isn't that the whole point of moving somewhere like this?"

"It was for us," I said, "but we have no way of knowing what motivated the others. Anyway, it's particularly quiet here as we have no neighbours."

"There's that man at number 2," said Angie. "The real estate agent said he's a recluse though so he probably doesn't have wild parties."

"1 is up for sale," I pointed out, "and she said that 4 and 5 don't even have any buildings on them. There's only us and whoever lives at 6 and 7, oh, and the recluse."

"That's true," said Angie thoughtfully. "We've been here three days and no one has even driven past."

"I thought I heard a car earlier," I said. "I half woke then went back to sleep."

"That was Garth," she said. "He's got an old ute and there's a hole in the exhaust. Makes a hell of a noise."

"That's it!" I said, slapping my thigh. The thing that had been niggling had surfaced. "Where's my phone?"

"Where you left it," she said, startled. "What's 'it'?"

"What I wanted to show you," I said, getting up. "I've just remembered. Just got to find my phone."

I went into the lounge and searched around and eventually found my phone underneath the book I'd been reading the night before.

"Look," I said, going back out to Angie. "I was reading last night and something crashed into the verandah door so I went to see what it was."

"What is it?" asked Angie, looking at a grey blob on a dark shadow against a black background, all harshly lit by the flash of my phone's camera.

"It's an owl," I said. "Look, that's the corner post of the verandah rail. It must have flown into the door then gone to sit on the post to recover."

"Ohh, the poor thing," said Angie, immediately concerned. "Was it hurt?"

"Didn't seem to be," I said. "I went back a while later and it had gone."

"Did you look down?" asked Angie. "It might have fallen off."

“Never crossed my mind,” I admitted. I got up and peered over the rail. There was no sign of a dead or unconscious owl beside the water tank or on top of it. “Nothing there now.”

“Oh, we need to go to Toowoomba over the weekend,” said Angie.

“Why's that?” I asked.

“Dead Horse Harry's coming to fit the new cooker on Monday,” she said, “so we'd better get one.”

“Who's Dead Horse Harry?” I asked.

“He's an electrician,” said Angie. “Garth recommended him and I rang him just before you got up.”

“I hope the horse wasn't killed by an electric shock,” I commented.

“I wondered about that too,” said Angie. “I didn't like to ask him why he was called that in case he really did kill his horse.”

“Maybe he just looks like a dead horse,” I said. “Or smells like one,” I added as an afterthought.

Angie wrinkled her nose in disgust. “Well, he won't be here long,” she said sadly. “We'd better get some air freshener too.” She sighed and picked up her book.

“What are you reading?” I asked.

“That book about the Tarot of the Templars,” she said, lifting it slightly to show me the cover.

It was called *The Grail Tarot ~ A Templar Vision* and had a old looking picture on the cover showing some knights in armour on horseback waving lots of flags and some desert in the background. I vaguely remembered the Knights Templar had arisen from the Crusades.

“You have had a busy day,” I said. “Is it interesting?”

“Very,” she said, flicking backwards a page or two. “It says here that those who were chosen to guard The Holy Grail were called Templars by the poet Wolfram von Eschenbach back in 1220 and the author ...,” she flipped the book to look at the cover, “... John Matthews, says that the Grail could have been a factor in the destruction of the Order in 1307.”

“Isn't the Grail just a big cup?” I asked. “Why would they be destroyed by a cup?”

“No one knows quite what the Grail was,” she said, “but the Templars were taken out because they'd grown too rich and powerful. The French King ...,” and she flipped through the first few pages to find the right place, “... Phillip the Fourth had them charged with heresy. It says here that he tried to join the Order but they rejected him.”

“More likely he owed them money,” I said drily. “Why would he want to be one of them if they were heretics.”

“I've only just started reading it,” she said, “and I don't know much about the Templars. But what's really fascinating is that the pictures of the Major Arcana form a continuous frieze if you lay them side by side in order.”

“Really?” I said, my curiosity aroused. “Can I see?”

She picked up the cards and rifled through them then handed me a small stack. I shuffled through them and saw that they were already in order so I started to lay them out on the table. Most of the cards were individual scenes but you could see from the background that they all joined together in sequence.

“That's pretty cool,” I said. “So what do they all mean? Are they the same as your other Tarot cards?”

“I haven't finished reading about them yet,” she said, not looking up from the book.

I had the feeling I'd been dismissed but since I was used to that I wasn't bothered. Besides, Angie was very tolerant of the many times I

disappeared into thought or stayed at my computers for days on end working on some interesting project.

I finished my tea and got dressed then went down to the shed to investigate it. We'd peeked inside when we first inspected the property but it had been crammed full of junk and had been almost impossible to get in. The agent, Rashlene, had promised that it would all be removed before settlement and, incredibly, almost everything had gone. All that remained was an old, stained mattress and a half empty can of paint.

The shed itself was huge and it looked even bigger now that it was empty. It had a slight metallic echo as well. We'd talked about what to do with it and, since we had little in the way of garden tools, I was thinking of sectioning it off with part being for an office, of sorts, for me, another part being a library, if and when we got around to unpacking all our books and re-assembling our bookcases and the small bit left over for housing our small collection of tools and gardening implements. Certainly there wasn't room in the house for my three computers and all the books.

I spent a while just sitting on the concrete floor absorbing the ambience. Some buildings are conducive to thought and work and others aren't. I have no idea why but I've heard that there have been some studies on this and some architects try to take this into account when doing their designs. After a while I got the feeling that with the mattress gone and something to deaden the echo it would be a reasonable place so I got up and checked the power supply.

When I was in my late 20s a friend I had made while doing my Masters in Computer Science had contacted me and proposed that we get together to set up a computer business. I had mulled it over for, ohh, at least two hours and agreed. What took me so long was that it involved moving to Australia and the prospect of migrating was a little daunting as I am not a great fan of bureaucracies. We set up Secure Data Systems which later became SDS Pty Ltd and I handled the more theoretical and technical side while Clarke handled the public relations and selling side. That wasn't to say that he didn't have the computer skills, he did, but he also had the selling skills which I lacked. This was in the late 1990s when 'Big Data' was starting to

become a thing.

The idea of Big Data is fairly simple. You collect as much data as possible about whatever it is you are interested in, usually people and their buying habits but it could be anything, then analyse it in every way you can to come up with new and interesting relationships that might be used for some purpose, such as influencing future purchasing decisions. Now, something I had been working on was the use of Artificial Intelligence to come up with new ways of analysing the data. As most AI systems need a lot of data from which to learn, it was a fairly productive mix. Clarke's concern was slightly different. His interest was in dirty data or rather, keeping the data clean so it doesn't become dirty data.

Now, if you have a small amount of data, such as the accounts for a small company, if there is an error in the data, thus making it dirty data, it will probably get spotted soon enough by one of the employees. Conversely, as Big Data usually operates on the terabyte and upwards scale, if you have an error in the data it doesn't actually matter since it gets swamped by the sheer scale of the data. If you have the purchasing records of a million people then an error in one transaction for one person isn't going to make the slightest difference.

But what if you have an error that affects a large amount of that data? What if a virus gets into the database and does nasty things to most of the data? It could be catastrophic, in much the same way that a parasite munching on an apple isn't an issue but that same parasite in a warehouse of apples could get seriously bad. Still, viruses, although a damned nuisance, are known and can be dealt with. This was, in fact, one aspect of our mission; to protect Big Data systems from viruses and, if found, cleanse the system.

Another aspect, and one that was in many ways more important, was that data can become dirty in other ways as well. In order for the data to be analysed it has to be put into a database and to do that it has to be collected from somewhere and transmitted somehow to the database. The difficulty with Big Data is that it typically has hundreds of thousands or even millions of sources and a myriad of ways of being transmitted. Just think, for example, about the data from internet purchasing. On any given day there will be millions of

purchases through millions of web sites, all with varying methods of data collection and levels of security (and, let's be honest, varying skills in programming the web site) and the collected data is sent through hundreds of thousands of computers, routers and other devices along wires, optical cables and wirelessly. The potential for systemic error is immense.

That was where we came in. Our mission was to boldly go where no data security company had gone before. To seek out systemic errors in systems that were not ours and find ways to cleanse them so that the vast quantities of data pouring into the Big Data databases was as clean as possible.

We got pretty good at it too, which is why I was able to take early retirement and bugger off to Queensland. Of course, being me, I took my three computers with me even though I wasn't going to be involved in that line of work anymore. In fact, I had no intentions of being involved in any line of work, it's just that I had got attached to those computers. I'd built and programmed them myself and they and I had adapted to each other. We were a team.

Chapter Three

"We've been invited to afternoon tea," I said, walking in the door.

"What was that?" asked Angie, looking up from the couch on the verandah.

I closed the front door as the cat was prowling and looked suspiciously as though it was going to make a break for it.

"I stopped at the post office on the way back," I said dumping the shopping on the kitchen counter. "There was a note in our PO box from someone called Angus inviting us to afternoon tea on Sunday."

"Who's Angus?" she asked, putting down her book and looking up in puzzlement.

"I imagine it's the chap who lives at the end of the road," I said, going out onto the verandah. "The address is number 7."

"In this road?" she asked, twisting to put her feet on the floor.

"Yes," I said. "Here," and proffered the note.

She took it and studied it intently.

"How very strange," she said after a while.

"What was that?" I called. I was back in the kitchen busying myself putting the food and other odds and ends of shopping away.

"I said, it's very strange," she repeated.

"Yes," I said. "Do you fancy sausages for dinner or lamb chops or shall I get something out of the freezer?"

"Oh, whatever you fancy," she said, coming in.

I didn't see a lot of point getting something out of the freezer when there were fresh things about to go into the freezer so I put a packet

of sausages aside.

"How does Angus know who we are?" she asked. "It says 'Dear David and Angela'."

"It's a small town," I said, ripping open a packet of lamb chops. I usually bought them in packs of six and wrapped them in pairs in plastic film before putting them in the freezer. That way they were easier to get out and defrost for one meal. "I'm sure we've been discussed by the locals. Since Angus is our neighbour, more or less, I guess he's just being neighbourly."

"And what's 'afternoon tea'," she asked. "Isn't that some weird English thing?"

"It's not weird," I said, stacking several sets of lamb chops in the freezer. "But it is English. I don't think you Aussies do that sort of thing. You're not sophisticated enough."

She hit me with the note but fortunately it was written on paper not a stone slab so it didn't hurt.

"Hey, you chose to move here among us colonial savages, cobber," she said. "So what is afternoon tea? Is it like breakfast tea?"

"Oh god, no," I said, resting my hands on the counter. "Breakfast tea is that stuff in tea bags. Afternoon tea is where you have fancy little cakes and sandwiches and bitch politely about the neighbours."

"Are you serious?" she said, looking at me wide eyed. "You think we've pissed them off already?"

I laughed. "No, I was joking about that but, yeah, afternoon tea is cakes and scones and stuff like that. It's more of a social thing and less formal than dinner."

"Well, we ought to go," she said. "We ought to get to know the neighbours anyway. It's not like this is a big city where we can ignore them. We don't want to make enemies so soon."

"I suppose so," I said, putting the tub of margarine and block of cheese in the fridge. "It's not like we have anything else to do on Sunday. I wonder how he knew which box to put the note in?"

"The box number isn't on the note," said Angie, re-reading it. "He probably gave it to Nancy at the Post Office and she put it in. She knows everyone in town."

"Yeah, you're probably right," I said, putting the milk in the fridge. I bundled up the shopping bags and stuffed them in a drawer. "Fancy a coffee?"

"I'll make it," she said, moving over to the kettle. "You want yours in the lounge or outside?"

"Outside," I said. "It's a lovely day."

"OK," she said. "Only be a moment."

"Thanks," I said.

I kicked off my shoes and pushed them untidily beside the front door with my foot, then pulled off my socks and stuffed them inside the shoes. I went to hang my keys on the hook beside the door but they weren't hanging from my belt loop. Puzzled, as I always put my keys back on my belt after I locked the car, I patted my pockets then looked around.

"I've lost my keys," I said.

"They're there," said Angie, nodding towards the end of the counter.

"Ohh," I said and grabbed them. For some reason I must have kept them in my hand when I carried in the shopping. I hung them up and went onto the verandah.

After we'd had our offer on this property accepted, Angie had spotted a couch and an armchair in an op shop and we'd bought them as she thought they'd be perfect for putting on the verandah when we got here. They were in OK condition but were cheap and perfect for

leaving outside. The armchair sagged a bit but it was comfy enough and I had claimed it. Angie preferred the couch. Since the weather in Queensland is generally sunny, we planned to spend a lot of time on the verandah.

I lit a cigarette and plonked my feet on the verandah rail.

“This is the life,” I said to myself, wriggling my pale white toes.

I confess I was feeling rather pleased with myself. I'd fulfilled a life objective by turning my back on the IT world at the age of fifty and Angie and I had moved to Queensland. It had taken a little while, but we'd found a property that we liked on the edge of the little town of Thrisk. Brisbane was far enough away to be irrelevant but, at 150km or thereabouts, was close enough if we ever sought the bright city lights again. Toowoomba, another biggish place, wasn't that far away either. Anyway, we'd bought twelve acres of woodland on the side of a hill with the town at the bottom of the other side. The house itself was a little run down although quite serviceable but the woodland had been left to its own devices for a number of years and needed some attention. There were three or four dead trees near the house, for example, that needed to come down before they fell and took out the roof. Still, I was 52, Angie was 48 and we had a rural idyll and no responsibilities.

I sighed with contentment and let my eyes range over the treetops then bent forward and pulled off my tee shirt. It was the middle of winter and the locals, who were used to Queensland weather, thought it was cold but we were fresh up from chilly Sydney and to us it was warm. Sitting back I took a drag on my ciggie then scowled at the dead tree barely two metres from the verandah.

“There you go,” said Angie, putting my coffee mug on the little table beside my chair.

“Thanks,” I said. “We really need to get someone to cut that thing down. It'll probably collapse in the next storm.”

“I asked Mandy in the hairdresser's,” she said, sitting on the couch. “She said not to bother looking in the Yellow Pages or online as no

one will come out this far.”

“Oh great,” I said, looking at the tip of my cigarette. “So what do we do?”

“She’ll ask around, she said,” said Angie. She put her feet on the couch. “Apparently there’s always someone who’ll do anything for cash, it’s just a matter of knowing who to talk to. That’s how it works in the country.”

“I was hoping to get someone out next week,” I said. “How long will Mandy take to ask around?”

“No idea,” said Angie. “She’s got my number and I’ve got another appointment next month anyway. I can ask her then.”

“Next month?” I said, looking over. “What if it falls down before that?”

“It’s been standing for hundreds of years,” said Angie, smoothing Angus’ note over her knee. “It should last a few more weeks. Anyway, the wet season’s not for a few months.”

“Hmm,” I said, somewhat irritably.

“It’ll be right,” she said. “We’re not in Sydney any more. We have to adapt to the local ways.”

“I suppose,” I said. “I’m just used to picking up the phone and getting things done straight away.”

“Just relax,” she said soothingly. “We moved here to be relaxed so it’s time you started. This is a funny note, isn’t it.”

“How do you mean?” I asked. I dropped my cigarette into the jam jar I used as an ashtray and picked up my coffee mug. It was too hot so I put it down quickly.

“Dear David and Angela,” she read aloud. “You are cordially invited to afternoon tea next Sunday at 4pm. Kind regards, Angus.”

“What's wrong with that?” I asked.

“The wording,” she said. “Who says 'cordially'?”

“OK, it is a bit old fashioned,” I said, “and a bit on the formal side.”

“Sounds like something you would write,” she said. “Maybe Angus is English, too.”

“Scottish more likely,” I said, “with a name like Angus. How would an Aussie have written it?”

“They wouldn't write,” said Angie. “They'd just drop in and invite us down the pub or maybe to a barbie. What should I wear for afternoon tea?”

“Whatever you want,” I said. “Why are my feet so white?”

“You never take your shoes and socks off,” she said.

“I'm not wearing them now,” I pointed out.

“We need to get you some thongs,” she said. “Get some sun on them. Your toenails need cutting.”

I waggled my toes again and perhaps the toenails were a trifle on the long side.

“I'll do them later,” I said.

“If it's formal we ought to dress up,” mused Angie. “What do the English wear for afternoon tea?”

“I've no idea,” I said, putting my feet down. I found their whiteness a little offensive now and made a resolution to get a sun tan on my feet. Perhaps some of that fake tan cream would do in the interim. “I never got invited to afternoon teas.”

“What are you going to wear?” she asked.

“Shorts and a tee shirt, I suppose,” I said. “That’s what Aussies seem to wear for all social occasions.”

“But Angus is English,” she said, “or Scottish. What if he expects us to dress up?”

“He could be Chinese for all we know,” I said, “but he’s in Australia so he’s got to fit in with the Australian way of doing things. Besides, if it was formal it would say so in the note, I would think.”

“What do you mean?” asked Angie.

“Ohh, something like evening dress or top hat and tails or something,” I said. “I don’t know. I was 27 when I came to Australia and I never went to formal things anyway. I lived in jeans back then. Jeans and a jumper.”

“Should we drive?” she asked.

“Drive where?” I asked, surprised at the sudden change in topic.

“To Angus’,” she said.

“Why would we drive there?” I asked. “He’s only just up the road.”

“We’ve got a long driveway,” she said, “and he’s at the end of the road and his property’s probably a lot bigger than ours. His driveway could be a couple of kilometres long and uphill all the way.”

“Actually that’s a good point,” I said thoughtfully. “All we can see from here is a bit of the driveway and a lot of trees. I’ll look it up on Google Maps.”

“I wonder if he’s married,” she said.

“No idea,” I said, getting up to get my laptop. “Probably not. If he was he’d have said his wife’s name in the note. You know, from Angus and Mary or whatever her name is.”

“I suppose,” said Angie, looking at the note again to see if she could

extract any more information from it. "He's got nice handwriting. Very elegant. Is that copperplate?"

"I don't really know," I said, looking over her shoulder. "It's very legible though, isn't it."

She said something but I'd gone inside so I didn't hear what it was. Almost certainly it was about my handwriting which is nearly illegible. I'd been working with computers for a little over thirty years and virtually everything I wrote was with a keyboard. When I was in my early thirties and bought my first house I had to create a new signature because I had completely forgotten my old one.

The note from Angus had become a bookmark when I got back with my laptop although Angie wasn't reading. She was watching a couple of bright red and green birds; parrots or galahs or macaws or something. Not being a bird person I forget these things.

"Looks like the driveway is only a couple of hundred metres," I said a short while later, "and it looks to be mostly uphill. The property is pretty big though. I'd say a hundred acres, maybe more. Looks like he's got most of the west side of the mountain."

"How big's the house?" asked Angie. She had her eyes shut and her face turned to the sun.

"Small," I said. "Looks to be smaller than ours. Maybe only one or two bedroom so he probably does live alone. I'll see if I can find any pictures."

"That's strange," I reported a couple of minutes later. "There's no online sales history."

"That's not strange," said Angie, not opening her eyes. "It just means he's been there a long time. When did they start putting real estate sales info online?"

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "Maybe twenty or thirty years ago."

"So he's lived there more than thirty years," she said, opening her

eyes. "Maybe he's the local hermit. He must be pretty old."

"If he is he wouldn't be inviting new neighbours round," I said, "and he could be young. Might have been born there."

"I suppose," she said, "but the note seems like an old man's."

"Yeah, you're probably right," I said. "We'll go in the car. I don't fancy walking all that way uphill and arriving all sweaty. Besides, it might be dark when we come back."

"It's only afternoon tea," said Angie, "not a sleepover."

"It's winter," I pointed out. "Sunset's around 5. I don't see us scoffing cakes and crumpets and getting away in under an hour."

"Better wear tights, then," she said. "Mozzies."

"Good thinking," I replied. "I'll wear some trousers, then."

* * *

I tossed the frisbee and watched it sail in a graceful arc over some bushes to land in front of the shed. Elvis chased after it, yapping excitedly. He tried to pick it up but it slid so he put a paw on top to stop it moving then came running back to drop it at my feet. I pretended to throw it towards the shed again and he ran after it then stopped when he realised and looked at me accusingly.

"Come on boy," I said, temptingly wagging the frisbee.

Elvis curled his lip to show his disgust that I hadn't thrown the thing and slowly trotted towards me. I waited until he was about halfway then suddenly threw the frisbee directly at him but quite high in the air. He leapt into the air with a backspin like a karate expert and caught the frisbee mid air. He landed with a thump and proudly came trotting back, tail wagging excitedly. He dropped it at my feet again and backed away expectantly, his eyes locked on my hands.

I glanced at my watch.

"It's ten to four," I called up to the open window.

"Alright," called back Angie. "I'm nearly ready."

'Nearly' is a word that lacks precision so I threw the frisbee again and it neatly skittered off a rock and disappeared under the house. Elvis didn't care and disappeared under the house after it. He reappeared a few moments later and trotted over. I heard the toilet flush.

"OK, game over," I said, taking the frisbee.

Elvis backed away expectantly but I turned and headed for the steps to the front door. He barked a couple of times to encourage me.

"Sorry, boy," I said. "You've got to go in now. Come on."

I clicked my fingers and he stood there disappointedly then sat down.

"Come on, Elvis," I said.

I could hear footsteps on the wooden floorboards inside.

"Elvis!" I barked. "Inside!"

He slunk towards me, every hair on his body showing his contempt for my lack of stamina, and paused at the bottom step just in case this was a ploy on my part to catch him off guard. The door opened and he reacted as though I had thrown the frisbee then stared at me. Angie came out and shut the door.

"Just a sec," I said. "Elvis has to go in."

She re-opened the door and I threw the frisbee in. Elvis hurtled after it, his claws clattering on the boards. She shut the door quickly.

"Ready?" I asked.

"Shall I lock it?" she replied, which presumably meant "yes".

"Don't bother," I said. "This is Thrisk."

“OK,” she said, coming down the wooden steps. “Have you got the biscuits?”

“They're in the car,” I said.

Part of my education when I came to Australia was that you always took something to a social function. Since this was afternoon tea, Angie had deemed that a six pack of stubbies or tinnies, the offering of choice in Australia, wasn't appropriate and since we were expecting cakes she thought biscuits would be a good idea. To be safe we had a large packet of assorted creams. I'd got them from Fruit and Root in town the previous day, who had a choice of those or Tim Tams Original. I found it faintly off-putting that a greengrocer sold biscuits but since there was nowhere else in town that did it was either that or drive the 80km round trip to the supermarket.

We got in the car and, rather than do a seven-point turn in the narrow driveway I reversed cautiously up the slope, keeping a close eye on the row of boulders that served as edging stones and managing to avoid the worst of the ruts and potholes. No doubt in time I'd get used to the edging stones but at the moment they made me nervous.

At the top of the drive I came to a halt then reversed out into the road. It was a little unnecessary as the only traffic likely to go past was to Angus at number 7 and we had never seen or heard any vehicles go past but old habits die hard. I put the car into first and we slowly ground up the hill. The driveway to number 7 began where the road ended and was marked by a rusty iron gate that hung from one hinge and was half overgrown. It had probably been thirty years since it was last shut. There were some tufts of grass and a few weeds growing in the driveway.

“Maybe we should get a four wheel drive,” I remarked, negotiating a large pothole. “Seems a bit run down, doesn't it.”

“I'm just hoping we're not going to be overdressed,” said Angie. “You said the house was small. Do you think it's just a glorified shed?”

“We'll find out in a minute,” I said. “I think it's just around the bend.”

“Oh my god,” said Angie in astonishment as we rounded the corner.
“Would you just look at that!”

Chapter Four

I stopped the car roughly where the rutted dirt track turned to gravel and we just stared.

“Good god,” I said, speechless. The place was huge.

It was only two stories high but seemed to spread out sideways far more than nature intended. As I slowly came to terms with it and began to take in details I realised that the house was, more or less, in the shape of an E laid on its side. The centre leg of the E didn't come out quite as far as the two end legs and held what must have been the front door although from where we sat it looked to be considerably more massive than the usual front doors. Directly above the front door, on the second floor, was a large ornate window and smaller windows littered the rest of the frontage. The building looked to have been built from speckled grey-red bricks and the roof was tiled with dark grey tiles. It sported a number of chimneys. Directly in front of the house was a narrow looking strip of flower beds with a few bushes here and there. Nestled in an inner corner of the E was a tall thin tree, bereft of any foliage.

“I certainly wasn't expecting that,” said Angie, looking serious.

“Well, no,” I said. “It certainly isn't your average weatherboard Queenslander, is it. God know how many bedrooms it has. It looks more like a hotel than a house. You don't suppose it is a hotel, do you?”

“I don't see any signage,” she said. “And if it was there'd be signs from town as well.”

“You're probably right,” I said. “A hotel like this would need to advertise its presence. Maybe this Angus is a rich recluse.”

“Oh dear,” said Angie. “I hope we're not dressed too casual. This looks a lot more upmarket than I was expecting.”

“I'm sure we'll be fine,” I said, not entirely convinced of that. I cleared my throat. “I suppose we ought to go on in.”

“Maybe we could turn around and go home,” suggested Angie hopefully. “We could drop a note in Angus’ PO box apologising for a sudden illness or something.”

“We’ve undoubtedly been spotted already,” I said, “and he’ll probably invite us again when we’ve got better. No, come on. It’ll be fine.”

I slowly drove forward and realised that we were on gravel and stopped again.

“The driveway is gravel,” I said, looking in the side mirror. Behind was dirt track. “No hotel would have a dirt track. And, look, the gravel goes all the way to the front of the house.”

“And there’s a fountain,” said Angie, pointing. “I didn’t see it at first.”

“So there is,” I said in surprise.

I think I’d been vaguely aware of it as a tree stump or something as I’d been concentrating on the house but now I actually looked at it I could see it was a stone circle with a figure on a column holding a vase or jug or something like that. Water was gently flowing out of the vase thing.

“And look at those over there,” said Angie. pointing to a couple of cars parked outside the far wing of the house, beyond the fountain. One looked to have been neatly parked, square on, but the other, an open sports car, looked more like the driver had driven up and just abandoned the car. Either way, both cars were very old fashioned in style.

“Maybe Angus is a rich old recluse who collects classic cars,” I said. “They look vintage to me. I’m getting intrigued. Come on.”

I drove on, the gravel crunching under the wheels, and steered carefully around the carelessly parked car to pull up neatly not far from the other.

“They’re beautiful old cars,” I remarked, getting out of ours and going to have a closer look. “They put our little Nissan to shame, don’t

they.”

The neatly parked car was large black and boxy. It looked immensely solid and had running boards and a spare wheel bolted to the engine housing. It gleamed and the badge on the back proclaimed it to be a Humber Snipe 80. I vaguely remembered the name Humber from my childhood in England. It only had two doors but as I peered inside I could see the rich leather of back seats.

“It is stylish,” said Angie, running her fingers over one of the large frog’s eye headlamps at the front. “Didn’t Prince what’s his name have one of these in that movie *The King’s Speech*?”

“I doubt it was a Humber,” I said, going over to look at the sports car. “He’d have had a Rolls or a Bentley I would think. Come and have a look at this.”

She came over to join me beside the open two-seater. It looked long and narrow although it was probably no longer than our Nissan Tiida. You’d expect a sports car to be a raunchy red or racing green but this one was a slightly unattractive pale blue.

“It doesn’t have a badge,” I remarked. “I wonder what it is?”

“It’s got two seats,” said Angie, “but they look awfully small. And look at those dinky little doors. I bet whoever owns this doesn’t bother opening them. It’d be easier to just jump out.”

“And look at those tyres,” I said, tapping one with my foot. “They’re not much wider than bicycle tyres.”

“I prefer that one,” she said, going back to the Humber. “It looks a lot more comfortable.”

“I wonder how fast it goes,” I said, staying beside the sports car. “Looks like a fun car though.”

Angie straightened up from peering in through the back window of the Humber and scanned the front of the house.

“No one has come to investigate,” she commented. “They must have heard us on the gravel.”

“Maybe Angus is round the back,” I said, giving the sports car a friendly pat. Its windscreen was jointed just above the bonnet so it could be laid flat. At the moment the windscreen was fully upright and the top of it barely reached my bottom ribs. “I’ll go and knock.”

I walked across the gravel to the front door and Angie hurried after me. It was wide enough for two people to walk through side by side and looked to be made of solid wood. The doorway was flanked by two faux columns, half embedded in the brickwork.

“Should I knock?” I asked. “There doesn’t seem to be a doorbell or a knocker.”

“What about that?” asked Angie, pointing to a metal rod that hung beside the door. It had a handle on it.

“I suppose,” I said and tugged it. It moved downwards a few centimetres and, far away inside, we heard a faint tinkle of a bell.

I suppose I half expected to hear slow footsteps echo as someone came to the door and loud creaking as it stiffly opened to reveal Bela Lugosi or Boris Karloff fronting a dark, gloomy hallway. Perhaps even a bat or two sweeping through the half open door. I’d been quite a fan of horror movies in my youth.

The reality was more surprising. The door was flung open almost instantly with barely a murmur and a young man stood there, looking relieved.

“Oh, here you are at last,” he cried then frowned and took a half step backwards. “Who the devil are you?”

“Oh, hello,” I said, a little taken aback by this greeting. “I’m Da...”

“Never mind,” he said, the frown disappearing. “You’ll find the others on the terrace. Toodle pip.”

He waved limply towards nowhere in particular and walked away briskly, leaving the door open.

“Umm, hello?” I said to his disappearing back.

“Through there,” he called waving a hand towards the back of the house. He disappeared through a doorway.

I looked at Angie and she looked back at me. Neither of us said anything for a few moments.

“Umm,” I said.

“What's 'toodle pip'?” she asked.

“I have no idea,” I said. “Do you suppose we should go through to the terrace?”

She shrugged and raised her eyebrows.

“This is very strange,” she said. “The others? You don't suppose that was Angus, do you?”

“If it was he seemed to be expecting someone else,” I said. “Do you think that woman at the post office put the note in the wrong PO box?”

“How many David and Angelas can there be in this town?” she asked.

“Maybe everyone's David and Angela,” I said. “We don't really know anyone yet.”

“We know Mandy and Nancy,” she said, “and they're not Angelas. And Angus isn't David.”

“Very true,” I replied, looking into the hallway. “It's a bit fancy, isn't it.”

Rather than being dark and gloomy the hallway, if you could call it a hallway as it looked big enough to hold a dance competition, was light

and airy and very spacious. A number of almost normal sized doors opened off it. There was an open door at the far end and sunlight streamed in.

“We'd better go in,” said Angie. “It's after four.”

“Yes,” I said trying to sound positive and decisive but instead it came out more as an uncertain drawl with a slight squeak at the end. “I suppose the terrace is at the back.”

I stepped through the door onto the polished timber floorboards then took another step onto the ornate but faded Persian rug that stretched the entire length of the hallway. I heard a single footstep behind me as Angie did the same.

Halfway along the hallway Angie exclaimed “Oh! I forgot the biscuits. They're in the car.”

“Leave them,” I said. “I have a feeling Arnott's Assorted Creams won't be appropriate here.”

Angie half turned then turned back again. “Yeah, you're probably right. This isn't a supermarket type of place.” She slipped her hand in mine, no doubt to feel a little safer. The place was somewhat intimidating.

After what seemed like an hour's walking we finally reached the other end of the hallway where there was a pair of large French doors, wide open. Beyond was a large paved area with wide steps leading down to a broad expanse of lawn.

“Nice view,” I commented and leaned through the doors to see if there was anyone there.

“I say, hello there,” said a friendly voice some way behind us.

It was a warm voice, mid way between bass and tenor. I felt Angie's hand jerk in surprise.

We both turned and banged shoulders as the voice said “You must be

David and Angela.” Angie stumbled slightly as she is somewhat lighter than I am. “Welcome, welcome. I’m Angus, Angus Stubbs.”

A large man, perhaps in his mid to late fifties, was marching towards us, a friendly smile on his face and his right hand extended. He was a fraction shorter than me but broader in the shoulder and his belly was, slightly, more prominent than mine. His face was tanned and a little weather-beaten and his salt and pepper beard was cropped quite short but came to a neat point below his chin. He exuded a cheerful sense of competency that positively demanded you liked him at first meeting.

I moved forward a couple of steps to meet him, letting go of Angie’s hand, and he grabbed my upper arm with his left hand and pumped my hand with the other vigorously.

“I’m David Fernly ...,” I started, wincing slightly as it felt like my arm was being crushed in two places simultaneously.

“Delighted, delighted,” he said enthusiastically.

I got the feeling his clear blue eyes had already assessed and dissected my character.

“... and this is my wife, Angela,” I finished.

The power grip on my arm was released and he turned to Angie who held out her hand, no doubt expecting a quick handshake. Instead Angus took her hand and raised it to his lips.

“Charming,” he said, his eyes twinkling, “absolutely ravishing, my dear.”

“Oh!” said Angie in surprise as this was not a typical Australian greeting. Then I swear she simpered. “Ahh, how nice to meet you, Mr Stubbs.”

“Captain Stubbs,” he said with a beaming smile. I noticed his teeth, although white, were uneven and one at the front was chipped. “But do please call me Angus and I shall call you Angela. Come and meet

the gang.”

Without giving us time to think he propelled us through the French doors, one hand on my shoulder and the other around Angie's waist.

“This way,” he said, leading us off to the right. “Our guests have arrived,” he called to a group of people sitting in deckchairs further along the terrace.

A man stood up as Angus brought us over and moved slightly away from the group. He had a half smile but seemed somewhat diffident. One of the women jumped up as well and went to stand beside the man. The other two women stayed seated but both looked up expectantly.

“This is my wife, Henrietta.” said Angus, letting go of Angie's waist to take the hand of a much younger and extraordinarily beautiful woman in a brightly coloured floral frock. “Hettie, this is David and Angela, our new neighbours.”

His tone of voice had changed as he said this. It seemed more subdued and patient, as though he was talking to a young child. When I looked into Hettie's eyes I understood why. Her light brown eyes looked at me with child-like innocence and I sensed at once that she wasn't entirely there.

“Hello,” she said happily. “Would you like a cream bun? They're scrumptious!”

“In a moment, my dear, in a moment,” said Angus quietly. “Let me finish the introductions.”

Hettie looked for a moment like a chastised puppy and turned her head to look out over the lawn. I had a feeling that, for her at least, I had ceased to exist. Angus sighed very quietly.

“And this is my sister, Emma,” he said, holding out his hand to the other seated woman. She was in her late forties or perhaps early fifties and decidedly plain. She wore a long plain brown pleated skirt and a matching knitted jumper.

“Hello,” she said gruffly, lifting her hand towards me. “So you’ve moved in, have you? How d’you like the place?”

“Very much,” I said. I took her hand and she tugged it once, firmly as though milking a cow, then released it. “Although it doesn’t begin to compare with ...” and I waved my hand over their grounds.

She smiled with her mouth and nodded. It seemed the introduction was over and I glanced at Angie. She was half watching Hettie while trying to pay attention to Emma. Emma more or less ignored her and took a sip from her cup.

“Ha-hmm,” said Angus moving over to the two standing. “And this is Amanda Brewis, my secretary.”

“I’m delighted to meet you, David, and you, Angela,” said Amanda with a pleasant smile. She gave my hand a gentle squeeze then Angie’s before taking a half step backwards.

“Hello Amanda,” said Angie, smiling at her. No doubt she was pleased to have actually been noticed at last.

“And this is Michael Weyman,” said Angus.

“David,” said Michael. I held my hand out and he shook it rather diffidently. He smiled then turned to Angie. “Angela.”

She proffered her hand and he barely touched it.

“Please, take my chair,” he said, motioning to the deckchair next to Hettie. He glanced at Angus. “I’ll get a couple more, won’t be a tick.” Angie hesitated then lowered herself into the chair.

“Where’s Patrick?” asked Angus, looking around.

“I rather think he’s gone off to wait for Pip,” said Amanda.

“Patrick’s my son,” said Angus. “I daresay he’ll turn up eventually. Pip should have been here by now. Come and sit by me, David. Would you like some tea, Angela? David?” He looked around again. “Dash it all.

Where the devil's that girl got to?"

"I rather think she's gone to fetch some more hot water," said Amanda. "Ah, thank you, Michael."

Michael had reappeared with two more chairs and had set one up next to Angie for Amanda. He marched around to the other end of the semi-circle and started to set the other one up.

"Ahh, there she is," said Angus as a young girl in a black dress with a frilly white apron appeared from the end of the terrace. "Come along Anna, some tea for our guests."

"Sir," said Anna, hurrying over with a jug.

Michael had finished assembling the deck chair and plonked himself in it so I made a conscious decision and went and sat next to him, leaving the only vacant chair, next to Emma, for Angus. It wasn't perhaps the most diplomatic thing to do but I found her rather intimidating. She didn't appear to notice. I smiled at Michael.

"Are you one of the family?" I asked.

"Ahh, no," said Michael. "I am merely an employee. I'm here to do the gardens"

"Oh really," I said, a little surprised. "You don't look like a gardener."

He was wearing black trousers with a white shirt and a muted dark blue tie and his feet were clad in shiny black loafers, not gumboots. He gave a short barking laugh.

"I design gardens," he said. "I don't dig them." He looked around the, what seemed to me, immaculate landscape then sighed. "There is so much to be done."

"It all looks pretty impressive to me," I said.

I know little of gardening but the one laid out in front of the terrace wouldn't have looked out of place at Downton Abbey.

“Ahh, well,” said Michael dismissively. His eyes moved over to look at Hettie and even I could see a change come into them. “And what do you do?”

“I’m retired,” I said as a shadow fell over me. I looked up and Anna was standing there with a tray full of things in her hand.

“Tea, sir?” she asked quietly.

“Oh, yes, please,” I said hurriedly.

I lifted the cup and saucer gingerly because it looked very delicate, despite the fox hunting decoration. Anna poured in some tea from a matching tea pot then turned the tray so the milk jug was easily accessible. I poured a little in while Anna turned the tray some more so I could get at the sugar. I wasn’t sure what to do with the milk jug while taking some sugar so I simply nodded and said “thank you” again. She turned the tray back so I could deposit the jug. I’m not overly fond of tea but tea without sugar isn’t my favourite. Sometimes you just have to go with the flow.

“So you’re retired, then, eh,” said Angus, leaning back in his chair. “So am I. Royal Navy. Battleships, you know.”

“Oh really?” I said, feigning interest. “Battleships are quite big, aren’t they?”

“Haw haw haw,” laughed Angus. “And what are you retired from?”

“Oh, I was in I.T.,” I said.

“I.T.?” said Angus, stirring his tea. Presumably he was used to Anna’s ways and knew how to get to the sugar. “What’s that?”

“Information Technology,” I said. Doesn’t everyone know what I.T. is these days?

He looked blankly at me.

“I worked with data,” I said. “Lots of data.”

“Ohhh, 'it',” he said, suddenly interested. He emphasised the 'it' as though it was of significance. He put his spoon beside his cup on the saucer and leaned forward. “I say, you’re one of those intelligence johnnies, aren't you. Got it. All very hush hush, eh, mum's the word.” He winked and tapped the side of his nose knowingly before sitting back and nodding.

“Umm, something like that,” I said, confused.

I looked over at Angie for help but she was clearly struggling with her own conversation with Hettie. Amanda, sitting the other side of Angie, was quietly gazing out over the garden, her face relaxed. She sat neatly with one leg over her knee and the foot tucked in behind her calf. She seemed a capable, self contained person. Angus said something I didn't quite hear to Emma who snorted before taking one of the cakes Anna was now passing around. Then Angus leaned over and tapped me on the knee.

“You must be a pretty clever sort of chap, what,” he said.

“I suppose so,” I said. After all, I did have a Bachelors degree in maths and a Masters degree in computer science.

“Could use a chap like you,” continued Angus. He bit into a cake and a little squirt of jam discoloured the side of his beard. It looked a little like a trickle of blood. “Need someone to help me plan a murder.”

Chapter Five

I just looked at Angus blankly while my mind tried to find a word that I could have misheard as 'murder'. Plan a murmur? Plan a Berber? No, those made no sense.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't quite make out what you said."

"Help me plan a murder," said Angus, perhaps unconsciously enunciating a little more clearly than he popped the last of his piece of cake in his mouth.

I glanced at Emma but she was inspecting the contents of a cream bun so I twisted a little to look at Michael. He was still looking at Hettie. Neither of them seemed to be listening and certainly neither showed any concern about Angus' extraordinary request.

"Did you say a murder?" I asked. "You mean as in killing someone?"

"Yes," said Angus calmly then seemed to become aware of something in his beard. He fished out a handkerchief and started dabbing the side of his mouth with it.

"I think you have misunderstood something about me," I said, wondering what on Earth it could have been. "I'm not that sort of person. I don't go around killing people." It occurred to me that as the captain of a Navy warship killings would be more in his line than mine but I didn't say that.

Angus paused in his dabbing and gave me a puzzled look then glanced at his hankie.

"Haw, haw, haw," he suddenly burst out. "I say, that's jolly good. Emma, old girl, did you hear that? David thinks I want him to kill someone, haw, haw," and he smacked her on her knee.

Emma didn't wince. She just gave me a look that suggested she might have a suitable candidate if I should happen to change my mind.

"You're not explaining yourself, Angus," she said. "You have jam in

your beard. We're organising a fete, David, and one of the events is a murder hunt. Someone is going to pretend to have been murdered and there are to be clues for people to solve that lead them to who the murderer is. Anyone who works it out will get a small prize."

"You mean it's just a game?" I asked, mightily relieved.

"Absolutely, old chap," said Angus, waving his hankie around between dabs. "My fault. Didn't explain properly, of course. Used to giving orders not explanations, you see."

"It sounds like it could be fun," I said, wondering what role he wanted me to play in this scheme. I really didn't fancy being the victim. Anna came back and I turned down another cup of tea but accepted a slice of cake. "How do you envisage me helping?"

"Need someone to make up some clues," said Angus. "Sounds easy but it's actually dashed difficult working out where to begin."

"Actually, I'd start at the end," I said. "Decide where the victim will be found and what weapon was used then make up a clue for those and put it somewhere. Then make up a clue for where to find that clue and so on, working backwards to where you want to start the hunt."

"I told you David was a clever bod, Emma," said Angus, slapping Emma's knee again. "Define the target then work out how to achieve it. Good policy that, what."

Emma gave one of her humourless smiles again but didn't speak.

"What sort of clues do you want?" I asked. "Cryptic ones or short verses or artefacts? Perhaps a photograph or two or some unusual footprints or a document of some sort?"

"Oh, splendid!" exclaimed Angus. "Photographs, footprints, that's the ticket! But then you hush hush boys have the right sort of minds for clues and whatnot. Excellent."

"Well, I'm more than happy to help," I said, wondering what this hush hush business was. "Perhaps if you gave me some details I could take

them home and think about it. When is this fete?"

"Oh, not for a few weeks," said Angus. "Amanda!"

Amanda came alert and looked over at Angus expectantly. "Yes, Angus?"

"Give David our plans for the murder hunt, such as they are, there's a good girl," said Angus.

"Certainly, Angus," she said, putting her cup and saucer on the ground beside her. "I'll just fetch the file."

"Amanda keeps track of everything for me," said Angus to me. "Lost without her," then to Amanda, "not now, not now," when he noticed her uncoil her leg preparatory to getting up. She settled back in her chair and re-coiled her leg and gave me a half smile.

"Give it some thought," said Angus. "See what that brain of yours can come up with."

"I will," I said, wondering what I was letting myself in for. "Will the hunt be here or somewhere else?"

"Here, of course," said Angus. "Always have the fetes here. Ah. Daresay you'll need to see around. Decide where to put the clues and so on."

"It would be useful," I said. "It would be difficult working blind."

"Deuced difficult, I'd say," said Angus. "Tell you what, let the little grey cells have a ponder then come back and take a look around."

"When would be convenient?" I asked.

"Liaise with Amanda," said Angus. "She keeps this place working smoothly."

He beamed contentedly and I could tell he must have been an excellent ship's captain. He had the job of delegating off to a fine art.

"Looks like Pip has arrived at long last," observed Michael.

"Where is she?" asked Angus, looking around.

"She just came round the North wing with Patrick," said Michael. "They went inside."

Given that the sun was about to set directly in front of the terrace it wasn't too hard to work out which was the North wing, or how Michael had seen them. The corner of that wing was in his line of sight beyond Hettie. I confess I was perhaps jumping to conclusions about why he seemed to be always watching her.

"Pip's Patrick's fiancée," said Angus. "They'll be out in a moment."

"Hettie doesn't seem old enough to have a son old enough to have a fiancée," I remarked.

"Oh, lord, no," said Angus looking over at Hettie talking with Amanda and Angie with adoration in his eyes. "Hettie's far too young. Same age as Patrick, in fact. His mother died some years ago."

"Ahh," I said. "I'm sorry."

"Sad, of course," he said, trying reasonably successfully to look sad, "but these things happen."

"Was your first wife Scottish, as well?" I asked.

I could have kicked myself as soon as I'd spoken as it didn't seem a good idea to talk about a man's dead first wife on casual acquaintance but Angus didn't seem to mind.

"Lord, no," he said, a faint look of puzzlement crossing his face. "She was as English as I am. Why would you think she was Scots?"

"I'm sorry," I said, feeling a little embarrassed. "I just thought you might be Scottish. After all, Angus is a Scottish name."

"Haw, haw, haw," chortled Angus, startling Anna as she bent over him

to offer some more cake. He took another slice. "That was just my father's sense of humour. We're English but he thought it would be a good joke to give me a Scots Christian name."

I looked blankly at him for a moment, wondering about his father's sense of humour.

"Indeed," I said, taking another slice of cake myself.

"Of course the joke's on father," continued Angus. "Angus is actually the English version of the Gaelic Aonghas."

"And is Hettie English as well?" I asked. There was a quality about her that didn't seem English but England's a pretty cosmopolitan place these days.

"Argentinian," said Angus, looking over at Hettie, who had her back to him. "Daughter of a diplomat. Met her at a do in Brussels. Damned tedious affair that 'till she arrived but diplomatic functions generally are. Married the girl only eighteen months ago."

Well that explained the brown eyes, dark hair and slightly olive skin. As if she knew we were talking about her Hettie looked over at Angus and gave him a delightful smile and waved. One of those waves where you bring all your fingers repeatedly down to the ball of your hand, the way a child does.

"Congratulations," I said automatically.

Angus beamed happily and started to eat his cake while I wondered what to say next. I was feeling decidedly out of place.

"What ho!" said a voice and I turned to look at the newcomer. It was the young man who had opened the door to us. "Hope there's some of Mitzi's delectable cake left for us."

He was of medium height and slim build and was handsome in a slightly feminine way. It wasn't so much the way he wore his blonde hair, short at the sides and long and floppy at the front. It was more in the well defined cheek bones, soft lips and long eyelashes. He wore

a simple pair of white trousers and a white jumper and looked as though he was about to play cricket.

The girl with him could have been his twin, except she was dark where he was fair and she exuded a mild tom-boyish air that was exacerbated by what I think are called jodhpurs; loose fitting trousers that are very tight from the knee down. Her cheeks were flushed as though she had just arrived from riding a horse.

“Patrick! Pip! Come and meet David and Angela,” cried Angus, jumping up and knocking his cup over. He ignored it but Anna noticed and sidled over.

Whoever designed deckchairs didn't seem to give any serious consideration to how to get out of them but I managed with only a slight loss of dignity and a brief stabbing pain in my left knee. Angie seemed to manage hers OK and came over to join me.

“Hullo,” said Patrick, grabbing some cake from the nearby table. “We've met before but damned if I can remember where.”

He gave me a limp handshake while holding up his piece of cake in his other hand.

“You opened the front door to us,” I said, faintly irritated.

“Oh, did I?” said Patrick carelessly. “That was jolly decent of me!”

“Be nice, Patrick,” said Pip, elbowing him out of the way. “I'm Phillipa Ashgate-Morley which is a bit of a mouthful so call me Pip. Delighted to meet you.” She held out her hand.

“David Fernley,” I said, taking it. Her grip was decidedly firmer than Patrick's. “This is my wife Angie, umm, Angela.

“Hello,” said Pip cheerfully, shaking hands with Angie. “Are you with the Devonshire Fernleys or the Northumberland Fernleys?”

“The Croydon Fernleys,” I said, amused by this checking of our antecedents. It seemed to fit in with her cut-glass home counties

accent. "Although I did holiday in Devon once."

"Quite," said Pip, momentarily taken aback. "I say, Croydon? Really? What fun!"

"Not much fun, actually," I said. "Croydon's a bit of a hole."

Pip laughed delightfully then spotted Hettie and went over to talk to her. Patrick picked up another slice of cake.

"Mitzi's outdone herself this time," he said, his voice indistinct around a mouthful.

"Mitzi's our cook," said Angus. "One of the best."

"She cheats you," said Emma, sourly, from her chair.

"As every good cook does," said Angus. "It's expected."

"I saw you just after lunch, Patrick" said Emma, accusingly. "Driving down the hill like a mad thing. You really shouldn't. You'll kill yourself."

"I can't help it, Auntie Emma," said Patrick, eyeing the one remaining cream bun. "That car was made to go fast."

"Is that your sports car outside?" I asked.

"Rather!" said Patrick enthusiastically. He abandoned the bun for the opportunity to talk about the love of his life. "Riley Imp, best handling car on the road! I've had her up to just over 70 on the straight and she's almost as fast around the bends."

"You must take very good care of your car," I said. "It looks to be in very good condition. Is it a vintage car?"

He looked at me askance. "Vintage? Vintage? I only bought her three months ago. She only had three miles on the clock."

I found this somewhat confusing but let it pass. "Whose is the

Humber? That looks a nice car as well.”

“That’s father’s,” said Patrick, dismissively. “It’s too heavy for the power even though it pumps out 50 horses. My little Imp only pumps out 12 but it’s a fraction of the weight and beats it hands down.”

“And no use for a family,” interjected Angus, “so you’ll need to be getting rid of yours when you and Pip get married.”

“Oh Pip loves my Impy as much as I do,” smiled Patrick. “Besides, we’re not getting married for yonks.”

“We should be going inside,” said Angus. “The sun’s gone and it’s getting decidedly chilly. Time for a snifter, eh.”

“We should be going,” I said, noticing a meaningful glance from Angie.

“Oh, right-oh,” said Angus. “Would you excuse me for a moment?”

“Of course,” I said.

The others started to drift towards the house and Angus stopped Amanda and spoke quietly with her. She nodded and walked quickly towards the North wing.

“It’s been, umm, delightful meeting you,” I said, holding out my hand.

“Yes,” said Angie quickly. “Delightful.”

Angus shook my hand then took Angie’s. He didn’t kiss it this time, just clasped it between both of his.

“You must come again,” he said. “Delighted to have you over whenever you want.”

“Thank you,” said Angie, trying to extract her hand. Angus released it with a smile.

“Anna will show you out,” he said. “Until next time.”

Anna had been clearing the plates and cups and saucers but on hearing this she dumped the tray on the table with an almost audible sigh and came over.

We exchanged goodbyes with the others and, as we followed Anna in through the French doors to the main hallway I thought I heard Patrick's voice saying "was that him?".

Anna held the front door open for us then shut it firmly behind us. Light streamed from a room on the ground floor of the North wing and, as we started to walk to where we'd left the car, lights came on in two of the other rooms further along. Neither of us spoke. I think we were still coming to terms with things.

The light from the North wing room suddenly went out and a moment or two later a door banged and footsteps crunched on the gravel behind us.

"If I could delay you a moment, David," said Amanda.

"Certainly," I said, turning.

"I have the details of the murder hunt," she said, holding out a simple folded cardboard file. She also had what looked like a briefcase under her arm. "It is by no means complete and many details have yet to be finalised."

"Ah, thank you," I said, a touch disappointed that it had been remembered. "Yes, I understand."

"When would be convenient for you to tour the house and gardens for suitable places to lay the clues?" she asked.

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "When would be convenient for you?"

"My time is at your disposal," said Amanda.

"Perhaps if I look over the plans tomorrow morning," I said, "and look around in the afternoon?"

“That would suit,” said Amanda. “Perhaps after luncheon?”

“OK,” I said. “I don't imagine it will take long.”

Amanda smiled but didn't answer.

“Well,” I said after a few moments, “it was nice to meet you, Amanda.”

I held out my hand as a handshake seemed to be appropriate but Amanda took a couple of steps away and beckoned. Surprised, I followed and she stood with her back to the house, on the edge of the light from the windows.

“Angus asked me to ask you for a kindness,” she said quietly.

“Oh yes,” I said.

She glanced behind her then held out the briefcase.

“If you would please take this into your keeping for a while,” she said. “Only for a few days.”

“Well, of course,” I said, taking the briefcase. “What's inside? Nothing illegal, I hope?”

“No,” said Amanda, “nothing illegal.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “It contains some documents of great national importance. Angus said you would understand, being part of the ..., you know. He said we can trust you.”

Another light came on, this time from the first floor. Its light spilled over onto Amanda and me and she moved further over to stay in the darkness.

“You can trust me,” I whispered, wondering what the hell was going on. I moved into the darkness with her. “When do you want it back?”

“I will send you a message,” she whispered. “I will sign the message with my name but with two 'w's instead of one. If you get a message

from me with only one 'w' in my name then you will know I have been compromised.”

“Are you serious?” I asked in my normal voice.

“Shhh,” she whispered. “Someone may be listening.”

“But who ...?” I whispered.

“We are not certain,” she whispered, looking around. “But there is someone here who is not who they seem.”

“Oh,” I whispered. “Who?”

“We don't know.” A door slammed not far away and she half turned, startled. “Quickly, you should have gone by now. People will be beginning to wonder why you are still here.”

“But ...,” I hefted the briefcase. It seemed very light. “But ..., what do I do if your message only has one 'w'?”

“Get in touch with Bartram Cambourne at the Foreign Office,” she whispered urgently. “Go now!”

“Right,” I whispered. “Bartram Cambourne.”

She reached out and squeezed my hand. “Thank you,” she whispered then melted into the darkness.

I stood there like a lemon for several seconds until Angie came over.

“What were you two whispering about?” she asked.

“I'll tell you in the car,” I said. “Come on.”

Feeling like an idiot I tried to hide the briefcase with my body from the gaze of anyone watching from the house. I held the murder hunt file ostentatiously for the same reason, although it all went to pot when I tried to unlock the car as I dropped the briefcase and had to scramble for it. As Angie got in the passenger seat I put the briefcase

and the file on the back seat and got in the driver's seat.

"You'll never guess what happened," I said as I started the engine and turned on the headlights.

"That woman's trying to start an affair with you?" she asked.

"If only it was as simple as that," I said. "Listen."

I explained as briefly as I could in the very short drive home. I turned off the engine when we reached our house and killed the lights. We could hear Elvis barking excitedly.

"You've got to be kidding me," said Angie. "Secret documents, the Foreign Office? They're playing a game with you. They're a bunch of weirdos. I should know, I've been trying to talk with that silly girl all evening."

I sat there drumming my fingers on the steering wheel.

"It is ridiculous," I said. "But it should be easy enough to find out."

"That's right," said Angie. "Open the briefcase. I bet you there's nothing in it."

"I hope it is a joke," I said. "I really don't want the FBI or the Chinese descending on us in the middle of the night."

I twisted round and scabbled on the back seat to get the briefcase but couldn't find it.

"Put on the light," I said. "I can't find the bloody thing."

Angie flicked on the interior light and I peered between the front seats. I couldn't see the briefcase or the file.

"They must have fallen on the floor," I said.

I got out and opened the back door of the car and searched under the front seats then pushed my hand down the back of the rear seat.

“They've gone,” I said, baffled. “Where the hell can they have got to?”

Chapter Six

“Oh, I'm sure they're somewhere,” said Angie irritably. “Look for them in the morning when it's light.”

“But what if the briefcase really does contain secret documents?” I said, looking up at her from where I was kneeling on the driveway. It wasn't gravel but it had stones in it and one of them was slowly embedding itself just below my left kneecap.

“Frankly I think they're having you on,” she said, opening her door, “or you imagined it. But if there really are these documents and anyone comes looking for them they'll assume they're in the house. No one would leave them in the car.”

“Actually I read in the paper recently that some air force general left top secret designs for a new fighter plane or something in a taxi,” I said, using the back seat to lever myself upright. “He'd gone into a strip club or something and forgot about them.”

“Well, you're no general,” she said, clicking off the interior light. “No one will blame you. If anyone's at fault it'll be Angus for giving them away to some civilian. I'm tired. I'm going in.”

She got out and slammed the door and I rubbed my knee. I heard her going up the wooden steps to the front door then Elvis going mad with ecstasy that someone had finally come back.

“I wonder what the bloody dog has chewed up this time,” I muttered and shut the rear door. Elvis didn't like to be left alone for too long.

The pain in my knee had gone by the time I reached the front door and the inside of the house was remarkably free of chewed bits of cushion or inner soles.

“Do you really think I imagined it?” I asked.

Angie was in the bedroom getting changed and Elvis came charging out to say 'hello'.

“That place was so freaky I wouldn't be surprised if both our minds are now unhinged,” came Angie's voice. “Or maybe you were intoxicated by that woman's exotic perfume.”

“She wasn't wearing perfume,” I said going into the bathroom for a pee. It transpired that Elvis hadn't chewed anything in the lounge because he'd been having fun with the cat litter. One of us must have left the door open.

“So you noticed that?” wafted through from the bedroom. “Funny how you never notice if I'm wearing perfume or not.”

“Bugger,” I thought and went to get a dustpan and brush.

“Actually I didn't notice,” I called back. “I just said that to show I wasn't intoxicated.”

Angie came out of the bedroom in some leggings and a t-shirt.

“Would you know if you were?” she asked, going into the bathroom. There was a momentary build-up of electric tension in the air then an angry “Oh Elvis!”

“I'm on to it,” I said brandishing the dustpan and brush. A matted wad of cat hair and dust fell out of the pan onto the floor and Elvis ran over and started to shred it. “Probably not.”

Angie snatched the dustpan and brush from my hand and started to sweep up the cat litter scattered everywhere.

“Probably not what?” she asked.

“Noticing intoxication,” I said, standing in the doorway to watch. “Shall I do some dinner?”

“Actually you probably wouldn't notice if she ripped off all her clothes in front of you,” said Angie.

She finished sweeping and looked around for a moment before emptying the dustpan back into the litter tray.

“We’ve strayed from the topic,” I said, heading off to the kitchen. I thought about it as I washed my hands and decided that yes, I probably would notice if a pretty girl took her clothes off in front of me. “How about an omelette? I didn’t think to defrost anything.”

“Maybe we should get a cook as well,” said Angie, coming in to put the dustpan and brush back in the cupboard.

“What for?” I asked getting some eggs, milk and cheese out of the fridge. “Don’t you like my cooking anymore?”

“Your cooking’s fine,” she said. “Don’t think I’d like a maid though. I’d feel I was always being watched. I didn’t know anyone had maids in Australia. Seems somehow un-Australian.”

I was about to say, jokingly, that I thought it would be a good idea to get a secretary to help me with my paperwork and decided it probably wouldn’t be a good idea. It might lead us back to perfume and related sensitive topics since I had no paperwork beyond the occasional credit card statement. I got out an onion instead and started to peel and chop it.

“What were we talking about?” I asked, trying to work out how we’d got to maids and secretaries.

“You and that briefcase,” said Angie, resting her hip against the counter and folding her arms.

“Me imagining it,” I said, ignoring her remark. “Didn’t you see the briefcase?”

“No,” said Angie.

“Not even when I dropped it?” I asked, tipping the onion into a fry pan.

“I thought you dropped your keys,” said Angie. “You’re getting old. You often drop things.”

I added a splash of oil and turned on the hob.

"I fumbled the keys and dropped the briefcase," I said, letting her ageist sarcasm pass. I opened a cupboard to get a glass bowl for the eggs.

"Oh," said Angie. She yawned. "Can I have some toast as well? I'm famished."

"Yeah, I'm hungry too," I said. I started to crack eggs into the bowl. "I shouldn't be after all that cake, but I am."

"Wanna watch a DVD?" she asked.

"OK," I said. "You choose."

"Why do I always have to choose?" she said.

"Because I don't give a damn," I replied, tossing the shells into the bin.

"Fair enough," she said. "How about Four Weddings and a Funeral?"

"Anything but Four Weddings and a Funeral," I said. I gave the frying onions a shake then got a fork to beat the eggs. Angie snorted and prised herself away from the counter.

"Seriously," I thought, adding some milk to the eggs, "what kind of idiot would pass secret documents to a total stranger? It must have been some kind of joke. Like one of those magic tricks where things disappear."

It was only when I was grating cheese on top of the cooked omelette that I thought of something.

"Should I still go back there tomorrow?" I asked, carrying in our plates.

"Hmmm?" said Angie, looking up from fiddling with the TV and DVD remotes. "Go where?"

"I said I'd go back after lunch tomorrow to talk about the murder

hunt,” I said. “That was what was in the file with the briefcase.”

“What murder hunt?” asked Angie.

“Didn’t you hear Angus asking me to help him plan a murder?” I asked.

“No,” said Angie, taking her plate. “That silly girl was yacking on endlessly about clothes and jewellery. I think she was retarded. She seemed to think she was living in London.”

“I rather got that impression as well,” I said, sitting down. “I daresay Angus married her for her looks rather than her brains. What are we watching?”

“Star Trek: First Contact” said Angie. “What’s all this about a murder hunt?”

“I thought at first Angus was asking me to help with a real murder,” I said. “Turned out to be a game for a fete or something they’re organising.”

“I did notice you went a bit strange at one point,” said Angie.

“You would too if someone asked you to help with a murder,” I said. “Anyway, he wants me to help set up clues to track down the murderer. I’m supposed to be going back there tomorrow to look around for things to use for clues.”

“This omelette’s really yummy,” said Angie. “What did you do to it?”

“I put in a little horseradish,” I said. “I was going to look at the file with the details of the murder hunt first only I can’t now since it disappeared as well.”

Elvis put his head on my knee to remind me that he hadn’t been fed. The possibility of a morsel of cheese and onion omelette made him drool a little on my trousers so I pushed him away. He went and sat beside Angie who scraped a little of the melted cheese off hers and made him watch her eat it.

"I think they're just playing games with you," said Angie. "God knows why but the whole thing is ridiculously far-fetched."

"So you think I should give it a miss?" I asked.

"Unless you particularly want to see that girl again," said Angie.

"Not especially," I said.

"Let's watch the movie," said Angie, picking up the remote.

When I got bored with the movie I took the dirty dishes into the kitchen and fed Elvis and Shishke. The cat's name being short for Shish Kebab. That done, I settled back in my chair. The movie didn't seem to have improved so I reached for my book. It was one of a set of Agatha Christies that Angie had given me for my birthday and I was slowly reading my way through them. I'd finished *Dead Man's Folly* a couple of days previously and *They Came to Baghdad* was the next one. It struck me that, taken across all the 80 or so murder mysteries that Christie had written, she was responsible for an awful lot of murders.

I found the movie a little distracting, particularly as the genius scientist who invents warp drive in the movie had a predilection for playing old Rockabilly music very loudly and I couldn't focus on the book so I put it back down again and half watched while half thinking about this briefcase.

It bothered me. Although I had seemingly agreed with Angie that I had imagined it, I was pretty sure I hadn't. Angie is normally very level headed and outgoing but, occasionally, she takes an irrational dislike to someone or something. While Angus and his family weren't necessarily the kind of people I would normally associate with, I was pretty sure Angie's antagonism had been raised and, rather than accept the possibility of the briefcase and its disappearance, she was dismissing it completely as a joke or a trick. I could see where she was coming from as they were definitely a very strange bunch but I was quite certain I had held the briefcase in my hand, dropped it and put it on the back seat. How and why it subsequently disappeared I didn't know but not knowing something doesn't make that something

impossible.

"I'm going to go round to see Angus tomorrow afternoon," I announced when the movie had ended. "I'm not convinced that the briefcase was a trick or that I imagined it. I want to see what he says when I tell him it's gone missing."

"If you must, you must," she said. "I'll stay here though."

"Don't you want to keep an eye on me in case that secretary is there?" I asked.

She snorted. "If she was really after you, you'd run a mile," she said.

I thought about that for a moment then admitted the truth of it. "Besides," I added, "if I did imagine it then I would really like to know. There could be serious implications if I am losing my mind."

"Oh god," said Angie, suddenly sitting up straight. "I'm living with a hallucinating fruitcake!"

"That has yet to be established," I said. "At the moment I'm only a potentially hallucinating fruitcake."

"I'm not the victim in that murder hunt, am I?" she asked suspiciously.

"I don't know," I said. "The file's gone missing. Do you want to be?"

"You've probably hidden it so I can't see it," she said "If you ever kill me, I'm coming back to haunt you."

"You wouldn't be able to find the way," I said. "Remember that time at that theatre in Melbourne? You had a panic attack when you couldn't find your way back from the toilet."

"You said you'd wait for me by the door," she said accusingly. "When I came out you weren't there!"

"I was only across the hallway," I protested, "looking at the pictures. All you had to do was look around."

"I wasn't wearing my glasses," she said, "and as an unavenged spirit I won't need glasses so I'll find you and make the rest of your life a misery."

"Actually that would be good," I said. "You'll be someone to talk to while I'm doing life in solitary. Are you sure ghosts don't wear glasses?"

She made a face and suddenly stood up. "I'm going to bed," she said. "Coming?"

* * *

"We really need to start doing something with this garden," said Angie the next morning. "We've been here a week."

She was leaning over the verandah rail studying the acre or so that was, allegedly, the garden, as distinct from the woodland that was most of the other 11 acres. Somewhere near the bottom was supposed to be a seasonal creek but we hadn't ventured that far yet.

"Uh-huh," I said, nursing my coffee.

As always my brain was taking a while to start working. Angie, on the other hand, is one of those depressingly cheerful morning people. If she ever took up jogging I'd probably file for divorce. I used to see women like that on my way to work in the depressing hours of the morning when we were in Sydney. Gaily tripping along in their Lycra shorts and brightly coloured designer trainers with their pony tails bouncing accusingly and engulfed in an aura of smug self-satisfaction, an 'oh look at me, aren't I simply awesome' self-righteousness. It's no wonder some people's thoughts turn to murder.

"There's a lot of lantana here," said Angie. "Garth says the Council is gearing up to fine owners who allow it to grow on their property."

"Oh," I said. I sipped my coffee and lit another cigarette while I thought about that. "Who's Garth?"

"He's the man who's going to re-do the driveway," said Angie.

“Remember?”

“Oh yeah,” I said. I sucked on my ciggie for a while. “What's wrong with lantana?”

“It's a noxious weed that runs rampant,” said Angie. “Look, it's over there, there and there.”

“That's a lot,” I said, not looking. “So what do we do?”

“We're getting someone in to help us,” said Angie.

“Awesome,” I said. So long as it wasn't me that had to dig the stuff up.

“So we need to get a couple of spades, a Dutch hoe, a wheelbarrow and a whipper-snipper,” said Angie.

“OK,” I said.

She moved further around the verandah, studying the garden. “There's more over there.”

“So why do we need all that stuff?” I asked after considering the matter slowly.

“What stuff?” she said, turning round to look at me.

“The spades and things,” I said.

“To dig up the lantana,” she said patiently.

“I thought you said we were getting someone in,” I said.

“To help,” she said. “Lol's going to help but he's got no implements.”

“Oh,” I said. “Who's Lol?” I asked a few moments later.

“Garth's cousin,” said Angie. “Lawrence I think his name is but I'm not sure.”

I thought about this for a while. It did cross my mind that perhaps Garth had said the Council were going to ban this weed as a way of getting work for his cousin.

"You can see where the Council's been spraying the lantana beside the roads," said Angie, turning back to look at the garden. "This will look awesome when it's all planted out with nice things."

OK, so maybe the Council actually was clamping down.

"Have you finished your coffee yet?" she asked after admiring the scenery for a while.

"Almost," I said. "Why? You making some more?"

"We need to go into Mossvale," she said. "To get the gardening tools."

I closed my eyes.

"Come on," she said brightly.

"What's the hurry?" I asked, my eyes still closed.

"You've a busy afternoon," she said.

I searched my memory then remembered I was going to see Angus after lunch.

"Can't we go tomorrow?" I asked.

"Lol's is coming round tomorrow," she said. "I thought, if we liked him, we could get him round one day a week."

I wondered how expensive this person would be then remembered that Shayne was pretty cheap which meant he didn't pay Garth much so his cousin would probably be even cheaper. If Lol made more than Garth then it would be Lol finding work for Garth rather than the other way around.

"OK," I said, not moving. "Let me get my shoes."

“We’ll get you some thongs as well,” said Angie. “You wanted to get your feet tanned.”

* * *

After lunch I decided to walk to Angus’ place as Angie had found me a pair of heavy duty all terrain thongs at the hardware shop in Mossvale. They were surprisingly comfortable and had little pictures of bulldozers and bobcats on them. I felt almost macho wearing them, a man of toil on the soil, although they were undoubtedly made for tourists as all the locals I’d seen wore heavily battered steel-capped boots. When I went down the steps from our front door and looked up the fairly steep driveway and thought of the uphill climb to Angus’ house I changed my mind and got in the car instead. It seemed easier and, naturally, I needed to test my new thongs in driving conditions.

Angus’ house was still a shock when I rounded the corner onto the gravel. Even though I was expecting the place it seemed very incongruous; an English style manor house and grounds on the side of a hill in Queensland. If nothing else, it didn’t fit in with the weather or the landscape. The vintage cars were exactly as they had been the previous day and I pulled up in much the same place, next to the Humber. I opened the car door and swung my legs out.

“Hello!” called Amanda, emerging from a fairly normal sized door. “I saw you coming up the drive.”

“Hello,” I called back, waving.

She looked at my feet but refrained from commenting.

“Beautiful day,” I said, levering myself out of the car.

“Yes, isn’t it,” said Amanda. “Have you had an opportunity to review the plans yet?”

“Ahh,” I said. “I wanted to ask you about that.”

I turned to lock the car and caught a glimpse of something on the back seat and did a double take.

“Well that's strange,” I said and tried to open the back door. It was locked.

“What is strange?” asked Amanda.

I pushed the button on the key remote and the doors clicked. I opened the door and took out the briefcase and the file that lay on top of it.

“How did that get there?” I muttered to myself. They hadn't been there earlier as we'd put the Dutch hoe on the back seat because there wasn't room for it in the boot with the whipper-snipper and the spades and the other odds and ends Angie had decided we needed.

Amanda took a sideways step to block the view from the house and hissed “don't get it out. Hide it away, quickly.”

“I'll put it in the boot,” I said, staring down at it.

“Quickly,” said Amanda, glancing over her shoulder.

I put the file on the roof of the car and, holding the brief case close to my body, I moved round and opened the boot and put it inside then slammed the boot shut. Amanda relaxed and pushed the door shut and lifted the file from the roof. She smiled and ostentatiously opened the file to look inside.

“What was it you had specific concerns about?” she asked in a slightly over loud voice.

“Umm,” I said, at something of a loss. “Oh, umm, I was wondering if Angus had had any more thoughts about the murder hunt?”

“I am not aware of any,” said Amanda, “but then he was in rather a rush this morning. He had to leave for Baghdad somewhat unexpectedly. Can I offer you some refreshments or shall we start the tour?”

Chapter Seven

“Baghdad?” I said, a little surprised. “Isn't that in Turkey or somewhere round there?”

“I think you'll find it's in Iraq,” said Amanda politely.

“Well, good luck to him,” I said. “Bit dangerous out there, I hear.”

Amanda just raised a neatly groomed eyebrow but clearly didn't intend to discuss her employer's private business any further. I stood there for a few moments then realised she'd asked me a question.

“Ah, yes,” I said, feeling under pressure. “Umm, perhaps if I could see the file again?”

I had a vague idea that if the plans were fairly simple we could go straight to the tour. If not then it would probably be a good idea to sit and talk them through with her over a coffee or something.

“Certainly,” said Amanda.

She closed the file and handed it to me. I took it and opened it to find a single handwritten page. Simple wasn't the word.

MURDER HUNT PROPOSAL

location of victim:	tennis court? folly?
victim to be:	pip? someone else?
murderer:	?????
murder weapon:	?????

“There's a lot yet to be decided,” I said, staring at the page. I checked but there was nothing written on the back.

“I imagine a set of clues will help bring things into perspective,” said Amanda smoothly. “Perhaps some tea?”

“So, you, err, are really expecting me to organise all this?” I said, frowning.

“You did agree to give Angus some assistance,” said Amanda.

A faint hardness seemed to come over her, as though she was mentally gearing up to apply significant pressure.

“To help with some clues,” I said. “I didn't expect to be saddled with all the planning.”

“I am happy to organise the event,” she said. “It will not be necessary for you to do that, but if you could supply some clues ...”

It struck me that I was either going to have to be overtly rude and refuse or just agree and get it over with. Given the state of their planning it seemed likely that they would be fairly happy with whatever I produced.

“OK,” I said.

Amanda waited calmly for me to expand on that. I shut the file and flicked it my thumb nail a few times thoughtfully. Then it also struck me that I, more or less, had a free hand. I didn't have to think up clues for something that already had a rigidly defined structure. It shouldn't be that hard after all.

“OK,” I said again. “Good. Perhaps if you show me around and tell me what's what and what can't be included in the hunt and I'll take it from there.”

“It would be my pleasure, David,” said Amanda, putting her hand on my arm for a moment. I confess it took me by surprise and I nearly jerked my arm away.

“I don't think I'll be needing this anymore,” I said, holding out the file.

“As you wish,” said Amanda, taking it. “Would you prefer to see the house or grounds first?”

“We have to go through the house to get to the grounds,” I said, “so we may as well do that first.”

Amanda started to walk towards the front door, so I followed.

"In general the family rooms are on the left of the Hall," she said, "And the working rooms on the right. Upstairs are the bedrooms, guest apartments and servants' quarters."

"I imagine the bedrooms will not be accessible to competitors," I said.

"Indeed not," said Amanda, opening the front door. "This is the Hall."

She closed the door behind me and we stood there for a few moments. The Hall seemed wider than when Angie and I had been there the previous day but we'd only been looking at it as a means of getting through to the Terrace. I could see a staircase half way down that I hadn't noticed before.

"So these are the family rooms?" I asked, gesturing with my left hand.

"That is the Music Room," said Amanda, "and beyond it is the Small Library."

"Oh, yes, and where is the Big Library?" I asked facetiously.

"At the far end, overlooking the terrace," said Amanda, "although we simply call it The Library."

"Of course," I said, feeling a little stupid.

I opened the door to the music room and was surprised to find it was empty apart from a grand piano and a settee. A door on the far side presumably led to the Small Library.

"I see," I said, closing the door. "What's over there?"

"Angus' office," said Amanda, not looking across the Hall to where I was pointing. "Next to it is my office and the Archives Room and behind those are the Kitchen, various store rooms and so forth. We would prefer those following the hunt stay out of this area. These doors will, of course, be locked."

“Of course,” I said. “And this side?” as we walked further along the Hall.

“The Billiard Room,” said Amanda. “Next to it is ...”

“Can I see?” I asked.

“Of course,” she said, opening the door for me.

“Impressive,” I said, meaning it.

In my youth I had played a little pool in pubs on dingy, badly maintained little tables. The Billiard Room contained a full size table of polished mahogany with an immaculate green cloth. A rack on the wall held a selection of cues. It was several moments before I realised the table had no pockets.

“Oh, it's a real billiard table,” I muttered then spotted the two white balls and a single red that rested on the baize.

“Very nice,” I said. “Would participants be allowed in here?”

I thought it would be quite possible to base a clue on the billiard table. Perhaps even have one of the cues as the murder weapon.

“Yes,” said Amanda.

“What's through there?” I asked, nodding at the door.

“The Drawing Room,” she said.

* * *

“What took you so long?” asked Angie when I got home.

She was curled up on the couch on the verandah reading a book.

“I got given a tour of the place,” I said. “It's huge. Want a drink?”

“No thanks,” she said. “I've got one.”

I got a can of Diet Pepsi out of the cupboard, the weather not being warm enough yet to necessitate keeping a stock in the fridge, and popped the ring-pull as I went onto the verandah. I leaned against the rail looking out over our woodland while I took a sip and reflected that I preferred this to the artificiality of manicured designer gardens. Angie was reading her book again.

"Hey," I said, pulling my ciggies out of my pocket and sitting down. "The weirdest thing."

She looked up, her finger marking her place.

I lit a cigarette and exhaled a plume of smoke. "The briefcase was on the back seat when I got there," I said.

"Don't be absurd," said Angie. "We put the hoe on the back seat. We'd have seen the briefcase."

"That's right," I said. "And I can't have imagined it because when I took it out Amanda insisted I put it in the boot so no one could see it."

"So where is it now?" she asked. "Still in the boot or did you bring it inside?"

"I gave it back," I said. "After the tour I told Amanda that we really weren't comfortable looking after top secret documents. We don't even have a safe and we've no idea who we're protecting them from."

"I bet she didn't like that," said Angie.

"Actually she said she understood," I said. "Especially when I said I was worried about your safety with the briefcase in the house."

"That was sweet of you," said Angie with a smile then she frowned. "I hadn't thought of that."

"I don't know why they don't just give it to that man at the Foreign Office," I said. "If it's that important why hang on to it and why give it to me? It all seems rather silly. You'd think in this day and age it

would be a heavily encrypted USB stick too, not a briefcase of documents. Or just email it, for God's sake. Not that the government's systems are that secure."

"Well, that part is the joke," said Angie. "Australia doesn't have a Foreign Office."

I jerked my head around to look at her.

"I didn't think of that," I admitted. "Australia has DFAT so why didn't Amanda tell me to give it to DFAT? It's not like I could have misheard. Unless ..." and I petered out as a thought occurred to me.

"Unless what?" asked Angie.

"Hmm? Oh, unless she meant the British Foreign Office," I said, "and they felt safer with me because I'm English."

"That makes no sense either," said Angie. "Australia is part of the Commonwealth and how would they know you used to be English? Did you tell them?"

"I don't think so," I said. "I remember asking if Angus was Scottish but I'm pretty sure we didn't talk about me. Maybe they picked up on my English accent."

"You don't have much of one anymore," said Angie, "and it's only on certain words anyway. Besides, from what I read in the online papers if you pick an English person at random there's a good chance they'll be anti-government. Amanda wouldn't know if you are patriotic or not. For all she knows you could be a Taliban sympathiser. I still think it's a joke and she said 'Foreign Office' because that's what people say in books. No one ever says to contact DFAT."

"You could be right," I said. "I'm beginning to find the whole thing irritating anyway. I'll bash out a few clues just to be polite then we'll keep our distance. I don't think they're the sort of people we want to get too involved with anyway. I see that horse guy hasn't done the cooker yet."

"He's coming tomorrow, hopefully," said Angie.

"I thought it was today," I said irritably.

"That's what he said originally," said Angie, "but he rang while you were out. He said he might be able to make it tomorrow or maybe Wednesday. If not then definitely before the end of next week."

I sighed in exasperation and slumped into my chair. I grimaced at my can then laughed, swallowed the last of the Pepsi and dropped my ciggie butt inside the can.

"That's country life for you," I said. "We're not in the big city anymore and I'm willing to bet that nothing round here is as urgent as it would be in Sydney."

I stretched, put the can on the table and willed myself to relax.

"We'll get used to it," said Angie. "And that old cooker seems to work OK."

"I guess," I said, watching a couple of red and green galahs, parakeets, parrots or whatever they were chase each other in and around some trees. "It's just that I hate electric cookers."

"So why get another electric one?" asked Angie. First one then the other landed on a thin branch and perched there happily as the branch swayed wildly up and down. "I wonder if birds ever get sea sick?"

"You mean the wobbling?" I asked, nodding at the birds, "or out at sea?"

"Motion sickness, then," she said. "Do birds even know what stability is or do you suppose they think that branch is stable?"

"I'm sure they know it's different to a tree stump," I said. "I'm guessing that since they fly in three dimensions they have a different perception of movement to us. Maybe to them stability means not having to flap their wings rather than not moving and because we

really only move in two dimensions if we are forced to move up and down we get sea sick. For sure, if my chair was going up and down the way that branch is I'd be throwing up everywhere. Anyway, I'd prefer gas but we don't have gas so I got an induction hob which they say is the next best thing."

"I don't see how an electric cooker can work like a gas cooker," said Angie pensively then held up her hand. "Don't bother trying to explain it again. I'll believe it when I see it. By the way, I've invited Desmond and Josephine to dinner."

"Who are Desmond and Josephine?" I asked, blinking at her in surprise.

"They run The House Of Aatm Shaanti," said Angie. "I was in there again this morning."

"And we know them well enough to invite them to dinner?" I asked, sitting more upright.

"They're nice people," she said, "and, besides, this is a chance to get to know them better. We don't know anyone here at all."

"Oh, well," I said, "if you like. When?"

"It's still open," she said. "Maybe later this week. I said I'd let them know after I'd talked to you. I told them how good a cook you are and Desmond made some not very subtle hints about sampling your food. I don't think he eats well since Josie is more or less a vegetarian."

"But he isn't?" I asked, slightly anxious as I'm not a vegetarian either, although Angie can happily eat a meal without any meat.

"Not by choice," said Angie with a smile. "So what shall I tell them?"

* * *

I spent most of the afternoon working on clues for the Murder Hunt and trying them out on Angie until we had half a dozen that, hopefully, weren't too hard or too easy. One involved taking a close-up

photo of the red billiard ball so it might possibly be mistaken for a tomato. I figured someone at Angus' would have a camera

After dinner and some time watching a DVD Angie went off to bed, taking Elvis with her as usual. I typed out the clues and some instructions on the photo and printed them. We'd decided to drop them in to the Post Office in the morning rather than me go round again and get embroiled in some other activity. It was probably around nine that I made myself a cup of tea and settled in my chair. Shishke was already lying across the back of it. She can be a social cat when she wants to be but it has to be on her terms. When she would be good and ready she would sneak down onto the arm and then onto my lap and want to be petted but not before.

I picked up my book and opened it at the card for a painter and decorator that was serving as a book mark then turned it back to look at the cover.

"That's a bit of a coincidence," I muttered to myself. "This is called *They Came To Baghdad* and Angus went to Baghdad only this morning. What are the odds of that? It's not like Baghdad is a common destination."

I briefly pondered how to calculate the probability of such a coincidence then decided it was pointless since I was reading a book involving Baghdad and Angus had gone to Baghdad so the probability was irrelevant.

"It's like the Murder Hunt," I told Shishke as she kneaded my shoulder with her front paws then I shut the book with a sharp snap that made Shishke dig in her claws in alarm.

"The Murder Hunt," I said out loud. "The Murder Hunt? But ... I've not long finished ... That is weird."

I was only three chapters into *They Came To Baghdad*. Before that I had been reading *Dead Man's Folly*. I'd finished it on Saturday. Essentially the story was about a Murder Hunt game at a fete where the pretend victim was found genuinely dead.

“OK,” I said to myself, “two references to Baghdad in the same day is unlikely but surely the odds of me getting involved in creating a Murder Hunt for a fete just after reading a book about it is so small as to be impossible.”

I drummed my fingers on the cover of *They Came To Baghdad* and thought about it. I had a vague recollection that the fete in the book was organised by someone called Stubbs, as well.

“This is ridiculous,” I said. “Where's that book?”

I stood up and Shishke stared reproachfully at me. I ignored her and marched over to the bookcase where the rest of the Agatha Christie set was and found *Dead Man's Folly*. I pulled it out and started to leaf through it. Hercule Poirot, the great Belgian detective, gets a phone call from Ariadne Oliver, a novelist he knows slightly, asking him to come down to investigate her fears that something dreadful is going to happen. Apparently she is organising a Murder Hunt for someone but I couldn't immediately see who. Short of re-reading the book, not the quickest way to find information, I did the only thing I could do. I looked up the book on the Internet using my phone.

“Ahh,” I told Shishke, “it's not Angus Stubbs, it's George Stubbs.”

Shishke seemed relieved at this, although it could simply have been that I was sitting down again.

“But, still,” I said, “Stubbs. Still one hell of a coincidence. And his wife's name's Hattie in the book, not Hettie.”

I was staring at my phone in disbelief, as Wikipedia was telling me that Sir George Stubb's secretary in the book was Amanda Brewis, when Shishke yowled loudly in my ear and clawed at my shoulder desperately trying to get off the chair. She landed on the floor with a loud thump and started to back away from me. She was hissing and her tail was three times its normal thickness.

“What's the matter, puss?” I said in surprise. “Shishke? What is it?”

I could feel some sort of tension building up in the air, as though a

thunder storm was brewing, and the back of my neck felt strange. I put my hand on my neck and felt the short hairs standing up, all sharp and prickly. Shishke went stiff legged and her back arched just as intense barking broke out from the bedroom. Then she suddenly turned and streaked out of the lounge just as Elvis came hurtling in, barking his head off as though we were playing a game. Except that his tail wasn't wagging as it does when we play games. It was held tightly between his legs and he had a wild look in his eyes.

"Elvis," I shouted as he dashed around the room but he couldn't hear me over his barking. "Elvis!"

"What the hell is going on?" said Angie loudly, appearing bleary eyed in the doorway.

Elvis bounded over to the door to the verandah and started snarling, his teeth bared.

"I've no ..." I started, just as the lights went out.

Chapter Eight

If this was a novel or a film or TV show, Angie would have screamed, quite loudly, at this point. Typically in a film someone walks into a room and sees a body lying on the floor and immediately screams and drops whatever they were carrying with a loud crash. In reality, however, if you walked into a room and saw someone lying on the floor you'd ask what they were doing. On getting no reply you might either simply ignore them and go on about your business or put down what you are carrying and go over and look at them. It would be some considerable time before you decided that the person was dead and you would still very likely not scream. If, by some misfortune, you put your hand in a pool of blood under the body you would still not be inclined to scream. Most likely you'd simply look at your hand and go "yuk" with an expression of distaste.

However, this is not a novel or a film or TV show. This is an account of what actually happened and what actually happened was that Angie simply said "oh, shit" in a weary, 'I've had enough of this' tone. She may well have leaned against the wall and closed her eyes too but as it was dark and my attention was on the antics of an apparently insane dog I didn't see her.

Not being a man of action, it was some seconds before I reacted as I had to think about what to do. The most productive path seemed to me to find my cigarettes. Not because I wanted to smoke one, although that could have been a useful by-product of my thought processes, but because my lighter was with them and, armed with a lighter, the darkness would be less of an issue. One small benefit of not reacting instantly was that those few seconds gave my eyes time to start adjusting to the darkness which made it easier to find the lighter in the faint moonlight that filtered into the lounge. Once lit, however, the light from its flame destroyed whatever night vision my eyes had developed and made the darkness surrounding the lighter even darker. Fortunately Elvis stopped barking and carrying on at this point and went to inspect his food bowl in case it had been magically refilled.

"Where's the torch?" I asked, waving the lighter around rather aimlessly. The flame wavered and threatened to go out.

“By the door,” said Angie in a flat monotone. “I’m going back to bed.”

I fumbled my way to the front door and peered around. The torch was on the ledge of the small window beside the door which seemed, in hindsight, a sensible place to put it. I pushed the button on top and, to my surprise, it lit up. I shone it around the lounge and Angie was still in the doorway, her head and one shoulder resting against the door jamb and her eyes shut. I left her to it and flicked the light switch up and down a few times. I doubt very much if, in the history of electric lights, that has ever succeeded in restoring light but we all do it. Hope springs eternal. The kitchen light didn’t work either so that suggested it wasn’t a blown bulb.

“I’ll check the fuses,” I said.

“Uhh,” grunted Angie.

Elvis saw me open the front door and he ran over hoping for an unscheduled walk in the open air.

“No, Elvis,” I said, holding up my hand and inadvertently shining the torch on the ceiling.

He sat down and looked at me then over at Angie. I slipped out the door and shut it behind me. Holding the torch carefully I went down the eight steps to the ground, holding onto the rail then stopped at the bottom. For the life of me I couldn’t remember where the meter box was. I played the torch light along the slats that separated the underneath of the house from the rest of the world. Ordinarily the underneath of the house was a cool respite from the warmth of the Queensland sun but in the dark shadows leapt and danced and it was decidedly spooky. There was no meter box evident so I made my way up to the front of the house and played my torch along there. Still no meter box. A warning about snakes popped into my mind and I nervously flashed the torch along the ground half expecting to see several of the more venomous varieties poised to strike but there weren’t any. Something swished the air overhead and I ducked instinctively. I shone the torch up into the night sky but whatever it was had gone.

“Probably just a bird,” I thought to myself and straightened up.

Then there was a definite rustle in the bushes behind me. I froze, my heart suddenly beating louder than it had been and slowly turned around but couldn't see anything. The rustle came again, a little further to the right and my torch beam stabbed towards it. A wallaby was half behind a bush – lantana by the look of it – watching me with curious eyes.

“So where's the meter box?” I asked, with relief, and it disappeared into the undergrowth with great rapidity.

I turned around again and made my way to the far corner of the house. A little further down, attached to one of the steel stumps supporting the house, was the meter box. I opened it, a surprisingly difficult task when you are unfamiliar with it and one hand has to hold a torch, and breathed a sigh of relief. The fuse box was one of those new ones which have little switches that jump up when overloaded rather than the old style with a wire that melts. With the old ones you need to fiddle around with a screwdriver and fuse wire to fix them but with the new ones you just flick the switch back down. One of the switches was up so I pushed it down. I could see through the slats the ground on the far side of the house light up.

“Fantastic,” I said to myself and shut the meter box.

Back in the house the lounge light was on and Angie had gone from the doorway. I peered into the bedroom and could see a long shape under the covers and a smaller shape curled up beside it, both apparently sound asleep.

“You asleep?” I whispered.

The smaller shape moved and Elvis looked at me but the larger shape didn't.

“It was the fuse,” I whispered to Elvis and went back into the lounge.

There was no sign of Shishke but cats have a tendency to go into hiding when alarmed and sometimes don't reappear for days. Dogs,

on the other hand, get over these things very quickly. I settled myself back in my chair and wondered what had upset both animals and if it had any connection with the blown fuse. It was quite possible that a wallaby or some other wild creature had come close to the house and both the cat and dog has sensed it but it wasn't at all clear how that could have blown the fuse. Nor, now I thought about it, why I had felt something electric in the air and the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I rubbed my neck at the thought of it but the hairs were lying flat again.

"I wonder if there was an electrical disturbance," I thought. "I suppose that might have overloaded the fuse and animals can sometimes sense these things. Maybe we should get that electrician to check all the electrics."

I couldn't think of any obvious explanation for the goings-on and made a mental note to talk to the electrician. The kettle still worked so I made a coffee and went back to my chair. I picked up my book then put it down again and picked up my phone. It had turned itself off but came alive again when I pushed the little button on the side. It was still showing the Wikipedia entry for *Dead Man's Folly*.

"It's only Angus Stubbs, Hettie and Amanda," I muttered, looking at the list of characters, "and Angus isn't right. No mention of Patrick or Phillipa. Who was that other chap? What was his name? The one who designs gardens?"

A name jumped out at me.

"Jesus," I muttered staring at it. "Was it really Michael Weyman?"

I put the phone down and leaned back in my chair, staring at the ceiling.

"Four names," I thought. "It could be a coincidence. After all, everyone has a name, and Angus is Angus not George and he's a Naval officer whereas George Stubbs was a wealthy businessman and Weyman was an architect not a landscaper. Stubbs isn't unusual and neither is Amanda or Michael but Brewis and Weyman? And why Hettie not Hattie? And Baghdad? It's one hell of a coincidence,

though.”

It bugged me, I confess. I tried to get back to reading about the exploits of a girl called Victoria who followed a man she had just met to Baghdad but I couldn't really get into it. All these names from a book I'd been reading and the people up the road were most likely coincidence, but if it wasn't a coincidence I could only think of one other explanation and it had me worried.

* * *

“Have you noticed anything unusual about me recently?” I asked Angie when I got up in the morning. I hadn't slept well and when I had slept I'd had strange dreams. “Anything strange?”

I'd had my usual two ciggies with my breakfast coffee and made the usual casual conversation before I asked. I even tried to sound nonchalant and casual but Angie wasn't fooled. Her eyes instantly locked in on mine like the twin barrels of a battleship's main guns. She let her book drop onto the couch beside her and leaned forward slightly. I twitched nervously and looked over the verandah rail.

“Looks like it might rain,” I said. Actually it did. Clouds were gathering.

“Talk to me,” she said quietly. “What's going on inside your head?”

Well, the die was cast now. It was too late to change the subject. I started to roll another cigarette.

“I think I might be having another episode,” I said quietly before licking the glue on the paper.

“You mean ...?” she said, matching me for quietness.

I nodded and lit my ciggie while avoiding eye contact. My hand shook a little. She sighed and leaned back again. My eyes flicked in her direction then back out over the verandah rail.

“Please don't stare at me,” I said, perhaps a little too harshly.

“Sorry,” she said and my eyes flicked back at her momentarily. She'd picked up her book again and her eyes were following her finger as she ran it up and down the edge. “It's good that you're telling me.”

* * *

Elsewhere in this account I have mentioned that I had achieved a lifetime ambition by retiring at 50 and moving to a rural property. What I didn't mention was that this hadn't been entirely voluntary. The pressure of work and responsibility had got to me and I had had a nervous breakdown with what 'they' call a 'psychotic episode'.

Clarke and I had started Secure Data Systems and had fairly quickly built up a strong reputation and an increasing client list. Over the course of the next twenty years or so we had taken on quite a few extra staff, programmers, security specialists and support staff, but I, as Director of Research, had stayed on my own as no one, with the exception of Clarke, could really think at the level required and he was too busy with managing the rest of the company. I didn't have a problem with this as I have never been a particularly sociable person. A case in point here being that I had early on rejected the offer of an assistant/secretary and had written my own little AI bot to fill that secretarial role without the idle chit-chat that real people seem to need.

After a few years the bot had become integral to my working life and, as is the nature of this type of AI bot, had developed a personality of its own. In time I took to calling it Autumn, after the main character in a book I had read called *The Annals of Autumn Savannah*. In the book, Autumn is a pre-medieval type warrior philosopher and my bot reflected many of her characteristics. What I wasn't aware of was that Autumn, my bot, was becoming increasingly real to me nor was I aware that I was becoming increasingly withdrawn from other people. For most of my time at SDS I was aware, if not always fully, that I was talking to a computer but in the last eighteen months or so I was talking to Autumn outside my office, in my car and even, towards the end, at home. Moreover, Autumn didn't just listen and answer back. Increasingly I would see her walking beside me or sitting in a cafe having lunch with me and, in the fullness of time, at home.

Angie, of course, never saw Autumn because Autumn wasn't real. What she saw was a workaholic husband who was spending less and less time with other people and her and more time locked away in his office. I became less and less aware of things going on around me and talked, on those rare occasions when I did interact with her, about ever more technical details, things that even Clarke would have difficulty following in casual conversation. Inevitably she got more and more worried about me and even, I found out later, went to talk to Clarke about me. What they said to each other I don't know but Clarke assigned a junior programmer called Malcolm to 'keep an eye on me'.

I also became increasingly paranoid. Of course, because of the nature of the work I and the company did, we were under constant threat from hackers, malware and virus writers and other assorted digital baddies, many with criminal or state resources backing them. Those threats were, however, almost entirely through the computer systems. Only once had any personal contact been made and that was a brief series of death threats sent to Clarke through the conventional postal system and had been cleared up fairly quickly when the police arrested a disgruntled former employee.

Angie talked to our doctor, Rajinda Singh, about me but there was little she could suggest other than that Angie should talk to me and try to persuade me to seek mental help as she had recently read of the restorative benefits of curatives run by a holistic guidance counsellor in the Lake District of England. Angie tried, she tried several times, but it's very difficult to persuade someone to do something they don't want to do in a three way conversation where one of the participants isn't actually there. It doesn't help that the one who isn't there is also a philosopher who can counter every argument on perception and the nature of reality. Unsurprisingly she gave up after a while and, after briefly considering seeing a divorce lawyer, Angie decided to make the best of a bad situation and be around to pick up the pieces when the inevitable collapse happened.

Sadly Angie wasn't around when the first cracks appeared. She was, I believe, shopping for new pillows to help me sleep better on those odd occasions when I wasn't at the office. I was, by this time, working 40, 50 or even 60 hour stretches and sleep had become quite difficult.

The first she heard of it was when she got a phone call from the police asking if she was in any way related to one David Fernly. When she admitted the fact the police informed her, in that semi-official abstract tone they adopt when trying to appear caring and concerned, that I had been found at a supermarket not far from my office. Apparently members of the public had been frightened by a wild-eyed dishevelled man arguing passionately with a row of shopping trolleys and someone had complained to staff who had told the manager who had called the police. Would she kindly come and get me so they could deal with serious crime?

She did. She took me straight round to Rajinda and managed to contain her emotions while calmly, on the surface at least, explaining the situation to me while waiting for her to find some free time. I confess I found what she was saying somewhat hard to believe but when it was reiterated by Rajinda and, later that afternoon, by Clarke, I was, more or less, forced to accept it. We, that is the four of us as Angie forbade Autumn from contributing, agreed that the best thing to do would be for Angie and me to get away for a few weeks on a nice relaxing holiday somewhere, free from the pressures of work and a long way from any computers or mobile phones.

We went to a nice little place down in Gippsland in Victoria. Angie rented a holiday house on a beach and more or less forced me to stop thinking about work. After three weeks or so I was sleeping fairly normally and taking an interest in current affairs and a couple of weeks later we returned to Sydney. Unfortunately, Angie didn't know that Autumn hadn't disappeared. She'd just got bored with the beach lifestyle and gone back to Sydney early. She was pleased to see me when I got back and we quickly resumed our old relationship. I'd been back at work only three days when I made some technical point to Autumn who replied with some equally technical point and Malcolm had immediately reported this to his criminal buddies.

He hadn't, of course. All he had done was happen to walk past us while querying SIRI, Apple's virtual assistant on the Internet, using his mobile phone, about where to find some fancy trainers in the latest fashion. In my delusional state I had slightly misinterpreted this as him reporting our highly confidential exchange to his hacker cronies. I am not normally a man of action but on this occasion I acted.

Fortunately Malcolm wasn't seriously hurt but Clarke, completely understandably, felt that he, or someone else, might well be next time and that it would be best all round if I stepped back from a direct role in the company and took on more of a home based consulting role while keeping my healthcare and super benefits and my shares in the company.

Angie took a slightly different view and argued that I should have no further role with the company although I should keep the benefits as the company wouldn't be where it was today without the personal sacrifices I had made etc etc. Clarke countered with an offer of my retaining the shares and a small percentage of annual profits in compensation for loss of benefits and a deal was agreed. Without any input from me or Autumn, I might add, which miffed me at the time but I signed anyway. I didn't have the mental energy to argue. I did get to keep my computers. Angie conceded that taking them away from me would be unnecessarily cruel but she did insist that my assistant bot be thoroughly purged.

With things now more or less out in the open, Rajinda was able to take constructive steps and suggested three mental healthcare providers, all of whom took private patients and were acceptable to my insurance provider, and that I, or Angie, pick one and she would make the necessary referral. Barnaby Whirrup was, according to Rajinda, 'old school' and although having a reasonable success rate his method of psychoanalysis could take some years to produce results. Dexter Firestone, on the other hand, had an excellent reputation but was, Rajinda admitted, somewhat free with prescription psychopoids. Angie plumped for the third, Jan Kippleby, for the simple reason that she didn't want this to go on forever nor have me stoned out of my mind for the rest of my life. The fact that Jan's approach was a tad 'new age' and controversial may have helped swing it her way as well.

It only took seven sessions with Jan for her to conclude that I had had a nervous breakdown and that my psychotic episode, the technical term for Autumn taking on a life of her own, had been triggered by a mild underlying case of schizophrenia. Jan took great pains to emphasise that the schizophrenia was nowhere near severe enough to warrant treatment in its own right and that it had only become an

issue because of the stresses that led to the nervous breakdown. Her treatment plan was simple; lifestyle change. Get away from the hustle and bustle of Sydney life and the pressures of work and find a nice quiet place where nature can be appreciated and enjoy life. She also recommended, as she drew heavily on Buddhist influences, daily meditation in which I should practice mindfulness and awareness of my own mind and the realities of the world in which I existed. For good measure she also instructed me to take up daily Tai Chi as exercise. I acquiesced as the general strategy did fit in with my vague life ambitions. It helped that Autumn was a strong believer in meditation and I felt that the Tai Chi would be in some way similar to her daily martial arts regime.

With her program deleted, Autumn faded away after two or three months. I missed her for a lot longer.

* * *

“So, you see,” I said, after telling Angie my thoughts about Angus and the Agatha Christie books, “I’m a little worried that it’s happening again.”

Chapter Nine

“Have you seen her again?” asked Angie intently. There was a slight emphasis on the word ‘her’.

“No,” I said.

I glanced over and Angie's eyes had narrowed slightly.

“Definitely not,” I said, hastening to reassure her.

“Heard her or talked to her?” she asked.

“No, absolutely not,” I said. “Not a sign of her.”

Angie nodded, perhaps in acceptance or perhaps in relief.

“That's good,” she said. “I'm proud of you for telling me about this. It must have been difficult for you but you're definitely not imagining it. You're forgetting that I was at the house as well.”

“I hadn't forgotten,” I said, feeling a little foolish, “but, umm, I couldn't be sure that I hadn't imagined that as well.”

“I'm pretty sure ... ,” said Angie, getting up and going inside the lounge. She left the sliding door open so I could still hear her. “... that the people at number 7 are playing some sort of game but no, they're real.”

I twisted round in my chair and could see she was going through that pile of stuff that seems to collect from nowhere and ends up on a corner of a table until someone decides to chuck it all in the bin and the pile starts all over again. She found something, scanned it then brought it out to show me.

“So is this,” she said. “The invite to Afternoon Tea.”

“Ahh, yes,” I said, taking it.

It was good to have something tangible in my hand. I studied it and it

seemed to be as I remembered. I smoothed it over my thigh and left it there while lighting a cigarette.

“Of course, I could be imagining this conversation as well,” I remarked. I was feeling a little playful with relief.

“Oh, stop it!” said Angie angrily. “I’m not going through these arguments on ‘what is reality?’ again. I’m here, I’m real and you didn’t imagine it, more’s the pity.”

“Stopped!” I said hastily, feeling suddenly chastised.

“Good,” she said. “Look, we moved here for a lifestyle change so that you aren’t under any stress anymore and we seem to have found ourselves living near some fruitcakes. I really don’t want you getting involved with them so if we get any more invites we’ll just ignore them, OK.”

“OK,” I said. “What if we meet any of them in town?”

“Just be polite and don’t get involved,” said Angie. “I don’t want them playing with your mind.”

“Quite,” I said. “And what about the Murder Hunt clues?”

“Ohhh, sod their Murder Hunt,” said Angie, irritably.

“I said I would do them,” I said. “I hate not doing something I promised I would do.”

“Oh, faff,” she replied. She screwed up her face for a few moments. “OK, we were going to put them in their PO box,” she continued, “so we’ll do that. Finish your coffee and we’ll go into town and get it done.”

“OK,” I said. “We can go to the supermarket in Mossvale as well. We’re getting low on a few things. Unless you’d rather go to Koowoolora instead? Check out that op shop you saw last time we went through.”

Koowoolora was a tiny place roughly fifteen kilometres away in the opposite direction to Mossvale. For some strange reason in its development it had a population of under three hundred, three churches, two pubs, a petrol station and just one shop; the op shop, which also sold milk and bread. Why such a place would spring into existence was beyond me.

“Sounds like an idea,” said Angie. “I want to pop into the library first but I can do that while you are in the Post Office. Let's go to Mossvale and we can stop at that cafe for a coffee and muffin.”

No doubt motivated by the prospect of cappuccinos and muffins we got ourselves organised unusually quickly and I was walking into the Post Office, envelope in hand, barely twenty minutes later. One elderly lady was collecting a very large parcel so I carried it out to her car for her. I could hear Elvis barking excitedly from our car as she thanked me profusely and tried to give me a 20 cent coin for my trouble. I refused it politely and wished her an uneventful drive home. I hoped she had someone there to help her get the parcel out of the car.

“Hello,” said Nancy brightly as I walked back into the Post Office. “Settling in all right?”

Nancy looked to be about 103 and made of polished hardwood but she probably wasn't much over 90. She ran the Post Office single-handedly and did the deliveries to the houses and businesses in the main street of Thrisk herself each morning before opening the shop. No one else got a mail delivery which is why we had a PO box.

“Yes, we are, thanks,” I said. “Has anything exciting happened in town recently?”

“Nothing exciting has happened here since 1972,” she said absently, tapping busily away at her computer, “when Mrs Hoskins' husband escaped from gaol in Brisbane and held her hostage until the police shot him. What can I do for you?”

“Why did he hold her hostage?” I asked, intrigued.

I would have thought only a fool would escape from prison and go

straight back home. Surely that would be the first place the police would look?

“He killed her lover,” said Nancy, not looking up, “and he went back to get revenge only he was seen walking into town and the police were there almost as soon as he was.”

“Well now,” I said, a little taken aback. “What happened to him?”

“He went back to gaol,” she said. She stopped tapping quite suddenly and stared at the screen.

“And Mrs Hoskins?” I asked.

“Bugger,” said Nancy, vehemently. “I hate computers.” She pushed the Escape key on the keyboard four or five times then started tapping busily again. It was obvious she'd done something wrong. “Mrs Hoskins? Oh, she got over it soon enough. Took up with Ted Nugent, over in Koowooloora 'till she died back in, ohh, '84.”

“Right,” I said, reflecting that Ted Nugent must have been quite a brave man.

Nancy stopped bashing her keyboard again and stepped back to study the screen. Her deeply tanned face cracked with a smile and she stepped forward and hit the Enter key viciously with the air of one who has triumphed over great obstacles.

“Course, they should have hung him,” she said, turning to me.

“Ted Nugent?” I asked, puzzled.

“Nah, Bert Hoskins,” she said. “Nothing but trouble since the day he was born. What can I do for you?”

“What sort of things did he get up to?” I asked, “apart from murder.”

“Ohh, drinking, fighting, thieving,” she said happily, “bit of arson, things like that.”

“So he wasn't a nice man, then,” I said.

She chuckled. “He was a lovely man,” she said, “very popular, just had a bit of a temper.”

“Right,” I said. I put my letter on the counter. “Oh, I've got a letter here for Angus Stubbs, up at 7 Timber Court. Could you put it in his PO box for me? I'm afraid I don't know the number.”

“Don't know no Angus Stubbs,” she said frowning. She flipped the letter round so she could read the address. “And we don't have a PO box for 7 Timber Court. Are you sure that's the right address?”

“Yes,” I said. “I was talking to him only the other day.”

“Hmmm,” she said. “I didn't even know that place was occupied. I thought there was only you and Clive Helmscott at number 2 but then, the places in Timber Court keep changing hands. Sorry, I can't help you.”

“Oh,” I said, slightly disappointed. “So what should I do now? Can I just post the letter anyway?”

“Not a lot of point,” she said. “I'll only send it back to you as undeliverable. Why don't you take it round yourself? He's only just up the road from you.”

“I suppose I'll have to,” I said, picking up the letter. “Oh well, thanks anyway. Tell me, why do the properties in Timber Court keep changing hands? Is there something wrong with them?”

“Can't rightly say,” said Nancy.

She gave a terse smile and turned back to her computer. Clearly her chat period had ended.

“Oh, by the way,” I asked, pausing at the door. “How did Mrs Hoskins die?”

It had struck me that the unfortunate Mrs Hoskins may have escaped

from one killer only to find herself embroiled with another. Some people, according to what I read occasionally in the papers, can have runs of bad luck like that.

“Pneumonia,” said Nancy. “Mind you, she was 74. Smoked 50 a day most of her life as well so she had it coming.”

I did the maths going down the steps to the street. Mrs Hoskins would have been around 62 when she was taken hostage and, allowing a couple of years for the case to go through the courts, she was probably around 60 when her lover was killed.

“Must be this unpolluted country air,” I muttered to myself as I walked to the library.

It didn't occur to me until I was almost there that my assumptions were wrong. Her husband could have been in prison for decades before he escaped. It was wrong to assume he escaped soon after being incarcerated.

Angie waved through the window of the library as I walked past and I waved back then pointed in the direction of the car. She shook her head and beckoned me in so I found the entrance and was quite surprised. Given the population of the town was a little over eight hundred the library had a surprisingly large collection. I'd say there was at least fifteen hundred books there. Admittedly not that many compared with our collection of roughly 3000 books and a drop in the ocean compared with Angus' Small and Main Libraries but, still, two books per person for the town was pretty good. I'd be surprised if Sydney, with its population of around 4 million, had as many as 8 million books in its combined public libraries.

“Won't be long,” she said. “Why don't you go and join? They've some good stuff here.”

She had two books in her hand and the one whose cover I could see was about crop circles.

“OK,” I said and went to talk to the lady at the desk.

I briefly explained my mission and she wanted to see my driver's licence. She seemed faintly upset when she found it was a NSW licence. I asked why and it turned out that she wasn't upset because it was a NSW licence as such, although Queenslanders aren't that fond of people from NSW, but because the NSW drivers' licence number is one digit longer than Queensland licence numbers and therefore didn't fit perfectly into the little box on her computer. I casually mentioned that inflexibility is a design fault quite common in a lot of computer systems and she seemed offended by that so I shut up and let her get on with it.

While I waited for her to do whatever it was she was doing with a small plastic card I looked at the library's display of new additions and was amused to see *Crimedotcom* by Geoff White. Geoff White is a London based journalist who specialises in investigating and reporting on computer crime and he had interviewed me four or five years before in connection with SDS's identifying, tracking and neutralising a ransomware author who went under the name of MorDorClaw. Ransomware is a form of computer virus that blocks your access to your data until you pay the author a ransom. I looked in the index and found my name and laughingly pointed it out to the librarian. She didn't believe me but gave me my new membership card anyway.

"I'm going out for a smoke," I said to Angie.

"OK," she said, now with four books in her hand.

I lit a ciggie outside and looked around. Nothing much was happening, as you'd expect after talking to Nancy, so I wandered back to the car to get Elvis. He was ecstatic that he hadn't been forgotten and peed on every bush he could find in the small Memorial Park opposite the library. There were thirteen names of those who had died in the First World War on the Memorial and nineteen for the Second. Three of the names for the Second World War had the same surname as one of the ones for the First and I wondered if they were a father and his three sons or even, possibly, a grandfather, his son and two grandsons since one of the three was a Sargent and the other two were privates. I wondered how the women of the family felt, especially since neither war had anything to do with Australia.

“Sorry I took so long,” said Angie when she eventually turned up. “I got talking to Magda.”

“Who’s Magda?” I asked, unlocking the car.

“The librarian,” she said, putting the five books and two DVDs in the boot so Elvis didn’t eat them. “She runs the Centrelink agency and the Vehicle Licensing agency as well as the library.”

“Really?” I said. “So why didn’t she offer to change my licence to a Queensland licence, then?”

“She does the vehicle stuff in the mornings and Centrelink in the afternoons,” said Angie. “Anyway, that doesn’t matter, we can sort our licences out later. She gave me a book on local history and the man who wrote it lives in Thrisk. He runs the local historical society here.”

“I’m surprised this place is big enough to have a historical society,” I said, starting the car.

“They meet at the pub on Wednesdays,” she said.

“Which pub?” I asked.

“The pub,” she said. “The other’s a hotel.”

“Australian hotels are pubs,” I said as we drove past The Grand Hotel, the only building of any real size in Thrisk. It didn’t look as though it had any bedrooms but it did seem to have several pokie machines lining its entrance. It didn’t look particularly grand either.

“That place,” she said, pointing to the other pub on the other side of the road.

“OK,” I said.

“How did you go at the Post Office?” she asked, rummaging around inside her bag.

“Angus doesn’t have a PO box,” I said. “In fact Nancy had never heard

of him.”

“I thought Nancy knew everyone,” said Angie.

“Maybe she only knows the people who get post,” I said.

“This is a small place,” said Angie. “Someone like Nancy would know of everyone, even if she hasn’t met all of them.”

“Obviously not,” I said. “Maybe Angus has his post delivered in Mossvale. I could always ask at the Post Office there.”

Angie didn’t find whatever she was looking for in her bag so she put it on the floor of the car and stared out of the window.

“I suppose it’s worth a try,” she said. “I’m sure someone like Angus would get a fair amount of post. Why would he need a secretary if he didn’t?”

“Maybe she’s writing his memoirs,” I said, “or she’s really his mistress and his wife hasn’t realised.”

Angie snorted. “Yeah, she seemed stupid enough.”

Her bag made some noises and she started to rummage again. This time she pulled out her phone.

“Josephine’s suggesting Friday,” she said. “That OK with you?”

“For dinner?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Angie.

“OK by me,” I said, “although I’d rather go to Mossvale on Thursday instead of today.”

“How come?” asked Angie.

“The food’ll be fresher,” I said, “and I don’t really want to go there twice in the same week.”

“Oh, OK,” said Angie. She seemed a little disappointed. “I’ll text back agreeing.”

I pulled into a dirt track that headed off to a farm then did a U turn and headed back into town.

“We can go to a cafe in Thrisk,” I said. “There’s a couple we haven’t tried yet.”

“How about the Blue Boar?” said Angie, cheering up. “I don’t like the look of the Thrisk Cafe or we could go back to Beverly’s or the Old Copper Cafe.”

“They’re both good,” I said, “but we ought to give the others a chance. They could be better. How about the Blue Boar?”

“OK,” said Angie, busying herself with her phone. She seemed to be typing in a lot more than ‘Friday’s good’.

I pulled up a little way down from the Blue Boar and Elvis was heartbroken to be left behind yet again. I swear if that dog had a phone he’d ring the RSPCA.

“Do you want anything to eat?” asked Angie, which usually meant she wanted something to eat but didn’t want to eat alone.

“Sure,” I said, not being averse to snacks between meals. “Let’s see what they’ve got.”

“A skinny cappuccino and a chai tea,” said Angie to the bored looking girl in the otherwise empty cafe.

“Want anything with that?” she asked.

“We’re just deciding,” said Angie.

“I think I’ll have one of those vanilla slices,” I said, pointing to something that looked disgustingly sweet that had whipped cream everywhere.

“I'm going to have one of those Viennese cookies,” said Angie.

“Oh, they look rather nice too,” I said, torn and indecisive. Discretion ultimately won out as the Viennese cookies looked considerably healthier than the vanilla slices. “I'll have one too.”

“And two Viennese cookies,” said Angie.

“K,” said the girl, scribbling something on her notepad. “Won't be long.”

“So you'll try the Post Office in Mossvale on Thursday?” asked Angie, moving over to where the cash machine was on the counter.

“Yes,” I said. “If that doesn't work out I suppose I'll have to go round and hand the clues to Angus or Amanda personally. Doesn't that look rather disgusting?”

Angie eyed the red, green, yellow and blue loaf of bread labelled Rainbow Bread and nodded.

“Two lattes and a tea,” said the girl, coming over. She put the three takeaway cups on the counter a little roughly and spilt one of them a bit.

“We asked for a cappuccino and a chai tea,” said Angie. “Not two lattes and a tea. Is that a chai tea?”

The girl glared at her then scooped up the cups. It sounded like she was swearing at us under her breath. Angie just looked at me and we both stood there silently. She came back after a few minutes with two cups.

“Cappuccino and chai,” she said, plonking them down. “\$11.80.

“And two Viennese cookies,” said Angie, pointing at the tray labelled Viennese cookies.

The girl glared at Angie again then picked up a pair of tongs and a paper bag and slipped two things from a different tray into the bag.

“\$23.60,” she said, dropping it onto the counter.

“Those aren't Viennese cookies,” said Angie.

There was a red spot of each of her cheeks which meant she was starting to get angry.

“Yes they are,” said the girl, looking at her as though she was stupid.

“Those are Viennese cookies,” said Angie, pointing to the tray.

“No, they're blueberry drop scones,” said the girl.

“The label says Viennese cookies,” said Angie tersely, the red spots getting bigger.

The girl grimaced. “Label's wrong,” she snapped, pushing the bag on the counter. “You asked for Viennese cookies and these are Viennese cookies, You want 'em or not?”

“No, I don't want them,” snapped back Angie. “I want those things there, whatever they're labelled.”

“Jesus!” said the girl angrily and snatched the bag off the counter. She put the Viennese cookies back on their tray using her fingers and picked up two of the drop scones and shoved them in the same bag. “\$23.60”

“The drop scones are \$2 cheaper than the Viennese cookies,” I said, having found the label for the drop scones. It was on a tray of what looked to be custard tarts. “That makes it \$19.60.”

“Oh, for God's sake,” said the girl and angrily rang up \$196.00.

“Have a nice day,” I said sarcastically, grabbing Angie's elbow before she blew her top. “We're leaving.”

I half pushed Angie out of the door.

“It's not worth it,” I said. “They'll be out of business soon. Let's go to

Beverly's."

Angie made as if to go back inside the cafe then changed her mind and got in the car instead.

"Let's go home," she said. "I'm just ... just ... ohh!"

"I'll make you a nice cup of tea," I said as we pulled up at the end of the drive after a silent, but mercifully short, trip home. "And I can run up some nice drop scones in a few moments."

"I'm not hungry," said Angie coldly, picking her way between the ruts in the drive.

We went inside and I put the kettle under the tap to fill it. Nothing happened.

"Damn," I said, trying again. "The pump's not working."

Chapter Ten

"I'm going to have a lie down," said Angie, dispiritedly. "Come on Elvis."

"Do you want to be woken?" I asked to her back.

"Only with some tea," she replied before disappearing through the doorway.

Elvis looked at me then at the doorway then back at me.

"Go on," I said, trying the tap again and he scampered after Angie.

"I suppose this is a job for a plumber," I thought to myself. "I wonder if there's a plumber round here and how long it'll take to get him out."

I was used to the ways of the city where water always came out of the tap. Here we depended on rainwater collected in a huge tank under the verandah and pumped up to the house by a pump. The water here tasted a little funny but apparently that was because it was clean and not full of chemicals and pollution. I tried the tap once more and still nothing happened, beyond a few drops, so I went onto the verandah and lit a ciggie.

"It sounded perfectly healthy," I muttered and bent over the verandah rail to see if I could see it but it was out of sight. "You don't suppose ...?"

I hurried down the steps and around the front of the house to where the meter box was and jerked the hatch open. Sure enough, the breaker switch, with 'pump' boldly written on a small sticker above it, was up.

"Pah!" I exclaimed and flicked it back down. Nothing happened.

I'd half expected, hoped would be a better word, the pump to start pumping its heart out but, of course, I hadn't left the tap on so there was no demand for water so the fuse may not have been the problem, only a result of a problem. I closed the hatch and went back around

the front of the house and stopped in surprise. I could hear the engine of a vehicle coming slowly up Timber Court. I was surprised since it was the only car engine I'd heard since we moved in a week and a half before. I walked part way up the drive to see which driveway the car was heading for and a big, filthy four wheel drive ute came down the drive as though the deep ruts didn't exist. I jumped back out of the way and it pulled up beside me with small clouds of dust billowing up from its huge wheels.

"Fernly?" said a deep voice through a luxuriant beard.

The man, judging by the voice and beard, had on a pair of mirror sunglasses and a sweat stained battered Akubra hat. The shades were tinted a golden red and looked to have a thin film of dust on them. The only part of his face that was visible was a narrow strip of cheek between the beard and the sunglasses.

"Yes," I said.

I wanted to ask who he was but felt it would seem rude. Anyway, he could be the local policeman for all I knew and the police always make me a little nervous.

"Pleased to meet ya," said the man and pushed his left hand through his open window without letting go of the steering wheel with his right hand. "Harry."

I shook hands with him, wondering who Harry was but before I could ask he drove off and parked in front of the house as though he had a right to be there. I hurried after him. He was out of the ute and lifting a tool box out of the back by the time I arrived.

"Right then," he said, probably with a grin as I saw a thin gleam of white somewhere inside the beard, "let the dog see the rabbit."

"What?" I said, somewhat taken aback. "We don't have any rabbits."

"I'm Harry," he said, pulling his sunglasses down to look at me with as much puzzlement as I had. "Harry the 'lectrician. You was wanting a cooker installed?"

“Ohhh,” I said. “I thought you weren't coming 'till next week.”

“On me way to visit the wife,” he said, pushing his sunglasses back up. “Thought I'd drop in since I was passing.”

“Right,” I said. “Well, you'd better come in.”

“She went into 'ospital last night,” he continued, following me up the steps.

“Oh dear,” I said, opening the front door. “I hope it isn't anything too serious.”

“Nah,” he said, following me in. “Only another kiddie. So you want that one out?” He nodded towards the old cooker.

“Yes,” I said. “I've got a new induction hob I want installed in its place and a shelf underneath for a small oven.”

“No sweat,” he said, studying the old cooker. “You OK with white?”

“White?” I asked, not understanding.

“Got to put in a support to hold the hob,” he said, “and the shelf. Only got white in the ute. If you want the counter tops matching I'll have to get them special. Take a few days.”

“Oh, white's fine,” I said. “I'll just get the hob. It's in the spare room.”

I fetched the hob while he started measuring the old cooker and left it propped against a cupboard while I tested the tap. Water gushed out and the pump made its usual thrumming noise.

“Right then,” he said. “Just get some board. Gotta turn off the electric so if you want to boil a kettle you'd better do it now.”

“No, it can wait,” I said.

“Hello,” said Angie, coming into the lounge. “I thought I heard voices. I'm Angie.”

“Harry,” said Harry.

“He’s the electrician,” I said, helpfully.

“So why are you called Dead Horse Harry?” asked Angie.

“Cos I live in Dead Horse Lane,” said Harry, heading for the door. “Just get some board.”

“The pump’s working again,” I said, filling the kettle to prove it. “Want some tea?”

“Yes, please,” she said. “What was the problem?”

“The circuit breaker was up,” I said.

“Ohh,” she said and yawned. “Are you going to get Harry to check the electrics?”

“Yes,” I said, putting teabags into cups. I did one for Harry just in case.

I made the tea with the sound of a power saw coming from outside. Angie took hers back to bed so I took Harry’s out to him.

“Made you some tea,” I said.

“Beauty,” he said, looking up from marking out a hole for the hob in one of the boards.

“Could you check the electrics while you’re here?” I asked. “We keep having circuits pop.”

“No sweat,” he said, taking the proffered mug. “Probably won’t find anything though. These places are always blowing circuits.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Been out to all the houses in this road loads of times,” he said. “Fuses blowing, things starting up when they shouldn’t, motors burning out,

shit like that. Don't leave any power tools plugged in when you're not using them."

"Really?" I asked. "Is there something wrong with the power supply then? Voltage too high or something?"

"Nah," he said. "I've checked 'em all and power company's been out hundreds of times over the years. Everything checks out. Reckon it's something in the air."

"How strange," I said. "How long's this been going on?"

"Ohh, pretty much as long as there's been electrics here," he said. "Me dad says it were like this when he started out and all, but I'll check it out for you anyway."

"Thanks," I said, making a mental note to get battery based uninterruptible power supplies for my computers. A straight power cut isn't too bad beyond the loss of whatever the computer was working on at the time but sudden power surges and brown outs can wreak havoc on their circuitry and can corrupt data. A UPS will also smooth out any fluctuations in the supply.

"What if we installed solar?" I asked. "Would that solve the problem?"

"Nah," said Harry, finishing his tea. "That place down the road got solar and it made no difference. Nice cuppa that, thanks."

I watched him neatly cut a rectangle out of the board then followed him back inside.

"So you're from outside?" he asked, attacking the wiring of the old cooker with a screwdriver.

"We're from Sydney," I said.

"Thought so," he said. "Only outsiders move here."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"This road," he said. "No one local will live here no more."

"Really?" I said, intrigued. "Have they got too expensive?"

"Nah," he said. "Just things."

"Things?" I said.

"You know, electrics and shit," he said.

The cooker suddenly came loose and he stood up and deftly whisked it away.

"What sort of shit?" I persisted.

"Oh, you know," he said, "stuff."

He didn't seem to want to go into details so I let it drop. I wandered out onto the verandah and lit a cigarette, wondering what on earth he was talking about. It tied in with a few other comments we'd heard, such as these properties changing hands frequently. It would also explain why only three of the seven properties were occupied.

* * *

"This is quite interesting," said Angie, some while after dinner that night.

"What is?" I asked, not bothering to look up from *They Came To Baghdad*. Victoria, the girl who had gone chasing after a chap she met in London, was now on an archaeological site in Iran. She had given the archaeologist to understand that she was a distant cousin whom he hadn't met and, being absent minded and engrossed in his studies, he had accepted that. The story was completely implausible but still entertaining and I was curious to find out who had committed the various murders that had occurred so far and why Victoria had been kidnapped; her escape from captivity having led her, fortuitously, to the archaeological site.

"Brisbane was founded in 1823," she said. "It was set up as a penal

colony for the convicts who were too incorrigible to be dealt with at the Sydney colony.”

As this factoid seeped into my mind I looked up. Admittedly my knowledge of Australian history wasn't deep but I had the impression that the convict settlement in Sydney had been fairly brutal. I'd read somewhere that punishments of a thousand or more lashes with the cat o' nine tails were commonplace so those convicts they had been unable to beat into submission must have been of a toughness beyond my capability to comprehend. Even the threat of one or two lashes would have reduced me to total submission. This in turn suggested something of the nature of Brisbane's character, but I wasn't sure what.

“I'm surprised they didn't just hang them,” I commented after a while. “They were a long way from England and I doubt the authorities there would have cared. What are you reading?”

“That local history book,” she said, holding the cover up so I could see it.

The cover had what looked to be an old painting of a landscape of scrubby trees on a small hill and lots of multi-coloured but dingy looking birds flying around. The title, *Thrisk and Environs; A History* was balanced on the top of the hill in a drab greeny-brown, no doubt to resemble the colours of the landscape in the painting. The author's name, Wallace Smythe-Cooper, was underneath the painting and printed in plain black.

It occurred to me that perhaps the convicts weren't particularly incorrigible. Perhaps they did just hang or shoot the ones who were too much trouble but they couldn't do that with the warders and minor officials. Perhaps the Brisbane colony had really been set up to get rid of the warders who were troublemakers and the convicts were simply convenient pawns in a political power play. After all, every organisation has someone who is a damned nuisance but who you can't sack and the cost of sending back warders and the like was, no doubt, prohibitive. The thought also crossed my mind that it wasn't beyond the realms of possibility that the Governor of the Sydney colony set up the Brisbane colony to get rid of the Deputy Governor,

or whoever was sent there to run the place, so he could have an affair with the man's wife.

“Was he married?” I asked.

“Who?” said Angie, looking puzzled because the conversation wasn't going the way she expected.

“Whoever was in charge of the new Brisbane colony,” I said.

“I've no idea,” she said. She gave a little shake of her head as though to dismiss the apparent irrelevance of my question. “But free settlement began in the early 1840s and Brisbane was declared a municipality in 1859. That was when Queensland became a separate state.”

“It must have been a bugger to run the place from Sydney,” I said. “It's, what, 1200 kilometres and they didn't have trains or telephones. I wonder why they didn't find somewhere closer for the new colony.”

“Maybe they just wanted to start opening up the country,” said Angie. “It says here that there were early attempts to mine copper in these hills in the 1830s and settlers started to move to Thrisk in the 1840s, although it wasn't Thrisk then.”

“What was it originally?” I asked.

“It didn't have a name,” said Angie. “At first it was just known as the copper mines since the first people here were miners. White people at any rate. Then when other people started to move in who weren't miners the settlement became known as Ghost Hill.”

“That is interesting,” I said, thinking of what Harry had said earlier. “Does the book say why ghosts?”

“Apparently there were a lot of ghost gums in the area,” said Angie. “That's why, after the miners gave up on the copper, they turned to timber. At one point there were as many as seven timber mills here. There's only the one now. The rest shut down in the 1920s.”

"I wonder why the mills shut down," I mused. "I would have thought with Brisbane and Ipswich growing there would have been a demand for timber for building houses."

"I haven't got to the 1920s yet," said Angie. "That's just what it said in the introduction. Maybe they started to use bricks for building or stopped making wooden ships."

"Could be," I said. "So were the copper mines exhausted quickly?"

"I imagine so," said Angie. "All it says here is that the mines quickly became uneconomical so I'm guessing that means there wasn't enough copper to justify the cost. Anyway, the town became Thrisk in 1882, seven years after the Post Office opened."

"So that would have been in 1875," I said, "so that must mean Nancy is nearly 150 years old. I can believe that."

Angie laughed. "The first Post Master was Clement Pottageworthy," she said. "Apparently he worked in the cotton mills back in England but developed a lung condition that meant he couldn't work with cotton anymore. He came out to Australia when he was 29 in the hope the climate would let him make a new start. Sadly it didn't."

"I daresay the heat and humidity made his lungs worse," I said.

"No," said Angie. "It's quite sad, actually. His lungs improved a lot and he was planning to marry a girl in Sydney when he got the Post Office established but only a few weeks after sending for her he was bitten by a snake and died."

"Oh, that's no good," I said. "What happened to the girl?"

"Her name was Constance," said Angie. "She arrived here in Thrisk expecting to find her fiancé and a thriving business but it seems the local people buried him and never got around to telling the Post Office so mail continued to be delivered to Thrisk, or Ghost Hill as it was then. Clement had only sent her sufficient funds for the trip up and she didn't have enough to get back to Sydney. She was 17, penniless, alone and surrounded by sacks of undelivered mail."

“So what did she do?” I asked. “She must have been quite upset.”

“She was,” said Angie, “but I think she was quite intelligent and tough as well because when she found out Clement was dead she lied and said that she had married him the day before he left Sydney and she took over the Post Office. The locals were happy since they had a working Post Office again and the Post Office authorities were happy since everything was signed for by C Pottageworthy as it should be. They never bothered to check and it was against the rules for a woman to run a Post Office at the time.”

“Well, good for her,” I said.

“The only problem was that she had no capital to run the Post Office either since everything was in Clement's name,” said Angie. “So she got a clerk at one of the timber mills to forge a marriage certificate so she could inherit. After two years running the Post Office she set up an agency for Cobb and Co and a few years after that set up a haulage business although that failed in the Depression in the 1890s.”

“She must have been quite a battler,” I said. “Did she keep the Post Office going?”

“No,” said Angie, “She sold it when Australia voted for Federation in 1901 and went back to Sydney and opened a pub.”

“Did she ever marry?” I asked, then the lights went out. “What the hell?”

“Can you feel that?” asked Angie in the darkness. “The floor is vibrating.”

“Yes,” I said as Elvis started to growl. There were hissing noises coming from the bedroom which suggested Shishke had woken up and wasn't happy about something. “The fuses must have gone again. This is getting ridiculous.”

The floor stopped vibrating and Elvis and Shishke quietened down.

“I'll go out to the meter box,” I said, getting up. “If this is going to

keep on happening maybe we should get Harry to move the box inside where we can get at it easily.”

“I’ll come with you,” said Angie. “I need to know what to do if you’re not here.”

“OK,” I said, “let me get the torch. Probably an idea to buy some more torches as well.”

I found the torch and turned it on so Angie could see then we went out and down the steps.

“The box is round the other side,” I said.

“Can you hear that?” asked Angie, stopping and putting her hand on my arm.

“No,” I said. “What is it?”

“Shhh,” she said, listening intently. “It sounds like ... I don’t know ... voices? Very faint, I can’t make out any words.”

We both stood there in the darkness listening hard.

“I think so,” I said after a few moments. “Maybe it’s the wind in the trees.”

“There is no wind,” said Angie. “It’s completely still. Ahh, it’s stopped. I can’t hear it anymore.”

“Maybe it was a trick of acoustics,” I said. “Someone having a party in town and the sound somehow funnelled around to here.”

“Maybe,” she said, sounding unconvinced.

I stepped forward then stopped again as the ground began to vibrate.

“That is weird,” I said, shining the torch around. “Can you feel it?”

“Yes,” said Angie, holding on to the slats on the side of the house.

“Look at that bush.”

The bush in the torch light was quivering.

“This is a bit spooky,” I said. “Is it an earthquake?”

“I think they only last a few seconds,” said Angie. “Let’s get the lights on.”

“Right,” I said and started walking forward again. “All you have to do is open the box and flick down any of the switches ... ugh,” and I found myself on my knees on the ground.

“Did you trip?” asked Angie, bending to pick up the torch which I’d dropped as I fell. Its light was still on.

“No,” I said, looking around as I cautiously got to my feet. “Something pushed me.”

Chapter Eleven

“Pushed you?” said Angie. “What do you mean, pushed you?”

“Aargh,” I muttered as I straightened up.

There was a stabbing pain in my left knee and the other felt a little bruised. I bent over and rubbed the sore spot and flexed my leg a couple of times. It still hurt.

“It was like someone jostled me,” I said, rubbing the other knee as well. “You know, like when you’re in a crowded place and someone accidentally bumps into you.”

Angie shone the torch around then pointed it at the ground at my feet.

“What could have jostled you?” she asked. “This place is hardly crowded.”

“I don’t know,” I said, feeling a little irritable and, deep down, perhaps a little scared. “Maybe it was a wallaby or something.”

“We’d have heard a wallaby,” she said, “and there’s nothing here to trip you. No exposed roots or rocks or anything.”

“I didn’t trip,” I said, “but whatever the reason, I did fall and my knee hurts. Let’s just do the damned fuses and get back inside.”

“OK, OK,” she said placatingly. “How do you open the meter box?”

“There’s a catch on the side,” I said, hobbling over.

“Oh yes,” she said and undid it. The meter box door swung open with a faint metallic rasp.

“These are the contact breakers,” I said, pointing to a row of little oblongs with small blue levers on them. “Each one is labelled with which circuit it’s for and if it is overloaded the little blue lever pops up to break the circuit.”

“So it's that one,” she said, pointing to the one blue lever that was up. “The one labelled 'ceilings'.”

“Yup,” I said. “So just push it down again and the ceiling lights should come back on.”

Cautiously, as though she expected an explosion or to be electrocuted, Angie clicked the switch down and the bathroom light directly above us came on.

“Oops,” she said. “Must have forgotten to turn that light off, sorry.”

“That's OK,” I said, peering under the house. “The lounge light is on as well. Let's get back inside.”

Angie turned the torch off and turned to go back round the front of the house and screamed.

“What is it?” I said urgently, thinking perhaps she'd trodden on a snake and been bitten.

“There's someone on the drive,” she whispered hoarsely, jumping backwards and treading on my foot.

“Oww, shiiittt,” I exclaimed, lurching back and nearly falling over again. Fortunately the slats around the bottom of the house were strong enough to keep me upright.

Her foot slid off my toes and she shifted her balance a little to grab my arm.

“There,” she said pointing.

“I don't see anyone,” I said grumpily. Both knees, the heel of one hand and my foot now hurt. Next time a fuse went Angie could go on her own.

“G'day,” said a voice and this time it was me that jumped backwards. I clattered noisily against the slats. Angie gasped but held her ground and lifted the torch defensively.

"I'm your neighbour," said a figure stepping out of the darkness and into the light from the bathroom window. "From over the road. Out for a walk. Saw your torch. Came to see if you needed help. Didn't mean to frighten you."

He looked to be in his sixties, lean and incongruously dressed in a camouflage jacket, grey shorts and army style boots. He had a longish beard and unkempt hair and clutched a stout looking stick in his hand.

"Oh, er, hello," I said, pushing myself off the slats. "You startled us."

"Sorry," he said and stood there as though wondering what to do next.

I was having the same problem as my mind had gone completely blank.

"I'm Angie," said Angie, recovering more quickly than me. "And this is David."

The man gave a half smile.

"Do you have a name?" she asked after waiting a few seconds.

"Oh, er, Clive," he said. He scratched under his beard and looked a little startled himself.

"And which neighbour are you?" she asked.

"That one," he said, pointing with his stick up the drive and a little to the left.

"Ohh, Number 2," I said.

Clive nodded. "I'll, umm, be off then," he said and turned to go.

"The fuse went," I said. "Seems to happen quite a lot here."

"Yes," said Clive.

He walked up the drive three or four paces then stopped and thought for a few moments.

“Don't bother with lights, me,” he said over his shoulder. “Waste of time.”

He strode off, one arm and part of a leg moving in the bathroom light while the rest of him stayed in the darkness.

“Thanks for the offer of help,” I called after him.

He may have grunted an acknowledgement, it was hard to tell.

“Well,” said Angie, staring after him.

“Indeed,” I said. “He moves very quietly.”

“Bit whiffy,” she said then clicked the torch on and off again.

“I think he's the recluse the agent told us about,” I said, hobbling forward. My knee seemed to be hurting even more and my little toe throbbed. “Probably doesn't wash as often as he should. I need some coffee.”

“You don't suppose it was him who pushed you over?” asked Angie, slowly following me.

“Why would he do that?” I asked in surprise.

“Maybe you got inside his comfort zone,” she said.

“But why would he be down this far?” I asked. “We'd only just put the torch on. He wouldn't have had time to see it and come down.”

I'd reached the steps and was going up using just my right leg while holding on to the rail.

“Maybe he was already down there,” she said.

“You mean, like a peeping tom or something?” I asked, getting to the

top with a small measure of relief.

“Could be,” she said. “Maybe it's him who's flipping the switches.”

“Why would he do that?” I asked.

“He's a recluse,” she said. “Who knows what goes on in his mind. Oh, you've cut your knee. Go and sit down.”

I hobbled over to my chair and Angie turned on the table lamp so she could see better.

“It's bleeding a little,” she said, “but not much. It looks like you've some dirt in it though and your trousers are torn. I'll give it a wash.”

“Thanks,” I said.

I inspected my knee while Angie went to the kitchen. There was a small wound, oozing slightly, in the soft bit just below the kneecap and a large dirt stain on my trousers around a jagged tear.

“Right,” she said, returning with a mug of water, some cotton wool and a tube of Savlon, “drop 'em.”

Dutifully I stood up and dropped my trousers and sat down again. Angie knelt on the floor and bathed my wound while I clenched my teeth and held on tightly to the arms of the chair. Then she smeared Savlon over it and sat back on her heels to inspect her handiwork.

“Probably best to put a plaster on it,” she said. “Back in a mo'.”

She was back quickly with a plaster and stuck it on neatly.

“There,” she said, giving my knee a pat and making me wince. “All done.”

“Thanks,” I said.

I stood and pulled up my trousers. “I suppose I'll need some new trousers.”

“Don't bother,” she said, getting up to sit in her chair. “This is Queensland so get some shorts and keep those for working in the garden.”

“I suppose,” I said, “although I don't have the legs for shorts. It would be easy enough to find out if it is Clive fiddling with the fuses. I could easily set up some PIRs.”

“What are PIRs?” she asked.

“Passive Infra-Red lights,” I said. “They're outside lights that are triggered by motion sensors. They're pretty cheap and most hardware stores should do some. That way if he comes within, say, 10 metres of the house then the outside lights will come on. I could set up a cam as well so we have a record of what triggered the lights and if I set it up so it covers the meter box we'll see if he's mucking around with it.”

“But if he's turning off the electricity wouldn't that kill the lights?” asked Angie.

“I could get solar ones,” I said, “but either way the cam would record who approached the box.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” she said. “But won't the lights be triggered by wallabies and bandicoots and things?”

“Probably,” I said, “but if it is Clive then he'll probably stop after the first time so we can stop using the lights after a while.”

“OK,” said Angie, “let's do it. I don't like the idea of someone spying on us. It's creepy.” She gave a convulsive little shudder.

“Oh, you're being spied on all the time through your mobile phone,” I said. “We live in an age of surveillance.”

“That's different,” said Angie, “and I can turn the phone off any time I want to. What if he's watching while I'm in bed or in the bathroom?”

“We can certainly stop him doing that,” I said, not bothering to mention that there are apps that can be installed remotely onto

phones that let them record even when apparently turned off. "I can get some PIRs tomorrow although I'll probably have to send off for a cam unless you fancy a drive into Toowoomba."

"How long will it take to get one?" she asked.

"Probably only a couple of days," I said. "I can order it online tonight."

"Are they expensive?" she asked.

"The cheap ones aren't," I said, "obviously. But they're poor quality and may not have the resolution for a recognisable image beyond a metre or so since they're designed for people sitting in front of their computers. The better ones can handle infra-red as well and the best can track whatever is moving."

"Maybe we could hold off for a bit," she said. "We're not made of money and Clive will probably stop as soon as he realises we have the lights."

"That's if it is Clive," I said. "It may not be and we shouldn't assume he's guilty without any evidence. Besides, if it's a wallaby or something else it would be good to see just how it does manage to flip the fuses."

"I guess," said Angie and she sighed. "I'll leave it up to you. I'm off to bed. Night."

She got up and gave me a kiss then disappeared through the doorway to the bathroom. Elvis opened an eye and watched her go then got up and stretched before slowly following.

I gazed at the ceiling for a few moments then started to prod the plaster on my knee.

"Leave it alone!" came Angie's voice from the bathroom.

"Talk about surveillance!" I muttered and got up to make myself a coffee and a sandwich.

When I came back Shishke was curled up in the warm spot where my backside had been and she glared balefully at me, daring me to do something about it.

“Come on, puss,” I said, putting my coffee down on the table beside my chair.

She rolled over and looked at me from upside-down. It was kind of cute but I pushed her off anyway and she stalked off towards the bedroom to take her revenge on Elvis.

I sat down and started to munch thoughtfully on my sandwich. I supposed it was possible that Clive was fiddling with the switches in the meter box although it did seem rather a futile thing to do. But, as Angie said, who knows what goes on in the mind of a recluse. It could simply be that he didn't like having neighbours and was trying to scare us off. Having said that, I also remembered that Dead Horse Harry had said this problem had been going on since his father's time which made it seem less likely to be Clive, although it was just possible he'd started doing it as a child and had never been caught.

“It all seems very unlikely,” I muttered to myself. “And would he really push me over then come back and say he'd come to help?”

Actually, that did seem possible. After all, he hadn't said a word until after Angie had spotted him so he may have been trying to get away unseen. But then again, would a recluse be that brazen?

On the other hand, something was causing the circuit breakers to break and, now I came to think about it, may be causing the vibrations as well and if it wasn't Clive ...

I finished my sandwich and turned on my laptop. While it booted I lit a cigarette then spent an enjoyable hour or so looking through the specifications for a variety of cams. I always felt more comfortable with technology than people. Sadly, people don't come with a set of specifications detailing how they work. A few hundred dollars later two cams with motion detectors and infra-red capability were lined up to be posted out to me the next morning. I thought I'd have one covering the driveway and the meter box and the other covering the

front door and the verandah. I made a mental note to check if the insurance company would give any sort of discount for these extra security features.

* * *

"Sleep well?" asked Angie when I got up in the morning and joined her on the verandah.

"Not really," I said. "I kept rolling onto my knee and waking myself up."

I plonked myself down and lit a ciggie. The sky was overcast and it looked like it might rain.

"The forecast's for rain," said Angie. "Maybe even a storm."

"Could use some rain," I said. "Everything's very dry."

"The wet season's a few months away," said Angie. She paused then added "I had a weird dream last night."

"Oh yes?" I said.

Angie often had weird dreams. Sometimes we tried to work out what they meant but most of the time the things she dreamt about weren't listed in the online 'dream meaning' websites.

"I dreamt about that woman who ran the Post Office," she said. "You remember, the one who was going to marry the man who was bitten by a snake."

"Back in 1870 something," I said, sipping my coffee.

"That's right," said Angie.

"What's so weird about that?" I asked. "You'd been reading about her only that day."

"I know," said Angie, "but that wasn't the weird part. In my dream I

was watching as Constance was sorting mail and selling stamps and doing post-office things.”

“Well, that seems reasonable,” I said.

“And she was dressed in one of those long heavy skirts, a tight fitting jacket and lace up boots,” said Angie. “Just like those women in the old photos. Oh, and a big hat. Why she would wear a big hat inside the building I don't know, but she did.”

“Maybe she was about to go off and do the deliveries,” I said.

“I don't think they delivered back then,” said Angie, “but it was a dream so anything could happen. Anyway, that was before it got weird.”

She paused to think about her dream and I waited patiently.

“Then she changed her outfit,” said Angie thoughtfully. “The jacket and skirt were gone and she was wearing a dark blue robe of some sort, with a hood although the hood wasn't up.”

I stiffened in my chair, my coffee mug part way to my lips.

“And she was barefoot,” said Angie, visualising her dream.

“Is that all?” I asked, trying to sound casual.

“That's all I can remember,” she said. “Oh, and the robe had a silver hem on it. I remember that distinctly. It looked rather good.”

I put my coffee down again and fiddled with my cigarette.

“Did she have long dark hair?” I asked quietly, “in a ponytail?”

“Ohh, I don't know,” said Angie. “You know, I rather think she did.”

She tapped her fingers on the arm of the couch while thinking about her dream then a puzzled look came over her face.

“How did you know the girl in my dream had long dark hair in a ponytail?” she asked.

“I didn't know,” I said, taking refuge in pedantry.

Angie sighed. “But why did you think she might have?” she asked patiently. “Why not a blonde or whether she had a horse or something? Long dark hair in a ponytail is very specific.”

I cleared my throat and wondered what to say.

“You never read that book, did you,” I said. “The one about Autumn Savannah.”

“No,” said Angie. “That type of story never interested me and when you, you know, I just threw it away. Why?”

I stared at her for a few moments.

“Because that's what Autumn wore,” I said quietly. “She wore a dark blue robe with a silver ribbon sewn to the hem which had magical powers and she was always barefoot and she had long dark hair which she wore in a ponytail.”

“You're kidding me!” exclaimed Angie going wide eyed. Then she laughed. “Yes, good one, Davie. You had me going there for a moment.”

“I'm not joking,” I said. “I just wish we still had a copy so I could show you.”

“But, ...,” said Angie then she frowned. “Are you saying I dreamt about your ..., that girl, ...? How is that possible?”

“I have no idea,” I said. “Unless I described her to you sometime but I don't remember doing that. Have I ever talked in my sleep?”

“Actually yes,” said Angie, “but most of it was just mumbo jumbo to me. Some I vaguely understood like data warehouses and multi-dimensional data cubes but most of it was technospeak on viruses and

stuff which I found incomprehensible. You sometimes talked to that girl in your sleep but you never talked about her.”

“Did I really?” I said in surprise. I had no recollection of doing that but then I had little recollection of much of that time period anyway.

I thought about it briefly then shook my head.

“I must have described her,” I said. “Maybe not in a continuous description but I may have said little snippets which you’ve remembered and put together. The unconscious is actually quite a phenomenal thing, really.”

“I suppose so,” said Angie, sounding unconvinced. “I can’t imagine how else I would know what that girl looked like, but why would I be dreaming about her?”

“Maybe the things that have been happening here have been stressing you,” I said, “and you’ve picked up on my stress period as a way of relieving yours.”

“Oh, get over yourself,” said Angie. “I may be married to you but I’m not dependent on you or living my life through you. I’m quite capable of coming up with my own imaginary friends.”

“Please, don’t joke about it,” I said, feeling quite upset. “She was as real to me as you are and it bothers me that she was only in my imagination. You don’t know what it’s like to find out that someone you thought was real, someone you trusted, is only a figment of your deranged mind.”

“Oh god! I’m so sorry,” cried Angie, instantly contrite. She jumped off the couch, knelt in front of me and took my hand in hers. “I didn’t mean it like that and your mind wasn’t deranged, you were just under a lot of stress and needed someone you could talk to.”

“But I’m still a nutter though, aren’t I,” I said quietly. “Someone who believes fantasies.”

“No, you’re not a nutter,” said Angie, looking intently into my eyes. “If

anyone's the nutter it's me. I have no excuse for dreaming about that girl and you haven't seen her since you left work, have you. Have you?"

"No," I said then shook my head. "No, I haven't but why on Earth would you be dreaming about her?"

"God knows," said Angie, "but it's probably what you said. You must have dropped little hints and my unconscious has picked up on them and chewed them up into a dream. Didn't you tell me once that dreams are just the brain's way of flushing out the waste it generates? That's probably all it is. My brain is just getting rid of its waste and most likely all it means is that I'm finally getting over that time as well."

"Yes, possibly," I said, taking hold of her hands with mine. "It must have been dreadful for you. I don't know how you coped."

"I nearly didn't," she admitted, "but then, you have to, don't you. It's either that or give up and I wasn't going to give up on you." Then she started to smile. "We'd never have been able to buy this place if I had!"

"So true," I said, giving her a hug, "so true. Do you want to come to Mossvale with me? I need to get those PIRs and we've got Desmond and Josephine coming to dinner on Friday. I thought I'd do a roast and apple crumble for dessert and we haven't enough apples or ice cream."

"Sure," said Angie, breaking the hug, "but I've got to get changed first. Oh, and Josie doesn't eat red meat."

"No problem," I said, "I'll do a chicken."

"Great," said Angie, standing up. "And can we stop off for coffee and muffins?"

"Sure," I said, rubbing my knee which was hurting again as she'd been leaning against it, "but not the Blue Boar, OK. I don't want them pissing you off again."

Chapter Twelve

“Do you want to rush back and install those?” asked Angie after we'd got four cheap solar powered PIRs at the hardware store in Mossvale.

“Not especially,” I said. “I'm going to put one on each side of the house and it'll mean going up a ladder. I'd rather do that earlier in the day than when it's starting to get dark.”

I don't like heights at the best of times and, because of the slope on which the house was built, one side of the house, near the driveway, is almost on the ground and the opposite side is about three metres off the ground, effectively making that end two stories high. It doesn't help that the main water tank is underneath that end and juts out so installing a PIR will be awkward. Mind you, the other two sides will have their own difficulty as the slope will mean the ladder is on an angle unless I can find some way to level the base. I wasn't looking forward to doing the installation. In fact, I'd been wondering if it was worth paying someone to come in and do it for me.

“So why don't we go to a cafe and get takeaway coffees?” said Angie. “Then we can go for a drive and have them somewhere scenic.”

“Sounds good,” I said, being in the mood to be easily convinced. “Where shall we go?”

“What about that one there?” she said, pointing to a cafe a little further down from the hardware shop.

“I meant for the drive,” I said. “Pretty well everywhere around here is scenic.”

“How about Lake Takanu?” suggested Angie. “We haven't been there yet.”

“OK,” I said. “I think that's another 50 k or thereabouts. We'll do the shopping on the way back otherwise the ice cream will melt.”

* * *

We got back to Thrisk around 6ish, having had a very pleasant afternoon by the lake. As it was after sunset the nine lights that lit the main street were on and, coupled with a smattering of shop window lights, gave the town a warm cosy glow.

“What day is it?” asked Angie as we followed a huge two trailer truck hauling giant tree trunks. It ground its way slowly along no doubt respectful of the signs on the outskirts of town asking truckies to keep noise to a minimum during the hours of darkness.

“Wednesday,” I said.

“So why don't we go to the pub and have a counter meal,” she said, glancing at me. “It'll save you cooking.”

“I don't mind cooking,” I said, flicking the indicator light to turn left into the road that wound around the mountain.

“And we can go the the Historical Society meeting as well,” said Angie.

“Ahh, so that's your game, is it,” I said, turning off the indicator light. “Which pub was it?”

“The pub,” said Angie, “not the hotel.”

“OK,” I said. “That's the one on the right, isn't it. I'll drop you and you can go get a table and check out the meeting while I pop back home and drop off the shopping.”

I drove past our turn off and slowly followed the timber truck. It was doing all of 20 kilometres an hour.

“Jesus!” exclaimed Angie a few moments later. “Look at that!”

“Good God!” I exclaimed as well, looking out her side of the car. “What the hell happened there?”

The Blue Boar Cafe was a burnt out ruin. I pulled over then backed up a little and we both stared from inside the car. Not only was the

place completely gutted but the roof and one of the walls were gone and the others were badly charred and looked about to fall down. Temporary fencing had been put up and the whole place still looked damp.

"The doctor's looks untouched," commented Angie, "although there seem to be scorch marks on the side of the op shop. Wasn't that the side where the kitchen was?"

"I think so, yes," I said. "I wonder what happened. Do you suppose they pissed off the wrong person and they came back and torched the place?"

"Ohh, you're making me feel guilty," said Angie.

"What on Earth for?" I asked in surprise. "It wasn't you, was it?"

"No, of course not," she said, "but I was thinking bad thoughts about the place after I went to bed last night."

"I know you are strong minded," I said, "but not even you can set alight to a cafe just through the power of thought."

"I know," said Angie, "but I still feel guilty. I hope no one was hurt."

"I wouldn't think so," I said. "No one ever went there so it was probably an insurance job in the middle of the night."

"Oh, they must have had customers," said Angie. "That girl was probably just having a bad day."

"Maybe it was her, then," I said. "She was pissed off with you picking up on her crap service so she burnt the place down in revenge. Come on, let's go to the pub."

The timber truck had disappeared and the street was deserted. I slipped the car into gear and drove the hundred metres or so to the pub. There were a couple of cars parked outside and I did a U turn and pulled up behind them.

"Doesn't look like it's busy," I said as Angie opened her door. "See if the barman knows what happened to the cafe."

"Right-oh," said Angie. "Shall I order for you? What would you like?"

"Oh, I don't mind," I said. "Anything so long as there's no broccoli."

"The only veggies will probably be chips," she said, getting out. "Country pubs usually do a side of salad and chips. Don't be long."

"I'll only be a few minutes," I said.

She shut the door and I drove off. The turn-off at the edge of town curved round the mountain and went past Timber Court. If you stayed on the road you meandered around a couple of distant farms then went back into town at the other end.

I parked at the top of the drive and briefly wondered when they were going to start work on replacing it. It was a pain having to walk up and down, especially when carrying shopping and even more so in the dark when it was difficult to see the ruts and potholes. Still, I managed without falling over and climbed the steps to the house. It was dark and seemed lifeless. I opened the door and there was no sound of a joyous dog bounding to meet me.

"Elvis?" I called, a little puzzled. "Elvis? Where are you?"

Silence.

I fumbled my way in and dumped the supermarket shopping bag on the floor then turned to find the light switch. I still wasn't used to the place and it took a few moments of scratching the wall.

"Oh Elvis," I said heavily as my eyes took in the shredded white fluff that covered the lounge floor. In the far corner, by the door that led to the bedrooms and bathroom, was a decidedly limp and pathetic looking cushion with a badly chewed end. It had been as thoroughly gutted as the cafe in town. Elvis was nowhere in sight.

I pushed the front door shut with my foot and picked up the shopping

bag. As I went around the corner of the cabinets into the kitchen area I saw Elvis lying on the floor, unmoving.

"You've had fun, I see," I said, dumping the shopping bag on the counter. I put the other bag with the PIRs next to it.

Elvis looked at me mournfully then his eyes flicked over to his empty food bowl then back to me. He gave the impression that he hadn't been fed for weeks and was at death's door.

"Yeah, yeah," I said, fishing the carton of ice cream out of the bag. "Your dinner's only an hour late. Get over it."

He feebly scraped his tail across the kitchen floor, clearly too weak to actually lift it. To his disgust I took no notice. Instead I put the ice cream in the freezer then put the apples in the fridge.

"So was it you who killed the cushion or was it Shishke?" I asked. "Hmmm?"

He remained motionless, his head resting on his front paws and his eyes locked on mine.

"Giving me the silent treatment, hey?" I asked then got a sachet of cat food from the cupboard and went to feed Shishke.

She was asleep on the bed and didn't deign to look up when I went in. Her food bowl was on the top shelf of a low bookcase so Elvis didn't eat all her food. Elvis hadn't moved when I got back to the kitchen although he gave a rumbling sigh when he saw me.

I bent to pick up his bowl and he leapt to his feet, deliriously excited that his suffering was about to end. I spooned in some of the chicken and vegetables that I brewed up every few days in the slow cooker, sprinkled on some dry biscuit and put the bowl on the floor. He was eating before it touched down.

I went out the front door, leaving the light on, then stopped halfway down the steps and went back inside. Elvis had demolished all his food and was snuffling around the floor searching for any stray scraps

that might have fallen. Given that there was a good chance the light would have gone out by the time we got back, I grabbed the torch to take with me. Even if the light was still on it would be useful for negotiating the driveway.

Thrisk was still deserted when I got back there although there was another car parked outside the pub. I pulled up on the other side of the road, in front of the empty lot between the Hotel and the car mechanic. It was dark there and a couple of dogs were foraging around the Hotel's rubbish bins. As I got out of the car I could smell the bins and remembered that we had to put our own bin out ready for collection in the morning. It seemed a little strange that our rubbish was collected but mail wasn't delivered but, on reflection, it occurred to me that undelivered mail wasn't a health risk but uncollected rubbish was. Mail didn't usually smell either. I could hear the faint pinging and jingles from the pokie machines coming from inside the foyer. There was a sudden snapping and snarling as the dogs debated some morsel or other but they quickly resolved their differences.

Across the road the pub looked dark and deserted. There wasn't even a smoker loitering outside. A brief wave of trepidation passed over me but I shook it off and locked the car just in case an opportunist thief should happen along. No professional thief would waste their time with the slim pickings along this street. I crossed the road and pushed against the heavy looking door, half expecting it to be bolted. It wasn't. It swung open to reveal an empty room, dimly lit and seemingly bereft of anything except a battered pub-sized pool table with a rip in its cloth and innumerable cigarette burns on its rails and a giant TV screen mounted high on the wall and blocking the window. There was a horse race on the screen but no sound.

I pushed the door fully open and saw a bar a little further down. It was better lit than the room and I could hear quiet voices from beyond it. I let the door swing shut behind me and saw an old fashioned sign on the wall. It said 'Dining Room & Garden' and had a yellowing hand pointing towards the back of the building. Working on the assumption that if it was pointing in the wrong direction someone would have moved it by now I went in that direction. Sure enough, beyond the bar was another dimly lit room occupied by a handful of

tables and an assortment of mismatched chairs. This room held four people. Angie was sitting with two very old men at a table in a corner and another man sat alone on a stool behind the bar, reading a newspaper. Angie spotted me and waved just as the man at the bar looked up. He had two or three days of dark stubble on his rather large jowls.

“G'day,” he growled.

I smiled tentatively.

“Oh, a lemonade, please,” I said.

The man looked disgusted and grunted as he heaved himself off his stool. His striped and stained shirt gaped as it tried to contain a belly that would have impressed a Sumo wrestler. I was intrigued to notice that the hair on his forearms was as thick and dark as Elvis'.

“Designated driver,” I explained feeling he would be deeply unimpressed to discover I didn't drink.

It seemed to work as he nodded sympathetically and squirted something very frothy into a glass from a flexible chromed pipe.

“Six bucks,” he said, pushing the glass across the bar with a fingertip as though it contained radioactive waste.

“Ouch,” I thought to myself but handed him a tenner. He looked at it and sighed then fished two two dollar coins from under the bar and slapped them down.

“Thanks,” I said, scooping them up and taking my glass. The coins were sticky and I hurriedly dropped them into my pocket. The man heaved himself back onto his stool and resumed his study of the newspaper.

“Nice place,” I said, sauntering over to Angie's table.

“Hi, David,” said Angie brightly. “This is Wally and Eric. They're the Historical Society.”

Eric had a long grey beard and even longer grey hair, neatly brushed but decidedly bald on top. He nodded convivially at me while imbibing a third of a glass or so of beer through his beard while regarding me with pale green eyes. Wally, on the other hand, was almost completely hairless, having only a pair of thick white bushy eyebrows. He had the quick movements of a sparrow to match his stature and sharp blue eyes peered out from under those eyebrows. He was clutching a glass of some transparent spirits in his right hand and the first and second fingers of that hand had the deep, dark yellow stains of a confirmed and lifelong smoker.

“Delighted to meet you,” he said in a surprisingly deep voice for one so small.

“Ohh, you're English,” I said in surprise.

“For my sins,” he replied with an inclined nod of his head. “Wallace Smythe-Cooper, one time Associate Professor of European History at London University at your service. I was just explaining to your charming wife that she is, alas, unable to join our little Historical Society because it is nothing more than a concept in the minds of myself and Eric. We have no society, we charge no fees, issue no membership cards and perform no activities beyond those of two old men pontificating to each other in a public house from time to time.”

“I don't bloody pontificate,” said Eric. “He does. I just argue for the sake of something to do.”

“And that you do superbly,” said Wally.

“Are you a historian as well?” I asked Eric.

“He has a natural talent in that direction,” said Wally before Eric could respond, “but sadly unformed and untrained in the rigours of the discipline. Eric is, however, an outstanding primary source for the history of this township, having been born on Besoms farm but a short distance from here and has remained there to this day.”

“No bloody reason to go anywhere else,” said Eric, “cepting the annual bloody show at Toowoomba.”

“Quite,” said Wally. “But, my dear, if you should choose to tell others you are a member of the Historical Society there are none that can gainsay you. You can be the Chairperson if you wish.”

“Thank you,” said Angie. I could tell by her expression that she wasn't sure what to make of this. “Umm, I've been reading your book.”

“You have my sympathy,” said Wally, gravely. “Would that many of my students had done the same. Might I enquire which one?”

“Oh, the one about Thrisk,” she said. “How many have you written?”

“Twelve or thirteen, I believe,” said Wally. “One loses track.”

“Are they all about Thrisk?” I asked. “I wouldn't have thought this place had enough history for twelve books.”

“History is in the details,” said Wally airily, “but no. The others were on the minutiae of various aspects of post-Medieval Europe and gather dust on the shelves of the better university libraries. No doubt you obtained my *Thrisk and Environs* from the esteemed library of this town?”

“Actually, yes,” said Angie.

“Ahh, well,” said Wally, feigning a sadness that was not reflected in his eyes. “A royalty would have been too much to expect. Would you like an autographed copy? The publisher gave me a dozen copies to do with as I please and I still have ten left.”

“That would be very kind of you,” said Angie, “but you must let me pay you for it.”

“Ahh, dear lady, your kindness knows no bounds,” said Wally, “but I will not hear of it. The knowledge that it is in the hands of someone as discerning as yourself is recompense enough. Eric, here, uses his copy as a doorstep.”

“Tain't worth using as a bloody doorstep,” said Eric, wiping his damp beard with the sleeve of his shirt. “Tis covering a hole in the dunny

wall. Best place for it, seeing as how it's a load of old crap."

"We live among philistines," said Wally, leaning forward to pat Angie's knee gently. "But he doesn't really. My book has pride of place on his mantelpiece although I venture it is still unread. Are you here on holiday? I do not imagine you have business here. You seem somehow unagricultural."

"We have just moved here," said Angie. "We've both retired and we bought a few acres for peace and quiet."

"How delightful," said Wally, "but you are not Queenslanders."

"We moved up from Sydney," she said, "although I'm originally from Victoria and David is from London."

"And where did you find your peace and quiet?" asked Wally. "I venture not in the town itself. All these trucks and tractors passing through."

"We live on the other side of Mount Eyrie," I said, feeling it was time I joined the conversation. "Although we haven't seen any eagles yet."

"Oh yes? I imagine it is peaceful that side," said Wally, glancing at Eric, "although you do realise that the spelling on the maps and signs is wrong."

"What do you mean?" asked Angie.

"No eagles," chimed in Eric. "Taint high enough. Eagles like to be isolated and not that many come this far south."

"That would explain why I haven't seen any," I said. "So how should it be spelt and why is it wrong?"

"The official name, with the 'y', comes from Hugo Desaline," said Wally. "He was the surveyor brought in to map the area in the years after Queensland was brought into existence. Desaline was here from 1869 to 1871, if memory serves."

“But you refer to the mountain as Eyrie with a ‘y’ in your book,” said Angie.

“Alas, that is the perennial difficulty that besets historians,” said Wally. “New information is always coming to light after publication. Many a reputation has been lost when things asserted as fact have subsequently been found to be incorrect. In this instance, Desaline recorded the name after interviews with local residents and presumed the spelling to be that of the nests of eagles. No doubt, being newly arrived from England, he was influenced by the forbidding nature of Queensland. Once in the hands of politicians and bureaucrats, of course, the name became written in stone.”

“So what was the original name?” asked Angie.

“Oh, it was the same,” said Wally, “merely a different spelling. Let me see now, a year or so after publication I came across some letters written by the mine supervisor ..., ah, you do know that there were attempts to mine copper here in the 1830s?”

“Yes,” said Angie. “That’s in your book. The mining was abandoned quite quickly.”

“Indeed, indeed,” said Wally, “and that point is related. Where was I? Oh yes, the mining supervisor, a young gentleman by the name of Ernest Wilcannon, wrote several letters to his sweetheart in Brisbane while he was supervising the mining operations. Those letters came into my possession through a deceased estate, as I was saying, a year or so after my book. In them he refers to the mountain as Mount Eerie. Different spelling, you see.”

“Eerie?” I said. “As in scary?”

“Quite,” said Wally happily. “And far more in keeping with the original name of the settlement that came along around the time of the demise of the mine and the move to timber.”

“You mean ‘Ghost Hill’?” said Angie. “I did wonder about that. Do you know why it was changed?”

“This region was originally put under the auspices of the Borough of Ipswich in the build up to the break with New South Wales.” said Wally. “There was some concern expressed by one of the Borough Councillors that the name 'Ghost Hill' ill befitted what was, at the time, a growing and thriving community. In fact, Thrisk peaked in the 1920s when its population was almost double what it is today. I have a copy of the Council meeting minutes, if you would care to see it, where this was discussed and the name 'Thrisk' was chosen.”

“Why 'Thrisk'?” asked Angie. “It's a funny name.”

“I believe it is the name of a river in Scotland,” said Wally. “No doubt near the birthplace of the Councillor who proposed it, him being a Scot.”

“So this was originally a scary mountain beside a town called Ghost Hill,” I mused. “Do you suppose there is some significance in those names?”

“Course there is,” said Eric, thumping his empty glass down on the rickety table. “You being outsiders wouldn't know but us as lives here do. Whose shout is it?”

Chapter Thirteen

It turned out to be my shout of course. The man behind the bar seemed loathe to tear himself away from his newspaper but eventually condescended to dish up another beer for Eric, a vodka and tonic for Wally, a house white for Angie and another lemonade for me. Not being a pub goer I briefly wondered how those whose lives centred around pubs could afford such a lifestyle.

“Local myth and legend is more your area than mine, Eric,” said Wally after thanking me for his drink.

“Don't know as how it is myth or legend, Wally,” said Eric. He took a long sip of his beer and sighed happily. “’Tis more just knowing looks when things happen. Folk around here get to know about things when they is kids. Can't say as how anyone has actually turned it into a myth.”

“That's how myth and legend operates,” said Wally, “or perhaps it would be more appropriate to term it folklore. They are the substance of what people know but tend not to talk about and if they do they talk in hushed tones, often with reverence or fear or both. It's rare for such things to be written down. If it wasn't for Homer, Hesiod and a few other poets we would know nothing of the Greek Myths. Similarly with the Norse myths of Scandinavia. No one knows the full scope of such myths for we can only know what was written and what was written was most likely only a small part of what the bards relayed and that in turn was most likely only a small part of what people knew or thought they knew. And, of course, only a small part of what was written has survived to the present day. Perhaps you should write these things down for the benefit of future scholars of Southern Queensland.”

“Nothing much to bloody write down,” said Eric. “No tales of Gods or great feats by heroes. More just little things that people go out of their bloody way to avoid.”

“What sort of little things?” I interjected. I had a feeling that these two would go off into a semi-academic discussion of mythology and not get around to any specifics.

“Can't rightly say,” said Eric, “although no one from round here will live on the west side.”

“What are they scared of?” asked Angie.

“Can't rightly say they are scared,” said Eric, “more that they are wary, like. Things happen.”

“Can you give me an example?” I asked.

Eric scowled and scratched his beard.

“Can't even say as they be things that happen,” he said. “Most likely they be things that bloody happen anyway but you know what it's like when people get an idea in their heads.”

“Things like frequent problems with the electricity?” I asked.

“Yup,” said Eric. “You been having problems with your bloody electrics, then?”

“The circuit breakers keep tripping,” I said. “Dead Horse Harry checked the electrics but couldn't find a problem and he said it happens a lot.”

“Seems to only happen on the west side,” said Wally. “I have no doubt that people in town and further out also have problems with their electrics and no one thinks anything of it but when it happens to someone on the west side they say 'ahh, the west side' and nod knowingly to each other. Personally I'd like to say it is simply coincidence, a statistical blip, but things do happen more often that side than statistics would warrant. On the other hand, people do have a pronounced tendency to see patterns in random data.”

“What about the bloody voices, then, eh?” said Eric.

“What voices?” I asked.

“Oh, sometimes people round the west side have heard voices,” said Eric, “or maybe seen lights or felt someone was bloody there next to

'em."

"Really?" I said, intrigued. "When you say 'people round the west side' you mean people who are living there?"

"Sometimes," said Eric. "And sometimes 'tis local people who've been round there for some reason. Bit of bloody hunting or such like. And the kids. They's often wandering that side, daring each other."

"And that's all?" asked Angie. "Voices, lights, presences, electrical problems?"

"Machinery problems too," said Eric. "Sometimes someone goes in to fell some trees for someone who's just moved in. Chainsaws pack up working but work fine when they get back to town. Jamie for one. He went to do some work for one of them as bought a house there a few years back and his ute died. Kept trying 'till his battery were almost bloody flat but the bugger wouldn't start. Had to get it towed back to town then it started again like a dream."

"But surely people have problems with their cars and chainsaws everywhere?" I said.

"It's as I said," said Wally, "if it happens somewhere else no one thinks anything of it but if it happens on the west side of Mount Eyrie then it adds to the mythology. It's self reinforcing and if it was just strange little incidents like those then I wouldn't bother to raise it to the status of myth."

"So there's more then?" asked Angie, frowning.

"Tell her about your farm, Eric," said Wally.

Eric took another slow drink.

"You'll be thinking I'm daft," he said, putting his drink down again, "but I have a few head of cattle to supplement the crops. Them beasts won't go near the west side. Anywhere else on the farm they'll be happy but on the slopes, no."

"Where is your farm?" I asked.

"On the flat beyond your place," said Eric. "We owns a few hundred hectares which includes the lower slopes on the west side."

"I thought it was all woodland," I said.

"Some is now," said Eric. "Me grand-dad cleared the slopes back in 1889 when he bought the bloody place and laid crops on the lower slopes and wanted the rest for grazing. Soon gave up when the cattle wouldn't graze there and let it go back to woodland. I send some up every few years but it's always the bloody same. They come back down again all nervy like."

"There have been a few people go missing, as well," said Wally. "Two in the last twenty years or so that I know of. One was a teenage boy who was hunting rabbits with some friends. When they realised he wasn't with them anymore they searched for a while then came back into town and the SES did a full scale search. Never found him."

"And the other?" asked Angie, giving me an indecipherable look.

"A couple bought one of the properties, I forget which one, as a weekender," said Wally. "They had a small cabin. One weekend the husband came into town to do some shopping and his wife wasn't there when he went back. The police suspected him of murdering her but they had no real evidence."

"Couldn't she have simply taken the opportunity to walk out on him?" asked Angie.

"Most likely that's what she did," said Wally, "but she would have had to walk since he had the car, and she didn't take anything with her. Apparently she even left her bag behind with her credit cards and things."

"How strange," said Angie.

"And there was the Capling girl, ohh, got to be forty years or more ago," said Eric. "She was ten or thereabouts. The family was on a

bloody day trip out of Brisbane and stopped round the west side for a picnic and the girl went missing. Right bloody hoo-ha there was about that. Police thought I'd bloody taken her for a while. Had me down the station and everything."

"And you think all this is related to something around there?" I asked.

"Perhaps, perhaps not," said Wally. "This is how myths are born but if there is then it's been going on for a long time. Eric's family has been here since the 1890s and other families have been here for longer and they'll tell you similar stories, if you can get them to tell you anything. It's even possible that whatever this is, if it is indeed anything and not simply the human creation of something to fit random events, may go back as far as 1827, perhaps even further."

"That's a very specific date," I said. "What happened in 1827?"

"You know that a penal colony was established in 1823 at Moreton Bay?" asked Wally.

"Yes, it's in your book," said Angie.

Wally gave her an ingratiating smile.

"In 1827 a convict by the name of Seamus O'Halloran, who had been transported for sheep stealing, escaped and headed west," said Wally. "A party of two soldiers with an Aboriginal tracker was sent after him and their journey was recorded by Josiah Pickerington, the more junior of the two. I have a facsimile of his diary. They spent 17 days tracking him and finally captured him, exhausted and starving. On their return journey, two days after the recapture, Pickerington records in his diary they they heard an explosion somewhere to the west of where they were."

"Where were they?" asked Angie.

"They didn't know," said Wally, "and neither do we. However, and I am the first to admit that this is somewhat rough and ready, if we assume that they made an average progress of ten kilometres a day then they would have been somewhere in the region of 150 kilometres

west of Brisbane. Is ten kilometres a day realistic? I don't know. They were on horses but there were no roads or paths and, of course, they were tracking which would have further slowed them down. Let us then say that they were perhaps only a hundred kilometres west of Brisbane. Of course, we also need to factor in how far away an explosion can be heard. No doubt a big explosion can be heard further away than a small explosion but we can be reasonably sure that Pickerington was, say, a hundred to a hundred and fifty kilometres west of Brisbane and heard an explosion of some unascertained size from further to the west.”

“I'm not sure I see your point,” I said.

“How far is Thrisk from Brisbane?” asked Wally.

“It depends which way you go,” I said, “but as the crow flies ... ahh. You think the explosion was where Thrisk would later be?”

“Impossible to know for certain,” said Wally. “Even if the distances are right the posse could have been further to the north or south but it is an interesting coincidence, is it not? And it would tie in with the mining.”

“How?” I asked, puzzled by the sudden introduction of mining.

“Copper was discovered here during the summer of 1829-30,” said Wally, “and Ernest Wilcannon was sent out with a small team of experienced miners and a supply of convict labour towards the end of the summer of 1831. They identified a suitable location to sink an exploratory shaft and struck a vein approximately 100 feet down. Over the next three years they sent out a tunnel following that vein and extracted some copper but they had endless problems and after the three years the investors decided to cut their losses.”

“What sort of problems?” I asked.

“Their candles and torches were constantly going out,” said Wally. “There were frequent rockfalls which halted mining until they cleared the mess and at least one miner was killed. Tools were constantly going missing. Carts and trolleys used for hauling the rock

underground and above ground kept breaking and on at least three occasions the horses used for hauling the carts escaped and new ones had to be purchased. Wilcannon, in his final letter to his sweetheart where he says they are returning and she is to begin preparations for their marriage, estimates that the venture made a net loss of somewhere in the region of a thousand pounds which, in today's Australian dollars would be of the order of 30 to 40 million dollars. A substantial amount over just three years."

"Why isn't any of this in your book?" asked Angie suddenly.

"I was not aware of Wilcannon's letters at the time," said Wally, "although I do mention more general accounts of the failure of mining in this area. As regards Pickerington and the explosion, well, that is simply too vague and amorphous for inclusion. After all, the explosion could have been anywhere within a hundred or more kilometres of Thrisk and is an isolated event with no apparent consequences. I daresay it might have served as an anecdote depicting the zeal with which escapees were hunted but that wasn't the objective of the book. There are many excellent books already concerning the penal system on which Australia is founded."

"Putting the explosion to one side," I said slowly, thinking as I spoke, "aren't the problems you describe with the mining typical of mining in the 19th century? It was a dangerous occupation and had they found more copper would they not have deemed it profitable and continued despite the difficulties?"

"I have no doubt of that," said Wally. "As would most likely have been the case had the quantities they mined been gold rather than copper. As I say this is all part of the mythology of Mount Eyrie and there may be no common cause beyond simple coincidence."

"Well, don't know about the rest of youse," said Eric, putting his empty glass down, "but I have to be up early in the bloody morning. Nice meeting you both. Goodnight."

He nodded abruptly to us and departed with a terse 'Gav' in the direction of the man behind the bar who grunted without looking up from his newspaper. I wasn't even sure he'd turned the page all

evening.

“Alas, I, too, must depart this merry throng,” said Wally, beaming at us. “It has been a most enjoyable evening. I do hope we have the pleasure of your company again. It's not often we get such a charming lady as yourself in this hostelry.” He patted Angie's knee again before standing up.

“I'm sure we will,” said Angie, trying to move her knee out of the way. Unfortunately the table leg blocked her.

“Until we meet again,” said Wally, standing up. He fished in his pocket and pulled out a packet of cigarettes.

The man, Gav presumably, looked up and fixed Wally with a hard stare.

“No lighting up until you're outside,” he growled.

“And farewell to you, noble innkeeper,” said Wally. “May the Gods of hostelries forever smile benevolently upon you.” He bowed with a flourish and stuck a cigarette between his lips before walking towards the entrance. Gav watched him until he went outside then returned to his newspaper. A few moments later Wally stuck his head around the door and blew in a cloud of smoke and winked at me.

“We'd better be off as well,” I said. “Elvis will probably have destroyed the mattress by now,”

We drove home in silence, each of us thinking our own thoughts.

“Oh bugger,” I exclaimed as we stopped at the top of the drive.

“What is it?” asked Angie. “Did you leave your ciggies behind?”

“Oh shit,” I said, patting my pockets urgently. I sighed in relief when I found them. “Ah, no. I've got them. No, I left the lounge light on and now it's off.”

“Oh,” said Angie. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I said. “Probably the fuse again. I brought the torch just in case.”

Angie didn't reply. She just got out of the car and waited until I did the same then walked down the drive with me. She waited at the corner of the house while I checked the meter box then, when the lounge light came on and the barking started, she slowly walked up the steps. She was sitting on the couch with Elvis on her lap when I came in. He was trying to interest her in a game of tug with a somewhat disgusting segment of old chewed sheepskin.

“Do you want a coffee?” I asked.

“No, I'm going to bed in a minute,” she said. “I'll make you one though.”

“It's OK,” I said, heading for the kitchen area, “I can do it.”

I put the kettle on and I found a clean mug on the drying rack.

“Do you think we should sell up and find somewhere else?” she asked as I put a spoon of instant in the mug.

I stared at her for a few moments.

“Is that what you want to do?” I asked.

“I love this place,” said Angie, “but after talking to ...” and she trailed off.

“Ahh,” I said. “Just let me finish making this.”

The kettle boiled a few moments later and I poured in some water and a little milk from the fridge. I took it over and sat beside her on the couch, pushing Elvis out of the way.

“Let's approach this rationally,” I said. “At the moment all we have is a problem with the electrics and a lot of hearsay and innuendo. I don't know what to do about the electrics at the moment but I am sure there is a solution. After all, it may turn out to be Clive and the PIRs

could put an end to it. Even if it isn't we'll no doubt think of something else and, worst case scenario, we just learn to live with it. After all, you usually go to bed early so it's really only me that's affected."

"But what about the voices I heard," said Angie, "and whatever it was that pushed you over."

"I confess I don't have an immediate answer to that," I said, "but that could simply be part of getting used to a new house. You remember how the house in Sydney used to creak and groan all the time? We panicked every time at first, thinking it was about to fall down, but we got used to it."

"Oh David, I am a bit scared," she said worriedly. Elvis stopped chewing the sheepskin and looked into her face with concern. "What if there is something behind all this and we're slap in the middle of it?"

"Again, let's think rationally," I said, unable to think of any other way to deal with fears. "The explosion could have been anywhere and it was a very long time ago anyway. There was no mention of another, more recently. All the problems with the mining, well, that's the nature of mining and in the 1830s they didn't have our modern technology. Besides, we aren't doing any mining. The deepest we'll be digging is a foot or so to get those lantana roots out. Same with cattle. We're not planning to raise cattle here."

"But what about Elvis and Shishke?" she said. "What if they get hurt?"

"Eric didn't say any of his cattle got hurt," I said. "All he said was that they didn't like grazing in that area. Maybe there is something in the soil that makes the grass taste funny. After all, there is copper here."

"I suppose so," she said. "And Elvis and Shishke seem quite happy here, apart from the other day."

"Yes," I said, "and that could simply have been the unfamiliar smell of a kangaroo close to the house. Whatever it was it didn't last long and hasn't happened since."

“And the missing people?” she asked, taking my hand. “What if you go missing? What do I do then?”

“How many was it?” I asked. “Three? In a hundred and fifty years? I would think if you picked any spot in Australia you’d find at least three people have gone missing from there over the last hundred and fifty years. A lot more than that go missing every week in Sydney, I would think. No, if you stop to think about it, it’s most likely what Wally was saying. Once an idea builds up new events can be made to reinforce it whether it’s actually the case or not. Look at all these conspiracy theories banging around America. Like QAnon. Once you have accepted the basic premise that there is a global group of paedophiles trying to bring down democracy, everything that happens will either be used to confirm QAnon or be dismissed as fake news. It’s much the same here. The locals have this idea that there is something wrong with this side of the mountain and anything that happens must therefore be a confirmation of that. The trick is to not accept the basic premise in the first place.”

“I suppose,” she said, sounding unconvinced.

“I’ll get the PIRs up tomorrow,” I said, “and the cams should arrive early next week. We’ll find out what’s blowing the fuses and once we’ve done that everything else will disappear as well. It’s like they say, the only thing to fear is fear itself.”

“I’m still a bit scared,” she admitted, “and worried.”

“There’s no need to worry,” I said. “This house has been here sixty years or so and real estate agents are obliged by law to tell us if anyone has died in it. No one has and the house itself is as solid as anything. Come on, let’s go to bed. Everything will look different in the morning.”

“What about your coffee?” she said. “It isn’t even 9 o’clock yet. You don’t go to bed for hours.”

“So I’ll go to bed early tonight,” I said, squeezing her hand. “I can reheat the coffee in the morning.”

“OK,” she said, standing up but not letting go of my hand. “Come on.”

An hour or so later Angie was sound asleep with my arm around her and Elvis curled up in the crook of her knees. Her fears were, for the time being at least, allayed. I lay there wide awake, still several hours away from my normal going to sleep time, and stared at the ceiling in the darkness.

“What the hell is going on?” I whispered.

I don't know if I was particularly scared or not, but I was certainly worried ... but that could simply be because we hadn't had any dinner.

Chapter Fourteen

"I'm beginning to wish I'd never installed the damned things," I said to Desmond on Friday.

I got up on Thursday morning when Angie got up and cooked us both a big breakfast then went back to bed and slept until noon. Refreshed, invigorated and optimistic about the future I started to fit the PIRs. I nearly gave Angie a heart attack when she came onto the verandah and found me balanced precariously on the verandah rail, leaning out over the water tank while I screwed a PIR to the wall with one hand and clung to a roof support with the other. Still, I managed to fit all four and we settled back to wait for darkness to see how they worked.

The good news is that no fuses blew, no ethereal voices or explosions were heard and neither of us disappeared. The bad news is that one or other of the PIRs kept going off all evening as kangaroos, wallabies, bandicoots, possums and god knows what else wandered or hopped around the house, triggering the lights. Anyone watching from a distance must have thought we were hosting a rock concert or something.

Of course, the first few times we rushed out onto the verandah to peer out over the starkly lit landscape, nervous and excited about what we might see. That was the first few times. Usually all we saw was a wallaby, frozen with fear at the sudden and unexpected dawn of a new light and holding its little front paws tightly against its chest. We did get briefly panicked ourselves on either the fourth or fifth light-up as all we could see was a huge shadow slowly moving from side to side over near the bushes at the far end of the lit-up area. It turned out to be a creature of some sort sitting on the roof with its tail dangling over the side, partially obscuring the light. Fortunately, being solar powered, the PIRs hadn't received a full charge during the afternoon and they stopped working not long after Angie went to bed and I was able to finish *They Came To Baghdad*. After toying with re-reading *A Murder Is Announced* I started *Death On The Nile* instead. It was either that or *Murder On The Orient Express* and I'd seen the movie of that one.

Desmond and Josephine turned up on Friday for dinner, only an hour

or so late. Desmond brought a life sized human skull he'd forged from aluminium to show us and to get our opinion on whether or not to make more to sell at their shop. Angie was lukewarm about the idea as it fitted more with the concept of a bikers' accessory shop than a mystical shop. It was the sort of thing you wouldn't be surprised to see mounted on the back of a Hell's Angel's Harley. I diplomatically suggested they displayed just the one skull somewhere near the back of the shop and see how much interest was expressed in it before buying in a few tons of aluminium to make more. Fortunately they thought this was a sensible idea.

Freed from the fetters of the shop, Desmond was able to give free rein to his thoughts and regaled us with monologues on why he thought the Blue Boar Cafe had burnt down (insurance job), blue tea, levitation, some of the things he and his friends got up to in Thrisk in their youth and his, now deceased, mother's skills as a Wiccan. Josie stayed mostly quiet and smiled indulgently although she did, near the end of the apple crumble, start talking about the coloured vortex that occasionally swirled a little to the left of centre in the shop. It was in the silence after that, as we had no vortex tales to tell in return, that I suggested to Desmond that we go out on the verandah for a smoke; he being a smoker as well although I rather got the impression that it wasn't always tobacco.

Just as we were lighting up one of the PIRs went off, as they had periodically since sunset.

"I'm beginning to wish I'd never installed the damned things," I said, putting my lighter back in my pocket.

"When did you do them?" he asked, gazing out at the wallaby that was transfixed by the light.

"Yesterday," I said. "The worst seem to be the wallabies. They trigger the light and freeze. After a minute or so the light goes off and they hop forward and trigger it again. One, last night, took eleven hops to cross the range of the sensor."

He laughed, his shoulders shaking.

“Leave 'em,” he said. “The 'roos and wallies will get used to the lights pretty quickly and figure out how to go around them. Why've you put them up anyway? You won't get burglars round here. They mostly stay around Ipswich.”

“I honestly hadn't given burglars a thought,” I said. “No, we're having trouble with the circuit breakers for the house. They keep blowing so I put up the PIRs to see if we can see what's causing them to blow.”

“You think the 'roos are doing it?” he asked, looking very sceptical.

“Most likely not,” I said, “but it could be one of the neighbours trying to freak us out or maybe kids from town thinking it's funny.”

Desmond nodded thoughtfully and sucked on his cigarette.

“Or druggies,” he said, blowing out a plume of smoke that billowed in the light as the PIR came on again.

“Druggies?” I said in alarm. “What do you mean druggies?”

“I've heard,” he said, a little cautiously, “only heard mind, that it's not unknown for people to grow a few things out this side where there's no people. Could be them.”

“Why would they fiddle with our electrics?” I asked. “You seriously think they're stealing our power for hydroponics or something?”

“God no, man,” he said, shaking his head and wagging his ponytail. “But this place has been empty for a while. Could be they've planted more nearer the house and are trying to scare you.”

“That sounds absurd,” I said as the light went out briefly. “I don't know how big this side of the mountain is but we've got twelve acres. Why go anywhere near the house? Why even grow any on this property? There's unoccupied land all around.”

“Fair point,” he said. “But the cave's somewhere near here.”

“What cave?” I asked, watching the wallaby. It had moved further over

to the right and now had its front paws on the head of the baby wallaby in its pouch.

“Not sure where it is,” said Desmond, looking around, “but there's a big cave somewhere round here. Used to go there as a kid. Wouldn't be surprised if them as grows things round here use the cave to store their stocks and tools and stuff, and keep 'em out of sight of the drones.”

“It's not you, is it?” I asked. “You seem to know a lot about it.”

“Strewth no,” he said, looking a little alarmed. “I wouldn't get involved in dealing, penalties are too high for a start and them as does wouldn't like the competition. Just that, living in town and all, I get to hear things.”

“And the drones?” I asked.

“Mostly the Council,” he said. “They do periodic sweeps for weed and pest infestations and by-law infringements. Then the Rural Fire Service do sweeps as well, mostly in the bushfire season, looking for early signs of fires. Cops do too when they think illegal things are happening.”

“Really?” I asked. “How often do they do these sweeps?”

I was quite surprised actually as it hadn't occurred to me that these things were done in rural areas. We had had helicopters flying round our suburb two or three times a week in Sydney, usually by the police, but I had assumed that was more related to inner city problems. It occurred to me that possibly the fuses were being blown by the drones, particularly if they were high powered and emitting some sort of electro-magnetic signals to pick up things in the dark.

“Ohh, maybe every couple of months,” said Desmond, “cept in the fire season. Pretty much every day then.”

“Hmm,” I said. “I wonder if it is the Council checking up on what we're doing here.”

"Doubt it," said Desmond. "You haven't been here long enough to do much yet. Take you a while to chuck up some illegal sheds or granny flats."

"I suppose," I said, stubbing out my ciggie. "Shall we go back inside?"

"I was just telling Angie about you and the fairies," said Josie as we went back in.

"You have fairies at the bottom of your garden?" I asked, not overly surprised.

"Noooo," exclaimed Desmond. "Just that in the tourist season I dot little toy fairies around the shop for the kiddies to play with."

"Oh, right," I said, sitting down. "Would anyone like to finish the crumble?"

"He tells the children he can't see them," said Josie. "They get ever so excited and drag their parents over. Sometimes the parents play along and say they can't see them either."

"You finish it, hun," said Angie. "I couldn't eat another thing."

"Must be good for business," I said, scooping the last of the crumble into my dish. I added a big dollop of ice cream so it didn't feel lonely.

"Oh, it is," said Desmond, laughing. "Especially with the mums. Most shops hate kids touching things so they like coming into one where their little buggers are encouraged."

"I can imagine," I said. "Hey, Angie, Desmond says there's a cave somewhere around here."

"Oh really?" said Angie, instantly interested. "I love caves, ever since I saw a cartoon of Puff the Magic Dragon when I was little. Is it on our property? That would be so awesome if it was!"

"I'm not sure," said Desmond, looking around the lounge. "Which way is west?"

“That way,” I said pointing with my spoon.

“Right,” said Desmond pensively. “That means the slope goes up over there so the ravine must be back that way.” He pointed towards the cooker.

“Is that where the seasonal creek is?” asked Angie. “We haven't been exploring yet. We've only been here not quite two weeks and I've been thinking mostly about how to get rid of the lantana.”

“Burn it,” said Desmond, “that's about all you can do, and the roots. Dig 'em up and burn 'em.”

“That's what I was thinking,” said Angie. “So the cave?”

“Oh yeah,” said Desmond. “Where's your boundaries?”

“We don't know,” said Angie. “We're thinking of getting in a surveyor but they're so expensive. I do know that the creek runs across our property. You can see the outline of it on Google Maps.”

“It runs down over there,” I said, pointing to the left of the cooker. “As far as I could tell from the topography the land is quite flat further over but rises steeply back that way. There seems to be a fold in the land.”

“That'll be where the cave is,” said Desmond. “I haven't been there for years but it used to be maybe a hundred metres back from where it flattens out. Big cave it is, high enough to stand up in.”

“It's unlikely to have moved,” I said.

“Can we go looking for it tomorrow?” asked Angie, looking hopefully at me.

“Sure,” I said.

“Be careful,” said Josie. “It's easy to get lost in these woods. Do you have GPS?”

“No,” I said. “Although I can probably download an app.”

“Don't count on it,” said Desmond. “Coverage isn't reliable here 'cos of all the trees. Have you got any rope or cord?”

“I can easily get some,” I said.

“Then tie pieces around the trees as you go,” said Desmond. “That way you can follow them back.”

“That's a good idea,” said Angie. “We'll go to the hardware shop in the morning.”

“Desmond says drones are used around here,” I said, wondering if it would be rude to lick my dish. I decided it probably was although neither Desmond or Josie looked the type to stand on formality. “The Council, RFS and police all use them. Whoa!” and I stopped and stared at the empty crumble dish as a thought came to me.

“What is it?” asked Angie.

“Just a thought,” I said, forcing my mind away from it. “I'll tell you later.”

A kind of silence fell over our little dinner party as Josie and Desmond wondered what thought I'd had and why I wouldn't share it with them. Human nature being what it is they probably figured it was something bad about them but that didn't occur to me until later. As it was I just felt the uncomfortable silence and rushed into a new topic.

“So do you know the Stubbs at number 7?”

“No,” said Josie and Desmond together, both shaking their heads.

“That surprises me,” I said, a little taken aback. “They've got a huge house that looks to have been there for ages. Bit like one of those stately homes back in England.”

“First I've heard of it,” said Desmond. “Josie?”

“No,” said Josie, screwing up her face in thought. “I’ve never heard of a stately home around here.”

“Maybe not a stately home,” said Angie, “but still very big.”

“No, I’ve never seen anything like that,” said Desmond. “Did a fair bit of exploring round here as a kiddie but only ever saw this place and the one next door.”

“What about the one over the road?” I asked. “Where Clive lives.”

“That was put in only a few years back,” said Desmond. “When was it, Josie?”

“Got to be twenty years now,” said Josie, “although I don’t think I’ve ever seen who lives there.”

“The agent said he’s a recluse,” said Angie, “although she never said anything about number 7.”

“You sure you’re not mixing it up with old Eric Besoms farm?” said Desmond.

“Where’s that?” I asked.

“Ohh, couple of kilometres west,” said Desmond, “maybe three.”

“Then definitely not,” I said. “Number 7’s only two or three hundred metres. It’s at the end of the Court.”

“Sorry, can’t help you,” said Desmond. “And I ain’t heard of anyone called Stubbs.”

“Angus Stubbs,” I said, “Angus and Hettie.”

He shook his head and looked at Josie. She shook her head as well.

“Maybe they’re recluses as well,” said Angie with a slight laugh. “We never hear any vehicles go past.”

“Could be,” said Desmond. “We’ve got quite a few round here. There’s a farm, ohh, twenty kilometres away, off the road to Mossvale. The kids go to school and the fields get ploughed and harvested but no one’s ever seen the parents.”

“You mean the old Larkin place?” asked Josie.

“That’s the one,” said Desmond.

“They’re well known,” said Josie. “They just never come into Thrisk. They do all their shopping in Mossvale. My mum knows them.”

“I never knew that,” said Desmond. “Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“You want me to tell you about everyone who doesn’t come to Thrisk?” said Josie with a laugh. “There’s a few million of ’em.”

* * *

“What was your thought?” asked Angie after they had gone. “You were talking about drones then went off into a world of your own.”

“Oh, yes,” I said, stacking the dirty dishes beside the sink. “When Desmond told me about the drones I wondered if they could be causing the fuses to blow. Could even be that one got a little too close and made me fall over, you remember, when I thought I’d been pushed.”

“What drones?” asked Angie, clearly puzzled.

“Ohh, apparently the Council uses drones to check up on what people are doing,” I said, “and the RFS use them to look for bushfires.” I decided not to mention drugs. “But I doubt they’re causing the problem. They’d be more likely to use the drones in the daylight and they wouldn’t buzz us four nights in a row.”

“I don’t like the idea of them buzzing us at all,” said Angie frowning. “I thought that moving out of Sydney would have taken us away from all that surveillance.”

“That wasn't my thought though,” I said, going over to sit in my chair. “It suddenly occurred to me that when I quit work, I more or less went dark on the net.”

“So?” said Angie, looking at me quizzically.

“You know part of what I did was to track cybercrooks,” I said. She nodded. “It occurred to me that my suddenly going dark may have caused some concerns in certain circles. Some of the nasties out there may have started to wonder what I am up to now.”

“But you've left that world,” said Angie.

“They don't know that,” I said, toying with a cigarette. “It could be that they are thinking I might be working on some major new offensive. For sure, people in that line would never think I've just given up and retired. They wouldn't believe that for a moment.”

“OK,” said Angie slowly. “So what are you saying?”

“It is possible for a drone to be interfering with our electrics,” I said. “If the drone is emitting a high powered signal or perhaps if the control signals being sent to it are high powered that could, conceivably, cause a circuit to overload.”

“So you think they've tracked you down and are attacking us in some way?” asked Angie, her brow furrowed as she tried to understand.

“It's possible,” I said, spreading my hands. “That could also explain why it always seems to happen at night.”

A PIR suddenly lit up the room, making us both jump. The house lights didn't go off though so it was probably yet another 'roo.

“Oh God,” said Angie, putting her head in her hands.

She stayed like that while I lit my cigarette and took a couple of drags. Then she sat up again.

“So what do we do about it?”

“There's nothing we can do,” I said, with a slight emphasis on the 'we'. “But I think it would be a good idea if I fire up one of my towers and poke around a little online.”

These days my main computer, and sole point of internet access for things like the news, weather forecasts and online shopping, was my laptop. However, when I left SDS I took my three tower computers, which I had built myself and had seriously high performance, with me. Even though I never expected to use them again they were very personal to me. They also had a bunch of hacking tools, many of which I had developed myself and other little odds and ends, including access codes to certain places on the dark web and a lot of information about certain people and their pseudonyms.

“No,” said Angie forcefully. “No way.”

“I just want to poke around a little,” I said. “See if I can find any indication that we are being targeted and who by.”

“Definitely not,” said Angie. “You know what happened last time.”

“This is different,” I said. “Back then was work stress. I promise I won't get stressed this time. I'll just mooch around a little, ask a few questions and run a couple of searches. If I don't find anything I'll pull out.”

“And if you do?” asked Angie, her voice getting high pitched with tension. “What if you do find something? You'll go to war on them and get sucked back into that whole god damned business and you'll start, you know, all over again.”

“It's a risk, I admit,” I said. “It's been two years since I was last involved and things can change rapidly, but I think it's worth checking out.”

“I don't,” she said. “So a fuse blows every now and then, so what? We can live with that, you said so yourself.”

“What if it gets worse?” I asked. “What if these are just overtures while they confirm it's really me?”

“Then it gets worse,” said Angie angrily. “We can always move.”

“But you love this place,” I said.

“I love you more,” she shouted and slammed her hand down on the little coffee table. “I will not let you risk you losing your mind again!”

I stared at her, a little shocked. Yes, we both knew what had happened to me but by unspoken consent neither of us ever directly referred to it. On those rare occasions we talked of it, it was usually in terms of 'episodes' which didn't carry the same significance of mental illness and breakdown.

“I'm sorry,” she said, staring at me challengingly. Her face was blotchy and she looked to be on the verge of tears. “But I'm not letting it happen.”

“OK,” I said quietly, looking down at the coffee table. I stared at it blankly for a few moments then realised what was wrong. “You've broken the table. Look.”

“Sod the bloody table,” she said harshly, ignoring it. “Promise me you won't go online and hunt these bastards down. Promise me!”

Chapter Fifteen

I got up unusually early on Sunday morning, it was only about half past ten. I wandered out into the kitchen to make a coffee wondering why the house felt wrong. As the kettle heated itself, surprisingly noisily, I leaned against the sink and gazed out through the window and over the verandah at the bright sunshine.

“Not raining,” I thought and nodded wisely to myself as though it had been a profound thought.

The kettle clicked off and I poured the water into the mug. A teabag floated to the surface. I stared at it blankly for a few seconds then sighed and went to get the milk from the fridge. Coffee I usually drink black but I need milk with tea.

“I made tea by mistake,” I said, going out onto the verandah.

I was half hoping that Angie would volunteer to drink it and go and make me a coffee but she wasn't there. I blinked a couple of times then sat down and lit a ciggie. Elvis wasn't there either. Half way through the ciggie I was sufficiently mentally defogged to wonder where they were although I waited until I'd finished the ciggie before going to look for them. The car wasn't there either.

“Must have gone somewhere,” I said to myself, going back onto the verandah. “I wonder where.”

I'd finished my tea and made a coffee before I heard feet coming up the steps and Elvis scrabbling at the door.

“Kettle's just boiled,” I called as they came in.

I hadn't really thought she'd disappeared like that woman Wally, or perhaps Eric, had told us about since she'd taken the car which implied it was voluntary, but I was very slightly relieved she was back.

“Want one?” she called back as Elvis came hurtling out to greet me.

“No, thanks,” I called back, scratching Elvis' head.

Satisfied that he was back with his pack, Elvis went to the edge of the verandah to watch for wallabies.

"I went down to the market," said Angie, coming onto the verandah.

"I didn't know there was a market," I said.

"Every second Sunday," she said. "Mandy at the hairdresser told me about it. I'd have asked you if you wanted to come but you don't like markets."

"All good," I said. "Find anything interesting?"

"There was a nice stall selling clothes but it was a bit pricey," she said. "I was looking for some rope but I found this instead. I got 30 metres of it."

She held up a roll of tartan ribbon.

"Oh yes," I said. "What's that for?"

"To tie round trees and bushes," she said, "when we go looking for the cave."

"Right," I said. "Actually that'll probably be easier to see than bits of rope. It is a bit bright, isn't it."

"I thought we'd go this afternoon," she said. "The ground seems to have dried up."

It had rained a lot of Saturday, although being the dry season it wasn't the torrential rain that Queensland is renowned for. It had been a light drizzle type of rain but enough to put us off exploring the slopes as they could have been quite slippery.

"I checked the PO box, as well," she said, rummaging in her bag. "There was this." She pulled out a folded piece of paper and shoved it towards me. "That man's got a funny sense of humour."

"Who has?" I asked, taking it.

She didn't answer, just gestured for me to read it so I unfolded it.

*A murder is announced and will take place next Sunday at
2pm at 7 Timber Court.
Friends, please accept this, the only intimation.*

I burst out laughing.

“Obviously he's an Agatha Christie fan,” I said. “It's straight out of her book, apart from the time and place, of course. Looks like they don't need my clues after all, unless they've sent us this as a reminder. Damn, I suppose I'd better drop round this afternoon and check.”

“Tomorrow will do,” said Angie, “and I'll come with you. I don't trust them.”

“OK,” I said then took a deep breath. “By the way, it isn't Clive whose been playing with our electrics.”

I watched her closely to see how she reacted. She didn't really. Just tossed the roll of ribbon onto the low table and sat back.

“How do you know?” she asked.

“I took the rubbish out last night, after you went to bed,” I said. “Clive was at the top of the drive so I said hello.” It was a damned nuisance dragging the wheelie bin up and down the rutted driveway so after the first time I just left the bin up beside the road. It was much easier to carry up the bin bags and no neighbours were going to complain. “While we were talking the lights went out.”

“What was he doing up there?” she asked.

“I think he's a bit strange,” I said. “He was just standing there, looking up the road. I could see him in the torch light as I walked up the drive. So, umm, it doesn't bother you?”

“God no,” said Angie. “He won't be any worse than that weirdo who lived down the road in Sydney. At least Clive's not got his arse hanging out of his trackies most of the time.”

“True,” I said, “and Clive doesn't smoke so he won't be searching the bins for dog ends. No, I meant the lights. We were hoping it was Clive.”

“Ohhh, there'll be some other explanation,” she said. “I was only scared the other night because I let Wally and Eric get to me. I bet you they were just playing with us to see how gullible we were. They probably laughed themselves silly all the way home.”

I breathed a sigh of relief as I hadn't been able to predict how she'd handle knowing it wasn't Clive.

“Anyway,” continued Angie, “whatever it is, it can't be any worse than some of the neighbours we've had over the years. You remember those rev heads?”

“Oh God, yes,” I said, shaking my head. “That was bad.”

For a year the house next door had been rented out to four young lads. We'd assumed they were quiet students at first but after a couple of days there were four big V8 cars on the driveway and they seemed to spend most of every night revving them and doing burnouts in the street. I'd complained to the letting agent several times then, when they didn't do anything, to the council. We were in the middle of the process of getting a noise abatement order served on them when they moved out, quite unexpectedly, leaving several weeks of unpaid rent arrears in their wake. We'd also had another neighbour, this time the other side, who would crank up his hi-fi and blast electronic dance music for ten minutes or so at irregular times. When that happened we had to stop whatever we were doing and wait for it to end since it was impossible to hear each other speak. We couldn't do anything about it as it never went on long enough for the police to turn up.

“He also said something weird,” I said. “Just before the lights went out he asked if we'd seen them yet.”

“Seen who yet?” asked Angie.

“I assumed he meant Angus and the others at number 7,” I said, “as he was looking up the road at their driveway so I said we had. Just

then the lights went out. I said something about the bloody lights and he said 'yeah, it happens when they're busy'."

"Busy doing what?" asked Angie, frowning.

"I don't know," I said. "I asked him but he just stayed quiet and grinned vacuously at me. Then he walked away without saying another word."

"You don't suppose it's them who are flying drones around?" asked Angie.

"They could be," I said, "but I didn't see or hear anything like a drone when the lights went out. They make a faint whirring noise."

"Had he been drinking?" asked Angie.

"I didn't smell anything," I said, lighting another ciggie, "but he smells a bit anyway so I didn't get that close. Anyway, it was just the fuse and the lights came back on again so it wasn't a drama. I, umm, hmm."

"You what?" asked Angie, picking up her coffee mug.

"Umm, I probably shouldn't tell you this," I said, realising it was too late to not tell her, "but it did occur to me later that he may not have been talking about Angus."

"Who else would it be?" asked Angie. "There's only them, us and him around here."

"Yes, I know," I said and paused. "You don't suppose he's seeing things, do you?"

"You mean hallucinating?" asked Angie, raising an eyebrow.

"Possibly," I said, "although his hallucinations wouldn't be interfering with our electrics. I, umm, wondered about ghosts and things."

"You mean the paranormal?" she said, frowning again. She blew out her cheeks then pursed her lips then slid out her bottom lip as she

sometimes does when she's thinking. It's cuter than it sounds. "I suppose it's possible," she conceded. "People have died around here and God knows what significance this place had to the Aborigines before us whites came along. Maybe there's a burial ground around here or something. I suppose we could always do some cleansing."

I looked at her in puzzlement.

"Cleansing," she said, "with burning sage."

"OK," I said slowly. "That works, does it?"

"So they say," she said. "You get a roll of sage leaves and burn it and waft the smoke into every corner while asking all negative spirits and energies to leave."

"Right," I said. "And if they don't?"

"You get in a psychic or an exorcist," she said, "or 'Deliverance Counsellor' as they call them nowadays."

"I don't fancy an exorcist," I said. "I've seen the movie. But I did wonder about maybe getting in a psychic to check for anything malevolent. I looked on the net last night and found a couple in Brisbane and one in Toowoomba. Apparently they don't even need to come out and visit the place."

"I wouldn't bother," said Angie. "If there is anything here it isn't particularly nasty and it's more likely to be some electrical anomaly or those people at number 7. Maybe they're running an illegal radio station or something and have a big transmitter hidden in the trees. Anyway, if we do we won't get one off the net. Anyone can say online that they do psychic cleansings, it's not like they need a licence or anything like that. No, we'd need to ask around and find one through recommendation. One that will actually come out and see if there is anything here. Any con man can say they can sense something on our property across the astral plane then claim they've got rid of it. We'd really be gullible if we fell for that."

"And you don't think it's worth it?" I asked.

“No,” said Angie, standing up. “So the lights go out occasionally, it’s no big deal. Drink up. Let’s go find this cave.”

* * *

Around the house there was an acre, perhaps an acre and a half, of ground that had been cleared of trees. Probably to act as a firebreak in case of a bush fire. Admittedly it was now fairly overgrown with lantana and the grass was knee high in places but we were going to deal with that if Garth’s cousin ever got back to us. The house itself sat on a wide terrace and the cleared area was on two other terraces with large boulders stopping the soil washing down when it rained. It would look quite impressive when it was tidied up. Beyond the third terrace the rest of our property, the woodland, stretched as far as the eye could see, which wasn’t that far because of all the trees. Beyond the woodland the terrain flattened out into farmland and way way beyond that lay Western Australia, a few thousand kilometres away. It was easy to imagine, standing there at the edge of the bottom terrace, that we were at the frontier of the inhabited world. That we were intrepid explorers venturing out into the vast unknown. About to boldly go where no man, or woman, had gone before. Up close, it also looked a lot steeper than it had from the verandah.

“It doesn’t look too bad,” I said, referring to the lack of undergrowth. “Looks like I bought these boots and trousers for nothing.”

Before we moved up here, our plan had been to cut some paths through the woods so that we could go for nice scenic walks. I had envisioned myself hacking my way through dense tropical rain forest like Clark Gable in some movie about plantations in Borneo or somewhere like that. I’d bought some very solid, steel toed boots, a pair of heavy duty trousers and some reinforced leather gloves to protect myself from the undergrowth and all the snakes and spiders that no doubt lay in wait. I hadn’t got around to getting an industrial strength machete but it was on my list. Being Australian and more experienced with ‘the outback’, Angie just wore ordinary trainers and jeans. Australia, she had informed me, doesn’t have dense tropical rain forests, except in far north Queensland where it actually is tropical. This part of Queensland is subtropical. I hadn’t believed her and when we’d visited the property before buying it I’d only seen the woodland

from the verandah and, of course, through the lens of Hollywood.

The trees were a decent size, although not as wide as the oaks and beeches of English woodlands and they rose up, tall and straight for some way before branches sprouted. Between them lay discarded branches, rocks of various sizes and a lot of dried leaves. There were a few scrubby bushes and creepers but hacking with a machete wouldn't be needed. We wouldn't even need to duck under the branches either.

"So which way shall we go first?" asked Angie.

"Desmond said the cave was over that way," I said, pointing to the right.

"OK," said Angie, cheerfully.

She cut off a length of ribbon and tied it to the stem of a sapling growing on the edge of the terrace, then she stepped between two smallish boulders and started to pick her way down the slope. I followed, missed my footing and slid on my backside maybe three or four meters. Angie laughed as I picked myself up and rubbed my bottom.

"Watch yourself," she said, "If you break a leg I don't think I can carry you back up."

"I suppose we'd call triple 0," I said, looking around, "but how would they find us?"

Aside from the general direction of the slope it all looked much the same and the slope wasn't that much of a help. Not only did the ground slope down in front of us but it sloped down from right to left as well. I turned and looked back at the house, but it wasn't there. It was obscured by the trees already. If it wasn't for the ribbon I'd have no real idea which way to go.

"They'd follow the ribbons," said Angie. "I hope 30 metres is enough."

* * *

It didn't take us long to find the ravine. Twelve acres sounds a lot but our property was at the most 750 metres long. Of course, on a flat road we could have walked that in ten minutes or so but here, with all the clambering over fallen tree trunks, occasional cautious steep descents, periodic stopping to decide what direction to go in next and frequent tying of ribbons it was well over an hour before we came to the ravine. As ravines go it wasn't that deep but it was deep enough and littered with boulders several metres wide. Through the trees, we could see, way off to our left, the ground flattened out. To the right, however, it rose steeply and the ravine got deeper. No trees or bushes were growing in the ravine itself.

"I suppose the cave is more likely to be that way," said Angie, pointing up. "It's pretty magnificent here though, isn't it."

"What must it be like in the wet season?" I asked, intrigued by the massive boulders. I couldn't begin to imagine the torrent of water that would be needed to toss them around.

Pretty much everywhere we'd been in Queensland so far had posts beside the road with markings to show the depth of water if the road was flooded. One bridge we'd crossed in the mountains a little further north had markings going to thirty metres. Admittedly that was a bridge over a narrow ravine but thirty meters of flooding? It was hard to believe and this ravine looked similar.

"We'll find out in a couple of months," said Angie, tying another ribbon.

Staying well back from the crumbling edge we started to climb again. It wasn't too hard a climb but my dodgy left knee was starting to hurt and Angie, being younger and fitter than me, slowly pulled ahead.

"What's that over there?" she called a short while later.

I paused to catch my breath. She was already a good thirty metres ahead of me.

"I can't see anything," I called back. Actually I could see trees and rocks and so on but that probably wasn't what she meant.

“Come up here,” she called.

I groaned quietly, took a deep breath and plodded on.

“Jesus,” I said when I reached where she was standing. “Where did that come from?”

On the other side of the ravine there was a sheer rock face jutting out from the hill side. Up until then it had been obscured by the trees.

“Not that,” she said, pointing to one side of it, “that.”

“I dunno,” I said, peering at it. “Do you suppose it's the cave?”

“Could be,” she said excitedly. “Come on!” and she started clambering down the side of the ravine, going from one boulder to the next.

“Oh great,” I muttered and rubbed my knee. I stayed put and watched. After all, if it wasn't the cave she'd be coming back.

“There looks to be a sort of path here as well,” she called, pointing. I couldn't see it from where I was. “It goes off downhill.”

She climbed up a couple of boulders on the other side then stopped and peered at something.

“David!” she shouted. “It's a cave!”

“OK,” I shouted back, “I'm coming over.”

It took me longer to get there but I managed and, yes, there did seem to be a path but it wasn't well defined. To be honest it looked more like something the kangaroos used. On the other hand, the cave was definitely a cave.

“It looks to be bigger once you're inside,” she said when I joined her.

I wiped the sweat off my face then detached the torch from one of the cute carry loops sewn to my outdoorsman trousers and shone it inside. It certainly did get bigger. In fact it looked high enough to

stand up in, as Desmond had said.

"Give me the torch," said Angie, snatching it out of my hand before she'd finished the sentence.

She ducked down and went inside, flashing the torch around.

"Someone's been here," she said, focusing the torch on something. "Look."

I went inside on my hands and knees, wincing every time my left knee touched the rock. When I was sure I'd got past the low entrance I cautiously stood up and looked at where the torch was pointing. There was a dirty sack of something lying on the ground beside a rusty pair of gardening shears. A spade was propped against the side and another lay on the ground. A little further away was an axe.

"Someone's been using this for storing things," I said, remembering what Desmond had said. "Maybe this is in next door's property and they were going to make paths as well."

"Maybe," she said, not overly interested. She flashed the torch around. "It looks to go back some way. Come on, let's see where it goes."

It turned out not to go back that far after all, the brownish grey colour of the rock being deceptive, and got narrower and lower quite quickly.

"I wouldn't get too close," I said when we came to a rockfall that almost reached the top of the cave. "Those don't look too stable to me."

Angie ignored me and pushed one of the rocks at the top. It wobbled a little but stayed put. Then she pushed the one beside it and it fell off and we could hear it roll down the other side and continue a little way before stopping.

"Sounds like the cave goes back even more," she said.

"We'll never know," I said. "It's too dangerous to go any further. No one knows we're here."

“I know,” she said, a little sadly.

She slowly played the torch over the pile of rocks then pushed another one. That, too, fell, leaving a decently sized hole. Angie, of course, peered through.

“Oh, wow!” she exclaimed.

“What is it?” I asked.

“A tunnel,” she said, turning round to look at me and shining the torch in my eyes. “It’s man-made. I can see the wooden supports holding up the roof.”

Chapter Sixteen

It took at least a minute for the huge black splodges from the torch light in my eyes to fade enough to see. Not that I could see much anyway as Angie was shining the torch through the hole so it was almost completely dark my side. When my vision returned, I could see the silhouette of Angie's legs sticking out of the rockfall.

"What are you doing?" I asked, cautiously feeling my way over to where she was. The floor of the cave was uneven and there were loose rocks of various sizes dotted around. Fortunately my fancy boots had steel toe caps.

"Climbing through," she said, her voice a little muffled.

"Do you think that's wise?" I asked.

"Probably not," she said, "but it's time we lived a little."

"Or died a little," I thought to myself but didn't say aloud.

Her silhouetted feet disappeared, accompanied by an "aghh" and the clatter of, probably, the torch against rock. The light went out.

"What happened?" I called, standing on a rock and trying to peer through.

"I hit my knee," she said, "and I dropped the torch. Suddenly it's not as much fun as it was."

I had to laugh and I could feel her glowering at me in the darkness. Then the light came back on.

"Can you walk?" I asked, wondering how I was going to be able to drag her through the hole and carry her back through the cave and up the slope to the house.

"Yes," she said. I could see the beam of the torch crawling over the walls of the tunnel as she looked around. "It's just a bit tender. Come on through. I think this must be an old mine tunnel."

“Shine the torch over here,” I said, prudently pulling my head back so I didn't get blinded again. “I thought so.”

“What?” she said, limping over.

“It's not big enough for me,” I said.

“Oh,” she said, moving the torch around the edges of the hole. “You know, this reminds me of Winnie The Pooh.”

“You've found some honey?” I said sarcastically.

“You know, that time when Winnie got stuck in the hole into Owl's house,” said Angie, “because he was too fat.”

“Are you saying I'm too fat?” I asked.

“I'm just saying that Winnie had to stay stuck until he'd lost enough weight to get unstuck,” said Angie. “Although in your case it could be a while. Stand back.”

“Why?” I asked.

“So you don't get hit,” she said and pushed hard against another rock. It slid heavily down the pile, narrowly missing me, and landed solidly on the floor of the cave. Another rock, dislodged by this one, landed on top of it and fell off.

“That nearly hit me!” I said crossly.

“I told you to stand back,” she said. “If you can't follow simple instructions then you have only yourself to blame. Reckon you can get through there?”

“I'm not sure I want to,” I said. “I haven't got the body type for potholing. I'm far more of an intellectual.”

“It's just this one little bit,” said Angie, taking the light away from the hole, presumably to look up the tunnel again. “Once you're through, the tunnel looks to be quite big. You can go back if you want, but I've

got the torch.”

“So you're staying that side, are you?” I asked, peering through the hole again.

“I want to know where it goes,” she said. “It's difficult to tell but I think it slopes uphill. Maybe the other end is near the house. That would be pretty sweet, wouldn't it.”

“It probably comes out the other side of the mountain,” I said, heaving myself up so I could see if my shoulders fitted.

“I have a feeling it isn't that far,” she said. “The air in here is quite fresh. I would have thought if it went for kilometres the air would be musty and stale.”

“Actually, that's a fair point,” I said.

My shoulders fitted although it was a bit of a tight squeeze so I scrabbled a bit with my feet to find purchase and pushed.

“What's taking so long?” asked Angie.

“My belt is snagged,” I said, feeling around with my hand. I found the offending protrusion and sucked in my stomach to help get the belt unsnagged then pushed again. It worked this time, although I could feel the shirt on my back tear.

“I've torn my shirt,” I said, picking myself up from the floor of the tunnel.

“I'll get you another,” said Angie. “Look.”

It was definitely man made. The sides, floor and roof weren't smooth by any means but I could see the marks of pick axes and every few feet there were big split trunks of wood holding up cross beams.

“It looks like they were digging along here and came up against the back of the cave,” said Angie. “There isn't any support where the rockfall is so I guess they gave up at this point. This tunnel probably

goes back to the shaft they dug.”

“There could be side tunnels,” I said, “although there won't be an extensive network. Wally said they didn't mine here for long. Have you still got the ribbon?”

“In my pocket,” said Angie. “Coming?”

She set off up the tunnel. I followed, albeit a little unwillingly.

“Good,” I said. “If we do come across another tunnel we can leave a marker in case we have to find our way back. Have you noticed how dry it is? There's no sign of any water dripping down from above.”

“That's probably because it's the dry season,” said Angie.

“I wouldn't think so,” I said. “We must be quite deep and there has to be moisture in the soil otherwise the trees would die. Besides, it rained yesterday.”

“So what are you saying?” asked Angie.

“I'm not,” I said. “I'm just wondering why there's no water at all. Every tunnel I've been in before has had dripping water.”

“Just how many tunnels have you been in?” asked Angie. “I thought you weren't a potholer.”

“Loads,” I said, “although they were all road or train tunnels. Even through the Alps there's water dripping through cracks in the concrete lining.”

“That must be scary,” said Angie. “Mind you, I wouldn't want to be hacking away at the raw rock in a little tunnel like this. It must have been soul destroying.”

“They probably only had candles or oil lamps, as well,” I said. “And there was probably quite a crush of people, as well. Not just the miners themselves but people, horses too, taking away all the rubble. Yes, we're definitely going uphill.”

It's difficult to judge but we must have followed the tunnel for half a kilometre or so and God knows how high we climbed. Some of the time it was fairly flat and other times it was quite steep. At one point, fifteen or so steep steps had been cut so presumably whatever seam the miners had been following had suddenly dropped, perhaps because of a fold in the geology. There were no side tunnels although there were a couple of large niches which could have been the beginnings of side tunnels or possibly passing points or even just somewhere to store things out of the way.

"Now what?" said Angie when we came to a dead end.

"This must be the shaft," I said, looking up. "Shine the torch up there."

There was no apparent roof but there was a rusty iron ladder bolted to the side. It got lost in the darkness above us.

"Turn the torch off for a bit," I said.

Angie turned the light off and we stood there in the total darkness for a while. It was surprisingly spooky and I wondered what it would be like to be trapped on the wrong side of a rockfall, perhaps even for weeks, never knowing if anyone was looking for you. I gave a sudden little shudder at the thought.

"I think there's some light up there," said Angie, her voice over-loud in the darkness.

"You could be right," I said, trying to keep my voice quiet. There could have been a faint light some way above us but I could just as easily be imagining it. "Must be the top of the shaft although its probably heavily overgrown by now. It's been, what, a hundred and seventy years or so."

"How do you suppose they got horses down here?" asked Angie, flicking the torch back on. "They can't climb down ladders."

“Probably lowered them down on a harness,” I said. “Still, the good news is they took the horses with them when they left.”

“How do you know that?” asked Angie, sceptically.

“No bones,” I said.

“Ohhhh,” said Angie.

She shone the torch around and confirmed there were no old bones lying around. There were a few discarded odds and ends, badly rotten or rusted and falling apart but nothing to indicate that anything had been left to die there. Surprisingly there wasn't even the skeleton of a kangaroo or anything else that had fallen down the shaft.

“So how do you fancy a climb?” she asked, shining the torch back up.

“To be honest, I'm not sure my knee can take it,” I said. I had a touch of early arthritis in my left knee. It wasn't a problem normally but all these steep slopes and caves weren't normal.

“Is it hurting?” she asked.

“A bit,” I admitted. “Do you think this ladder will support us?”

“Seems pretty strong,” she said, giving it a whack. “Anyway, we haven't a lot of choice as the torch is beginning to fade. Shall I go first or will you?”

“You,” I said. “That way if I fall I won't knock you off. Anyway, we could go side by side. The ladder looks wide enough for two, maybe three, people. I wonder how high it is? Didn't Wally say they sunk a shaft a hundred metres deep?”

“I think it was feet,” she said. “Did they have metres back then?”

“I don't think so,” I said, “not in Australia anyway. A hundred feet isn't far, that's only thirty metres. I should be able to manage that.”

“Isn't that, like, ten stories?” she said, peering upwards.

“Could be,” I said, “but there's no lift.”

I put my foot on the bottom rung and it did seem solid. I tugged the handrail and found it was firmly embedded in the rock.

“Right,” I said, and took a deep breath. “Let's do it.”

I made my way up quite slowly, using only my right leg to step up. Angie kept level with me, the torch tucked into the waistband of her jeans so it pointed upwards. It gave her face an evil glow. Surprisingly the climb wasn't too bad, particularly as it was dark beneath us so we couldn't see how high we were. It was only the last few metres that were difficult as a lot of roots had grown out into the sides of the shaft. In some places they stuck out between the rungs and in others they had pushed the ladder away from the side. In one particularly hairy place a couple of roots had caused the strut holding the ladder in place to come loose and it broke free as we climbed past it. The top was the most difficult though, as it was thickly overgrown with something that had strong stems and bushy leaves. I tried to yank them out but trying to hold on to a ladder with one hand and pulling at stems above my head with the other proved to be ineffectual. Still, we managed to get through and scramble onto solid ground. In front of us the ground sloped downwards and was covered in trees and rocks. It looked much like our own section of the mountain.

“I don't want to do that again,” I said, bending over to put my hands on my knees and breathing heavily. I felt a little light-headed from the climb and my knee and head were throbbing in time with each other.

“Imagine doing that after a hard day cutting rock,” said Angie. She moved over to lean against a tree. “They must have been tough in those days. I wonder where we are? Is this our back yard?”

I straightened up with an effort to look for the sun and nearly fell back down the shaft when a voice from behind called out “Hello there! Nice of you to drop by. Come and have some tea!”

Angie grabbed my flailing arm and pulled me towards her.

“Thanks,” I muttered then we both turned to look for the owner of the

voice.

“What the hell!” I exclaimed in astonishment.

Angie also said something but I was too surprised to make out what she said. The owner of the voice was Angus and he was sitting on the terrace of his house, not fifteen metres away, across a strip of neatly manicured lawn. He waved then raised his tea cup invitingly. Hettie and the others were sitting there as well but they didn't seem to be paying us any attention

“Jesus,” I said staring then pulled myself together. “Hello,” I called back. “I'm sorry to turn up like this. We were ...”

“Come on, come on,” called Angus impatiently. “The tea is getting cold.”

He turned to say something to the maid and I looked at Angie.

“We'd better go,” I said quietly. “If nothing else we have to explain why we're trespassing. At least we know how to get home from here.”

“Yes,” said Angie, “although if I'd known we were going to end up here I'd have worn something else.”

We made our way around the bushes surrounding the mine shaft and I confess it did cross my mind to wonder why Angus hadn't done something about it. After all, it was a dangerous thing to have so close to the house. My knee twinged as we crossed the strip of lawn and protested as we climbed the three steps onto the terrace.

“You look absolutely ravishing as always, my dear,” gushed Angus coming over to greet us. He took her hand and kissed it, seemingly not noticing the dirt that encrusted it. “Come, come, join us. There's plenty of cake left.”

They seemed to all be sitting in exactly the same places as they had when we'd been there for afternoon tea. Lawrence Westerby jumped up and insisted Angie took his chair while he ran off to get two more.

"I really must apologise," I said to Angus. He sat down and looked up at me with a mild expression of puzzlement. "We were exploring our own property and found a cave ...,"

"Oh, how jolly exciting," said Lawrence, plonking a chair down next to Angus. "A cave, fancy that!"

"Yes, a cave," I said, feeling a little irritated.

"Were there fairies inside?" asked Hettie, in hushed but excited tones, her eyes round with wonder.

Amanda snorted quietly then busied herself with a piece of cake on her plate.

"Umm, no," I said. I was beginning to feel a little confused and flustered. "As I was saying ...,"

"Yes?" said Angus. "There's no need to apologise, old chap. You are welcome here anytime."

"We started to explore the cave," I continued, determined to explain why we were there, "and found an old mining tunnel at the back of it."

"Ooooh," squealed Hettie, clapping her hands. "Was it diamonds? Tell me it was diamonds!"

"Umm, I think it was copper," I said wondering why on earth she would think there was a diamond mine here.

"Oh, Hettie, do let the man speak," said Emma gruffly.

"Sorry," said Hettie, visibly chastened.

"Anyway," I said, "we followed the tunnel and, to our surprise, it came out over there."

I turned and pointed to where we had crawled out of the mine shaft and froze. Angie noticed and turned to look herself. There was nothing but manicured lawn for at least fifty metres. There wasn't any

sign of even a hole in the ground to show where the mine shaft had been.

“Haw, haw, haw,” chortled Angus, slapping his knee. He spilt his tea and the maid, I couldn't remember her name, rushed over with a napkin to dab ineffectually at it. He waved her away and put his tea cup on the table. “Do sit down, old chap, do sit down. Anna, some cake for the delightful Mrs Fernly and some for Mr Fernly, as well.”

I sat down rather hard and stared at the lawn in bemusement. The woodland started a long way away, much further away than where the shaft had been. I looked around in case it was further over than I remembered but there was not the slightest sign of any bushes or untoward vegetation. Just lawn, with a croquet pitch set up some way to the left.

I looked over at Angie who was looking as bemused as I felt. She looked at me and shrugged slightly as if to say 'where the hell is it?'.

A shadow fell over me and I looked up to see Anna offering me a plate with a large slice of sponge cake. The jam glistened richly in the sunlight.

“Oh, er, thank you,” I said weakly, taking it.

“Oh, I say, jolly good,” said Michael, striding across the terrace with Pip in tow. “You've arrived at last. Are we all here?”

“We're still waiting for Clive,” said Angus. “He should be here any minute.”

“Still some cake left, I see,” said Michael, stepping around me to get at the table. “I say, looks like Mitzi's outdone herself again. It looks delicious, doesn't it, Pip.”

“Simply divine,” said Pip in a rather bored drawl. “Anna, bring me some tea.”

“Yes, miss,” said Anna, just as Michael appeared with yet another chair.

“We can't start until Clive's here,” said Angus, leaning conspiratorially towards me.

“Start what?” I asked, still looking around in case the mine shaft had materialised somewhere else.

“We need your help,” said Angus.

“Oh,” I said, “if it's about the Murder Hunt clues, I've done them. They're at home. I can drop them round later.”

“That was just a ruse,” said Angus, “but we need Clive here. He can explain better than we can.”

“Clive?” I said, suddenly connecting the name. “Do you mean Clive Helmscott at number 2?”

“Spot on, old chap,” said Angus, leaning back and beaming at me happily.

“I'm still not fully convinced about this,” said Amanda. She got up to put her cake plate on the table. “I don't think we've fully considered all the potential risks.”

“Now then,” said Angus, a touch wearily, “we've discussed this at ...”

For a moment everything froze, Amanda in the process of putting her plate down, Angus in the middle of talking, Emma in the middle of smoothing her skirt over her knee. It only lasted a fraction of a second, just like the momentary 'jerk' when a DVD goes from layer 1 to layer 2, but it was very disconcerting.

“... length,” finished Angus as Amanda put her plate on the table with a slight bang. “We have no viable alternatives on any acceptable time scale.”

I wondered if I had imagined it. I looked over at Angie to see she was looking over at me with an eyebrow raised in mute query. I shook my head slightly.

“But to expose ourselves in this way,” said Amanda, glaring at Angus.

“Clive knows of us,” said Angus.

“But this is far deeper,” said Amanda. “This will be exposing our very core, our essence.”

“We will maintain safeguards,” said Angus.

“What on Earth are they talking about?” I wondered, my mind switching back to their debate. “Exposing their core? What core? Who are 'they'?”

“I’m happy to help in any way I can,” I said, “and there is no need to reveal any of your secrets.”

Angus gave me a rather limp smile and Amanda threw herself back into her chair and began to chew her thumbnail while staring angrily out over the lawn.

“Well,” said Angus diffidently. “Perhaps some more cake? Or tea?”

Chapter Seventeen

“You know you’ve torn your shirt?” asked Clive, coming up behind me.

“Oh, hello,” I said, jumping up and turning around. For some reason I fumbled my hand around my back even though I knew it was torn. “Yes, I tore it on a rock.”

“G’day, Ange,” he said, nodding at Angie.

She gave him a coldly polite smile. She passionately hated being called ‘Ange’.

“G’day, all,” he said, acknowledging the others as a group.

No one answered but Michael, as always, jumped up and produced yet another chair. Where from I have no idea as there was no pile of chairs anywhere and yet he produced them very quickly. While Anna poured Clive a cup of tea I resolved to watch Michael closely if someone else should turn up needing a chair.

“So,” he said, settling himself in the chair, “this is it, is it?”

Angus nodded slowly. “Yes,” he said, looking serious.

Clive pursed his lips then put the cup and saucer on the ground beside him.

“Can’t say as I rightly knows where to begin,” he said conversationally.

I looked around and noticed that everyone, with the exception of Angie, was watching Clive rather intently. Angie was watching him as well but with only a casual interest. No one spoke, not even Angus which surprised me a little. As a retired navy captain I would have expected him to take command.

“It seems they want my help,” I said when the silence had grown uncomfortable, “but for some reason no one can’t tell me what the problem is. We’ve been waiting for you.”

“Ahh,” said Clive. “That's because they's, umm, foreigners, like. Don't speak the language too well.”

“They seem to manage quite well,” I said, then to Angus. “Where are you from?”

Angus looked blankly at me as Clive jumped in with “Ohh, a long ways off, but that don't matter. What matters is they've got a problem and need me to explain it to you so you can fix it for them.”

“Well, I'm happy to help in any way I can,” I said. “What sort of problem?”

“When you was here last week,” said Clive, “you said you was in IT. They didn't know what that was so they asked me and I looked you up on the net, like, at the library.”

“I'm surprised you found anything,” I said.

I'd actually gone to a lot of trouble making sure there were no traces of myself or Angie on the internet as any personal information can be used in highly creative ways by the sorts of people I clashed horns with in my work. To be honest, even if I hadn't been in that line of work I would still have kept my internet footprint to an absolute minimum as a lot of companies and political bodies use personal information in a variety of ways, including, but not limited to, altering spending habits and voting inclinations. The recent rapid rise of extremist misinformation being one outcome of the globalisation of personal data.

“I know bugger all 'bout computers and the net,” said Clive, grinning happily, “but I did find your name online linked to a book on cybercrime and when I asked the librarian about it she said she'd had someone in earlier that day claiming to be you so I figured it was you. No one else in Thrisk would give a fart about it. Seems you are connected with some outfit in Sydney that specialises in computer crime.”

“Not really,” I said. “We specialised in preventing and blocking computer crime, not doing it.”

“Same difference,” said Clive amiably. “So you're some sort of shit hot computer guru, then, eh?”

I screwed up my face but had to admit that I had been even if I wasn't any more.

“So it's a computer problem?” I asked.

“Yeah,” said Clive. “Like, they had a computer and it got broken so they've, umm, made ...” and he glanced at Angus, who nodded, “..., yeah, made another but they can't get their stuff on it, you know, their whatchamacallit, information.”

“Didn't you have backups?” I asked Angus.

“Backups?” asked Clive.

“Yes, copies of the data stored somewhere else,” I said.

“Oh, shit, yeah,” said Clive, “they've got a copy, just they don't know how to get at it.”

“You're serious?” I said, puzzled. “They know how to actually make a computer but don't know how to copy files? How did they make the copy in the first place?”

“Gawd knows,” said Clive. “Most likely it was done before they left.”

“Before they left where?” I asked.

“Wherever they've come from,” said Clive.

I opened my mouth to try to establish where they'd come from but decided not to bother. After all, if they were illegal immigrants it wasn't really my problem.

“So they want me to restore their backup on their new computer?” I asked instead.

“Yeah, kind of,” said Clive.

“Shouldn't be a problem,” I said. “I can do that now, if they want.” I got to my feet. “Where's the computer? What's it running, by the way? Windows, Mac, Linux?”

No one moved, except Angie who put her hands on the arms of her chair as though about to get up as well. Clive sucked his teeth for a few moments.

“Yeah,” he said slowly. “It's not quite that simple, like.”

“OK,” I said, sitting back down again.

Clive sat there watching me and saying nothing. The others watched Clive, also saying nothing. I spread my hands and raised my eyebrows.

“Talk to me,” I said. “I can't do anything if I don't know what I'm working with.”

“Yeah,” said Clive again. He looked over at Angus then at Amanda and Hettie. “I know eff all about computers, but seem like it's some sort of special computer, like, see.”

“OK,” I said. “So who actually made it? IBM?”

Clive glanced at Angus who contemplated for a few moments then nodded.

“No!” exclaimed Amanda, jumping to her feet. “I really must protest! This is going too far!”

Angus sighed.

“Do you really have to know?” he asked.

“No,” I said, “but I do need to know what system it's running. I can't do anything otherwise.”

Amanda slowly sat down again but remained poised on the edge of her seat. It struck me that she seemed to be more than just a secretary.

“Look,” I said, “you have some sort of specialised computer here and you have some data you want to put onto it but unless it's fully automated there's nothing I can do if I don't know what commands to give the computer, and if it is fully automated then you don't need me anyway. I don't even know if the backup device can even be connected to the computer. What is it, by the way? Disk, tape, USB stick?”

“Would you excuse us for a few moments?” asked Angus.

“Certainly,” I said, somewhat taken aback.

Inevitably, when people found out I worked in IT they would bring their computer problems to me. I was used to that and people were generally only too happy to show me the computer and point helplessly at it or waggle the mouse around to show that whatever was supposed to be happening wasn't. I'd never have anyone ask me to fix a computer problem before but refuse to even let me see it.

While I was contemplating that I realised that Angus hadn't moved. Literally. He was frozen in his chair, unblinking. I looked around in surprise and saw that Amanda and Hettie were also frozen, motionless. Emma, Michael, Patrick and Pip were sitting quietly but were animated to some degree. They breathed, blinked, scratched and gave every impression of being alive. Angus, Amanda and Hettie were like statues.

“What's happened?” I asked.

“Huh?” asked Clive.

“Angus, Amanda and Hettie,” I said, pointing. “What's happened to them?”

“Oh,” he said, looking unconcerned. “They've having a meeting.”

“You what?” I said, frowning in puzzlement. “A meeting?”

“You'll get used to it,” he said. “Just chill.”

“Get used to it?” I said. “What are you talking about?”

“David,” called Angie.

“Not now,” I said impatiently, waving a hand in her general direction. “Now listen here, Clive. What’s going on?”

“David!” said Angie, again.

An element of panic, urgency, fear or something in her voice made me turn my head to look at her.

“Yes, what is it?” I said, perhaps more angrily that I should have as I was completely out of my depth here, a situation I fervently hate being in.

“Look at this,” she said, her face devoid of any expression.

She reached out and poked the side of Amanda’s knee. Her finger sank into the knee and Amanda didn’t react in the slightest.

“What?” I exclaimed.

Angie didn’t say anything. She just pulled her finger out and poked Amanda in the knee again.

“Oh shit,” I said.

I got up and walked over and poked Amanda’s knee myself. My fingertip touched Angie’s somewhere inside Amanda’s knee and we both jerked our fingers back in surprise. I did it again and waggled my finger around. There was nothing underneath the appearance of her knee. She still hadn’t reacted either.

I stepped back and examined Amanda. She looked completely lifelike, if unnaturally unmoving, so I stepped forward again and cautiously tapped her on the nose. My finger passed straight through. For some reason I wondered how she picked her nose then told myself I was being stupid. Women like Amanda never picked their noses.

“OK,” I said, straightening up. “This is a hologram?”

“No idea, mate,” said Clive.

“What about you?” I asked Patrick who was sitting the other side of Angie, watching disinterestedly. “Are you a hologram as well?”

“I do not know what a hologram is,” he said, stumbling a little over the word.

I stepped over and poked him in the shoulder. He was quite solid.

“Sorry,” I said.

“That’s quite all right,” he said. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dusted his shoulder.

Pip laughed. “Do you want to poke me as well?” she asked, holding out her hand.

“No,” I said, feeling a little stupid.

I made my way back to my chair and sat down again.

“Are you one of ... them?” I asked Clive, waving my hand at the others.

“Nah,” he said.

He seemed completely relaxed and unconcerned.

“So you are real?” I asked.

“Reality’s too deep,” he said. “Just chill and take life as it comes.”

I reached over and tapped him on his arm.

“So you’re Australian?” I asked, reassured by his solidity.

“Sure am,” he said. “Born in Cairns.”

“How long have you known ...?” I asked with a twitch of my hand to indicate the others.

“Ohhhh, thirty odd years,” he said, screwing up his face as he thought about it. “Got to know 'em soon after I moved here, like.”

“So they've been here more than thirty years?” I asked.

“Something like that,” he said, vaguely.

I leaned back in my chair and crossed my legs. It didn't help much so I drummed my fingers on my knee. That didn't help much either.

“So where are they from again?” I asked.

“Can't rightly say,” said Clive.

“Why's that?” I asked.

“Cos I don't know,” he said.

“Haven't you asked them?” I asked.

“Yeah, I did,” he said.

“And they wouldn't tell you?” I asked.

“They couldn't,” he said, scratching under his beard. “They don't know either.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, dropping my leg down and leaning forward. “How could they not know where they're from?”

“David,” said Angie, coming over to kneel on the ground beside me, “what's going on?”

“As far as I can gather,” I said, taking her hand just to make sure, “those three have gone off to have a meeting about something and have left an image behind.”

“An image?” she said. “You mean like video-conferencing?”

“Now that's an idea,” I said.

"Is this a video-conference?" I asked Clive.

"No idea, mate," he said, spreading his hands. "I'm just an old hippy, like. Don't know nothing about computers and shit. Ain't even got me one of them mobility phones."

"Right," I said thoughtfully.

"No, can't be," I said to Angie a moment later. "He's solid and so's Clive."

"What about the others?" she asked quietly. "They look a bit weird."

"You can't be a hippy," I said suddenly. "You're not old enough."

"Not my fault I was born too late," said Clive.

"Would you like some more tea, sir, madam?" asked Anna. "Perhaps some cake?"

I looked up at her in surprise, trying to remember if she had been there a few moments before. I honestly couldn't remember.

"No, thank you," I said and Angie just shook her head. "That's a small tea pot. How do you manage to keep giving us all tea from such a small pot?"

"I keep bringing out fresh hot water, sir," she said, giving me a little curtsy.

"Oh, right," I said. Perhaps she'd just gone and got some more water which would explain why I didn't remember seeing her.

"This is all a bit surreal," I said as Anna backed away and went to offer tea to Emma.

"Can we just go?" whispered Angie. She was still holding onto my hand.

"I want to get to the bottom of this," I whispered back. "There's

something very strange going on and I'm not sure it's all good."

"Tell me, Clive," I said, turning back to him. "You said something the other day about the lights going out when they're busy. You meant these people, didn't you."

"Yeah," he said.

"Busy doing what?" I asked.

"Can't rightly say," he said.

"Can't or won't?" I asked.

"Would if I could," he said, "but I can't."

"Why can't you?" I asked.

"I promised not to," he said.

"Right," I said. "So you've been friends with Angus and the others for, what, thirty years, you said?"

"S'right," he said, nodding.

"So you come here, do you?" I asked, "or do they go down to your house sometimes?"

"Nah, I always come here," he said. "They never go outside."

"But what about those cars out the front?" I asked. "Don't they drive them to the shops or anything? Or are they holograms as well?"

"What cars?" asked Clive. "Never seen no cars here."

"Didn't you come to the front of the house?" I asked.

"No, I came round the side," said Clive. "Nice place isn't it." He looked behind him at the house appreciatively.

“Yes,” I said. “Have you any idea how old it is?”

“Can't rightly say,” he said. “I've never seen it before.”

I was so used to Clive not being able to rightly say anything that it took a moment or two for the penny to drop.

“Just a minute,” I said, “didn't you just say you always came here?”

“S'right,” said Clive.

“So how come you've never seen this house before?” I asked. I felt Angie's hand tighten around mine.

“Oh, this is for you,” he said. “Special, like.”

I let out a slow breath.

“So the house is a hologram as well?” I asked.

“Can't rightly say,” said Clive. “What's a hologram?”

“You know what a photograph is?” I asked.

“I ain't effing stupid,” he said, his grin disappearing momentarily. “Course I know what a photo is.”

“Well, a hologram is like a projected photographic slide,” I said, “only it's three dimensional and done with a laser.”

“Well, that's nice,” he said. “What's a laser?”

“It's a special kind of light,” I said thoughtfully. Something was niggling in my mind but wasn't quite ready to come out yet. “When you project it in a beam it doesn't spread the way a torch does.”

“Sweet,” he said and thought about it. “Oh you mean like what they used on my eye?”

“Did you have glaucoma?” I asked.

“Something like that,” he said, putting his fingertip to his right eye. “Few years back. Had trouble seeing out of me eye. Doc said they had to do something to the retina.”

“Yes, that was probably a laser,” I said. “They use it to burn away the damaged part.”

“Hey, you learn something every day,” he said.

“Someone must leave here,” I said after a few moments. “Aside from buying food and so on, someone put notes in our PO Box in town.”

“Oh, that was me,” said Clive. “I do odd jobs for them when they need something doing outside.”

“You?” I said, taken aback yet again. “Why you? Why don't they do it themselves? I know, you can't rightly say”

Clive grinned at me again.

“I really don't understand any of this,” I said. Angus, Amanda and Hettie were still frozen and the others were still quietly sitting there, not doing anything. It struck me that there was something about them that seemed familiar. Something about the way there were just sitting, patiently waiting and seemingly disinterested in what was going on around them.

“You remember that movie we watched, ohh maybe ten years ago?” I asked Angie.

“Are you serious?” she said. “A movie ten years ago? You expect me to remember every movie we've seen and when we saw it? Give me some clues, at least.”

I had to laugh.

“Sorry,” I said. “I was just thinking out loud. I think the movie was called *The Battle of Britain*, but it doesn't matter. It just occurred to me that the way they're just sitting there, waiting, is just like the way the pilots were in that film, waiting for the phone to ring to tell them

they'd been scrambled for action and they had to run to get into their Spitfires and go fight the enemy.”

“You're joking,” she said. “You think this is like a war movie?”

“No,” I said, “just the same sort of tensely relaxed waiting for something to happen.”

“Pah,” said Angie. “This is more like one of your Agatha Christie things than a war movie.”

“Oh, frigging hell,” I said slowly as realisation dawned. “This isn't holograms, this isn't real!”

I stared down at Angie's hand in mine then suddenly, forcefully, I threw it at her and jumped to my feet.

“Get away from me,” I shouted. “All of you, get away from me! Get out of my head!”

Chapter Eighteen

“David!” shouted Angie, tugging at my hands, “David! Stop it!”

With a strength I didn't know she had, she wrenched my hands away from my face and slapped me hard. I jerked my head back in shock and stared at her.

“You hit me,” I said in disbelief.

“Stop doing this, David,” said Angie in a quiet voice that had dangerous overtones.

“But ... ,” I started then became aware that my cheek and ear were beginning to feel hot and painful.

“But nothing,” she said, putting her hands, more gently this time, on my face so I was forced to look her in the eyes. “There's some weird stuff going on here but it is not inside your head. Look at me. It's not inside your head, OK? David, look at me.”

“But ...,” I said as my eyes tried to drift back to the group on the terrace.

“Listen to me, David,” she said, bringing her face close to mine. “I'm here, I'm real. Look at me. Concentrate on me, David. This stuff is happening to me as well, OK. It's not inside your head. Do you understand me?”

“It's not inside my head,” I said quietly.

“Good,” she said and stared deeply into my eyes as if she could see some truth in there.

“But ...,” I started.

“No!” she said, giving me a sharp tap on the side of my face. “No buts. Look at me, David. This is all real. This is happening. Say it. Come on, say it.”

“This is all real,” I said. “This is happening.”

“Good,” she said and slowly dropped her hands.

“But ...,” I started.

“Uh, uh, uh!” she exclaimed, raising an admonishing finger. “Accept it. This is real. This is happening.”

“This is happening,” I said.

“Good,” she said. “Now, come on, sit down.”

Clive got up and righted my chair so I could sit down.

“She got you a good 'un,” he said, studying my face. “Don't reckon you'll get a black eye though.”

I sat down and looked around. The others, those that weren't immobile at least, were watching interestedly.

“How are you feeling?” asked Angie. “In here,” and she tapped the side of her head.

“Calmer,” I said, looking up at her. “Yes, calmer. I think I must have had a panic attack.”

“I'm not surprised,” she said, “but hold on to the fact that I am experiencing all this ... whatever, as well. It's not inside your head.”

I nodded slowly and rubbed my cheek.

“Have you been working out?” I asked ruefully.

She laughed and I took her hand.

“Thank you,” I said and kissed it.

She smiled and gently patted me on the top of my head with her other hand.

"I'm just going to get my chair," she said. "Don't move."

Michael appeared with a chair and put it beside me. Surprised, I looked over at where Angie had been sitting and that chair was still there.

"How does he do that?" I asked myself as Angie shifted closer to me then sat down.

Angie must have seen something in my eyes because she raised her finger again and muttered, "accept it".

"Meeting's over," said Clive.

"What happened?" asked Angus, twisting in his chair to look at us.

"He had a fit," said Clive laconically. "Went doolally, like."

"It wasn't a fit," said Angie assertively. "It was just a recurrence of an old issue."

"Hmm," said Angus, looking puzzled.

"Greetings," said a young girl in a dark blue robe walking over. "I am Autumn Savannah. Am I the issue?"

"What the ...?" I exclaimed, jumping to my feet again. "What are you doing here?"

"David!" barked Angie, jumping up as well. "Sit down!"

"Yes, Angie," I said meekly, sitting down.

"You!" said Angie viciously, stabbing her finger at Autumn. "Go away! Now!"

I'd never heard Angie be so domineering before. I was impressed and, I have to admit, I kind of liked it. I took her hand again and was surprised to find it was trembling.

“As you wish,” said Autumn and stepped into nothingness.

“Now I understand,” said Angus.

“I’m glad someone does,” said Angie, turning the full force of her new found superpower onto Angus. “Now. Either you give us a full and complete explanation or we leave and you will get no help from David. No help whatsoever.”

“But ...,” I said, “that was ...”

“Be quiet!” said Angie. I became aware her whole body was quivering. “I will not let them mess with your mind!”

She glared at Angus who just sat there, no doubt as surprised and shocked as I was.

“Come on, David,” said Angie when nothing happened. “We’re leaving.”

She jerked my hand and, passively, I got up again and started to follow her.

“Please,” said Angus, also getting to his feet. “Don’t go.”

“You heard me,” said Angie, pausing. “Explain!”

Angus froze again, this time three quarters of the way to his feet and off balance. I, too, was caught off balance as Angie dragged on my hand as she started walking, marching would be a better word, away.

“Very well,” said Angus, finishing standing up.

Angie turned to look at him and he gestured to our chairs. “Please come back,” he said.

She hesitated and glanced at me then shrugged and we walked back to our chairs.

“No more mind games,” she said. “No more tricks and illusions.”

“As you say,” said Angus. “Don't sit in the chairs. Sit on the ground.”

“Is this another game?” demanded Angie angrily.

“No,” said Angus. “It is the end.”

With a faint shimmer the chairs, the terrace and the house disappeared and we found ourselves standing in woodland.

“What the hell?” I said, looking around.

Angus and the others had also disappeared. Only Clive was still there and he was sitting, cross legged, on the ground looking perfectly relaxed.

“Where's the house gone?” I asked, thinking that illusionists could make people disappear but not even David Copperfield could make an entire mansion vanish.

“Never was no house,” said Clive. “'Cept that,” and he pointed behind me.

We turned and saw, some way off and surrounded by overgrown lantana, a fairly decrepit old metal shed.

“And Angus and the others?” asked Angie. She still had a firm grip on my hand.

Clive pointed towards the ground. “Down there,” he said.

With a shimmer the house, the terrace and Angus reappeared. He was on his own.

“This is not real,” said Angus, “but it makes things easier.”

“That was no explanation,” said Angie.

“What you just saw was real,” said Angus. “Clive.”

“Oh,” said Clive, a little surprised. “You want me to ...?”

“Yes,” said Angus.

“K,” said Clive, getting up. He brushed the back of his shorts then ran his fingers through his beard. “Well, it’s like this, see. Umm, they’s aliens.”

“Come on, David,” said Angie, pulling my hand. “We’re leaving.”

“No, wait,” said Clive with a touch of urgency in his voice. He put out one hand as if to try and stop us leaving. “It’s true. They’s from somewhere out there,” and he waved his other hand at the sky.

“This is absurd,” said Angie. “Come on.”

“Wait,” said Angus. “Clive is correct.”

“Where are you from, then?” I asked. “Mars?”

“We do not know,” said Angus.

“How can you not know where you’re from?” said Angie disbelievingly.

“We know where we are from,” said Angus, “but not how to explain it to you. You have different names for the stars and your star maps are only from your perspective. We cannot work out where our home is from them.”

“Maybe NASA has better maps,” butted in Clive. “I could only get a book on astronomy from the library. Library here ain’t that wonderful.”

“But surely you know how you got here,” I said. “Can’t you simply work backwards?”

“We cannot get that information,” said Angus. “We need you to do it for us.”

“What do you ...?” I started then my brain began to work again. “Oh, you mean your backup data?”

“Yes,” said Angus. “Our craft was slightly damaged by a meteor and we crashed on this planet. Our ... computer? ... was destroyed.”

“But the backups weren’t?” I asked.

“As far as we can tell, no,” said Angus. “Our ... specialists? ... ended in the crash. Only eight of us survived.”

“Does this make sense to you?” asked Angie, looking at me.

“Actually, it does,” I said. “It’s only human arrogance that make us think there is no other intelligent life in the universe. It is quite possible, even if it is unlikely, that another species has crossed space and accidents do happen.” I turned back to Angus. “I don’t understand how you’ve not been discovered though. This is a populated area and the crash must have drawn some attention.”

“No one here in 1827,” said Clive.

“1827?” said Angie. “They crashed here in 1827?”

“Yes,” said Angus.

“But wasn’t that when an explosion ...,” started Angie.

“Just a minute,” I said, interrupting. “If you are from somewhere else in the universe, how do you know it was 1827 here?”

“Clive has explained how you measure time,” said Angus. “It is a simple calculation to put it in your terms.”

“I suppose so,” I said, “and you’ve lived here ever since?”

“Yes,” said Angus.

“In that shed?” I asked, jerking my thumb towards it.

“No,” said Angus. “Down there,” and he pointed at the ground.

“You mean underground?” asked Angie.

“Yes,” said Angus. “Our vessel crashed over there and sank deep into the ground. When we detected signs of intelligent life we covered over what traces remained.”

“Can we see inside your vessel?” asked Angie.

“No,” said Angus. “We cannot survive in your atmosphere, nor can you survive in ours.”

“Makes sense,” I said, looking at Angie. “There's no reason to suppose that life can't evolve under other conditions to those on Earth.”

“So you believe all this?” asked Angie.

“I don't know,” I said, “but it's certainly believable. I still don't understand, though, how they've managed to remain undetected all this time, especially with the mining that went on here.”

“Oh, that's easy,” said Angie. “They've scared people away.” She looked at Angus. “Haven't you.”

“Yes,” said Angus.

“Right,” I said, snapping my fingers. “The mine cave-ins and all that shit with lights and so on.”

“Yes,” said Angus. “We discovered very quickly that your species is highly aggressive and destructive so we came up with ways to avoid contact.”

“And Clive?” I asked. “You haven't avoided contact with him.”

“He would not go,” said Angus.

“I did some shit in my youth,” said Clive, grinning sheepishly, “back in the late 70s and 80s. The things that went on here were nothing like some of the bad trips I had so I stayed. Besides, I don't like people any more than they do.”

“So why us?” I asked. “You tried to scare us away then invited us

round for afternoon tea. That part makes no sense. Why are we here now?"

"We need your help," said Angus. "You can repair our computer and then we can go home."

"Oh, I see," I said. "But couldn't you have contacted any computer contractor? Or got Clive to, at least. Hold on, that's bullshit. You didn't know I knew about computers until after you invited us round."

"Bullshit?" said Angus, looking at Clive.

"Nonsense," he said. "Wrong, incorrect."

"Ahh," said Angus. "Your species has an interesting language."

"Well?" I asked. "How do you explain that?"

"They can read minds," said Clive.

"Yeah, right," I said sarcastically. "Of course they can. Silly me. So what am I thinking?"

"We cannot read minds," said Angus. "Your brains work differently to ours but we can detect some images when your minds ... seize strongly? ...," and he looked at Clive.

"I think you mean 'focus'," said Clive.

"Ahh," said Angus. "Focus, yes, when your mind focus strongly."

"I'm not sure I follow," I said.

"He told me they could sense or see or whatever it is that you knew about large amounts of information," said Clive, "so they asked me to find out more about you. Afternoon tea was my idea. Pretty cool, huh."

"And the murder hunt was your idea as well?" asked Angie.

“Nah,” said Clive. “They saw that too, no idea why. Only it was my idea to use it to see how helpful you were.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “They saw a murder hunt in my mind?”

“Reckon so,” said Clive with a shrug.

“A murder hunt?” said Angie, puzzled. “Why would you have an image of a murder hunt in your mind.”

“I’ve no idea,” I said then burst out laughing.

“Why are you laughing?” she demanded crossly.

“*Dead Man’s Folly*,” I said, clapping my hands.

“OK, now I think your mind really has gone,” she said. “Who’s the dead man and what folly was he up to?”

“No, no, no,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s one of Agatha Christie’s books. *Dead Man’s Folly*. It’s about a murder hunt at a fete at a stately home where the pretend victim really is murdered. Oh, of course, that explains a lot. This house and your names. They’re from that book, aren’t they.”

“I do not know,” said Angus, “but you had a strong focus in your mind and we copied it as best we could.”

“But there are discrepancies,” I said. “Patrick and Pip weren’t in *Dead Man’s Folly* and your character wasn’t Angus Stubbs, it was ...” and I clicked my fingers a few times to help me remember, “... oh yes, it was George Stubbs. And he wasn’t a captain he was a businessman.”

“Where did Patrick and Pip come from then?” asked Angie.

“I’ve no idea,” I said. “I did know a Patrick at university but he wouldn’t have been in my mind recently and I’ve never met anyone called Pip.”

“This would explain that girl, though,” said Angie.

"You mean Autumn?" I asked. "Yes, quite possibly. Oh! I've just remembered. Patrick and Pip were in *A Murder Is Announced*. I read it before *Dead Man's Folly*. They were twins who tried to kill what's her name to get the inheritance. So that's where that message came from."

"No, I mean just now," said Angie. "After you got upset and Angus came back from his meeting."

"Oh right," I said. "I'd almost forgotten that. Was that you, Angus?"

"Yes," he said. "I sensed a strong focus in Angela's mind so I created it to see if that was causing you to be upset."

"That explains why she didn't look quite right," I said nodding. "She was Angie's image of her, not mine. You know, I seem to remember there's an Angus in another one of her books. I was sure he'd done the murder but it turned out he hadn't. It must have got conflated in my mind with other images from other books."

"Conflated?" asked Angus, looking at Clive again.

"Buggered if I know," said Clive shrugging.

"Mixed up together," I said. "And Poirot's best friend was Captain Hastings which could explain why you're a captain not a businessman, although I seem to remember Hastings was an army captain not a navy captain."

"I didn't know that," said Clive. "Angus just wanted to know what a captain was, see, so I told him about the navy."

"I dreamt about her," said Angie suddenly. "Was that you as well?"

"Who?" I asked.

"That girl," said Angie. "Did you put her in my dream?"

"No," said Angus.

"I wonder why I dreamt about her then," said Angie.

"I daresay not everything unusual that's happened since we moved in was because of Angus," I said. "Most likely it was just coincidence, like that cafe burning down the day after they annoyed you."

"Oh, that was me," said Clive.

"You?" exclaimed Angie. "Why on earth did you set fire to the cafe?"

"Angus asked me to," he said.

"What for?" I asked.

"We offered cooperation to receive cooperation," said Angus. "You had a strong focus of that place so I asked Clive to help. Was it not to your liking?"

I laughed. "Actually it was very much to our liking," I said, "although we would never have said so."

"I do not understand," said Angus, looking at Clive.

"Don't ask me, mate," said Clive. "People are just too bloody weird for me."

Angus looked at me and I held up my hand to forestall his question.

"It would take too long to explain," I said. "Let's just say that there are certain rules that people are expected to live by as part of a social group and setting fire to places isn't part of those rules. Just do us a favour, would you? Ask before trying to do something to help, OK?"

"As you wish," said Angus. "Angela, have I satisfied your request for explanation?"

"What do you think, David?" asked Angie.

"Jesus," I said and exhaled rather loudly. "Aliens among us, that's a big ask. What do you think?"

"I asked first," she said, "but ..."

“Yeah,” I said. “But.”

I looked at Clive.

“This isn't bullshit?” I asked. “It's for real?”

“Yeah, mate,” he said. “It's on the level.”

I blew out my cheeks then said “wow” before looking at Angie.

“Makes more sense than anything else,” she said.

“OK,” I said and sat back in my chair to study Angus. “I guess, well, let's talk about computers.”

“Just a minute,” said Angie. We all looked at her. “What about the briefcase? Why did it keep disappearing?”

“We can only maintain the appearance for a short distance around us,” said Angus. “The briefcase was a mistake and should not have been given to David.”

“So why was it?” I asked.

“You had a strong focus in your mind of hidden documents,” said Angus.

“Hidden documents?” said Angie. “What, you've been writing love letters to that girl?”

“God, no,” I said. “I only ever talked to her, I never wrote her anything. No, I've no idea where that image came from. Certainly Agatha Christie never wrote about ... oh. Actually she did. I've just remembered. Several of her early books are about people being murdered because of secret military plans or treaties and things like that. I remember thinking that those books must indicate something about the anxieties of the English in the twenties, just after World War One. That would explain why Amanda gave me a briefcase of secret documents that were to be given to the Foreign Office. You remember? We wondered why the British Foreign Office and not DFAT.”

“Yes, I remember,” said Angie. “OK, point taken. I just wondered about the briefcase, that’s all. It didn’t seem to fit in but it does now. Carry on.”

“Anything else?” I asked.

“No, just that,” said Angie, smiling for the first time since we’d left the tunnel. “Unless I think of something else.”

I smiled back then turned to Angus.

“You said your computer specialists died in the crash,” I said to Angus. “Who knows the most out of those that are left?”

He made a noise like a snail crossing muddy gravel and added “communications”.

“Is that their actual name?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Angus.

“Male or female?” I asked.

“Our biology is different to yours,” said Angus, “although Clive has explained much to us. Our reproduction requires three individuals.” He made the snail noise again, “... is in many ways similar to your female.”

I tried to make the snail noise and failed dismally.

“Right then,” I said, abandoning the attempt. “Perhaps it is best if I talk to her. Which one was she in the group on the terrace?”

“Hettie,” said Angus. “I shall summon her.”

Chapter Nineteen

Frankly, my brain was beginning to suffer from overload and I was longing for a cigarette so I didn't have any thoughts about Hettie being their computer expert although I caught Angie's look of surprise and briefly wondered why. Then it struck me, a blinding light of revelation, a truly profound insight of world shattering dimensions.

They weren't actually there. *They weren't actually there.* It was all some sort of illusion and, aliens or not, they were somewhere underground. I could have a ciggie and no-one, *no-one*, would be offended. Except possibly Clive and I could handle that. I pulled out one of my pre-rolled cigarettes and lit it with restrained desperation. It was sublime although I fumbled the lighter and dropped it.

"You couldn't, like, spare one, could you, David?" asked Clive. "Don't get me pension money 'till tomorrow, see."

"Sure," I said, pulling another out and tossing it over.

He pulled some matches out of his shorts pocket and lit it and smiled happily through a wreath of smoke.

"David," said Angie quietly.

"Mmm?" I said.

"Can I have one too?" she asked.

"You don't smoke," I said, glancing at her. "You gave up years ago."

"I know," she said, her eyes looking glazed, "but all this ... it's too much. I need ... I mean ... um ..."

"Here you go," I said, offering her the tin.

She took one cautiously and fiddled with it while I retrieved my lighter and passed it over. She tried several times to light the lighter but it refused to work, her hand seemed a little uncoordinated, so I gently took it back and lit the cigarette for her.

“Thanks,” she whispered and inhaled deeply. She was still coughing when Hettie appeared.

Hettie looked subtly different. She was still in the same brightly coloured floral frock and was still spectacularly beautiful but something was different.

“David wants to talk to you,” said Angus.

“What about?” she asked, sitting down in a chair which materialised as she sat.

“Computers,” said Angus. “Tell him all you can.”

“As you wish,” she said and turned her head to look at me.

All became clear. Her light brown eyes no longer held a look of child-like innocence. Her gaze was strong and clearly intelligent.

“Umm,” I said, wondering where to begin.

Clive started to laugh somewhere deep in his beard.

“Why are you laughing?” I asked as Angie took another drag and started coughing again.

“Your face,” he said. “You was staring, like. Had ya fooled, didn't she.”

I snorted and turned back to Hettie.

“Well,” I said, “what can you tell me about your computer system?”

She looked at Angus who nodded.

“I do not know its inner workings,” she said, “but I used it extensively. I do not know your words but it was in two parts. One part did things and the other knew things.”

“OK,” I said. “Sounds like the programs were held in one place and the data in another. How much was destroyed?”

“The part that knew things,” she said.

“So the part with the programs is still intact and working?” I asked quickly.

“I do not understand,” she said.

“The part that did things,” I said. “Is it still working?”

“Yes,” said Hettie, “as far as it can. You call doing things 'programs'?”

“Umm, yes,” I said. “Programs do things and their knowledge is the data.”

“Ahh,” she said. “I think the programs still function but we have no datas.”

“That's a relief,” I said.

“You are pleased we have no datas?” she asked.

“Oh, no,” I said. “Of course not. There is a small chance I can help you restore your data but I couldn't begin to help you rewrite your programs. It would be impossible without a detailed knowledge of how your system actually functions at its most basic level.”

“But you can help with the datas?” she asked.

“There is a small possibility I can,” I said. “In principle it is fairly straightforward. I just need to know how to connect your copy of your data to the new data area you've made then do the transfer. Hopefully there will be no need to manipulate the data on the way.”

“I do not understand,” she said. “Manipulate the datas?”

“OK,” I said, wondering how much detail I was going to have to explain. “If we are very lucky the backup copy of the data is structured in the way the programs need it. If it is then we can just copy it. If it isn't then nothing will work.”

“I do not understand,” she said. “Structure? It is knowledge, not a building.”

“Yeah,” I said and scratched my nose a few times. “OK, let me give an example. Umm, I have no idea what data you have, or had, but I'm sure you must have had some data in a two dimensional array so if the backup copy has stored that array in the form of an array then ... what's the matter?”

“I do not think we have anything in only two dimensions,” said Hettie, frowning. “What is an array?”

“OK,” I said. “Let's forget that for now since it doesn't matter if we can't transfer the data. We can worry about structure later. How do we move the data?”

“You still use radio,” said Hettie. “I have been picking up your radio signals for a long time. I am able to connect the parts using radio if it would help.”

“It would be a great help,” I said. “Can you send a signal to my house over there?”

“It is not far,” she said. “Yes.”

“Awesome,” I said. “If I can pick up your signal I might, with a lot of luck, be able to work out the structure of the data and then ... just a moment. I don't understand something. If your programs still work and you are able to connect the data part to the program part, don't you have a program that does the restoring? Can't you just make the connection using radio or whatever you normally use and just run it?”

“That was what we expected,” she said. “It is how it was designed but we cannot.”

“Ahh,” I said. “So something in the program part isn't working properly?”

“Perhaps,” she said. “But the probability is higher for the data's part to be not correct.”

“Why do you think that?” I asked.

“The datas part was destroyed,” said Hettie. “We grew another but it seems to be different.”

“Grew?” I said, reaching for another cigarette. “What do you mean, grew?”

“Our computers are living,” said Angus. “We grow what we need.”

“Wow,” I said in astonishment. “I’ve heard of work that’s been carried out on organic computers but it’s still in its infancy. There’s a university in the UK, I think, which has four or five neurons interlinked but that’s all. So how big have you guys managed to get yours?”

“I do not know,” said Angus, “but the interior of our vessel is coated with the living material.”

“Good god,” I said. “That is absolutely fascinating! So how do you interact with it? How do you get it to do things?”

“We just tell it,” said Hettie.

“Makes sense,” I said. “Wow. I would dearly love to see it.”

“That is not possible,” said Angus. “You cannot live in our atmosphere.”

“Why not?” I asked. “What is it made of?”

“Methane,” interjected Clive. “I got a book 'bout chemistry from the library. It had something called a periodical table in it and we worked out that their atmosphere is four lots of hydrogen and one lot of carbon and apparently that’s methane. Same as in your lighter.” He looked a little proud for having achieved this breakthrough.

“Actually that’s butane,” I said, “but it’s similar and we can’t breathe that. Oh, well, never mind. So let me get this straight. Your data store was destroyed and you grew another but you can’t get it to work? Is

that right?"

"Yes," said Hettie.

"And you have no idea why it won't work?" I asked, thinking that it was now an impossible task.

"I suspect I know why it won't work," she said. "The life on this world is not advanced enough."

"I don't understand," I said, frowning.

"We had to grow the new part from life forms on this planet," she said. "It is different to life from our planet."

"Right, gotcha," I said thoughtfully. I pondered for a while, oblivious to the others watching me. "Actually, that shouldn't be an insurmountable problem. In essence it's just a compatibility issue between two different forms of storage media."

"You what?" said Clive.

"Like disks and tapes," I said, "or solid state drives and punched cards. All we need to do is find a way to translate between them. So long as it can be translated it shouldn't matter what the data is actually stored on, or in."

"So you can help us?" asked Angus.

"Don't get your hopes up," I said. "It's one hell of a task, translating from one unknown format to another and I'm guessing your data will be in whatever language you use as well so it'll be incomprehensible to me, but it's certainly an interesting challenge. How much data have you got?"

"I do not know," said Hettie. "I cannot calculate it in a way you would understand."

"OK, well I guess it doesn't matter," I said. "The first thing to do is get a connection going. Then I can explore and see if I can figure

anything out. You can do wireless?”

“Wireless?” asked Hettie.

“Radio,” I said. “Do you know what a hertz is?”

“No,” she replied.

“You know radio works in cycles?” I said, drawing a rough sine wave in the air with my finger.

“Yes,” she said.

“A hertz is one cycle per second,” I said, and she nodded acceptance. “Can you set up a radio connection at 2.4 or 5 gigahertz?”

I had to quickly explain what giga meant but she cottoned on very quickly so the conversation quickly became technical, with lots of misunderstandings and explanations.

* * *

“So you really think you can do it?” asked Angie when we eventually got home.

Elvis showed every sign that he'd thought we had permanently abandoned him and even food wasn't enough to interrupt his delight at our return. Shishke, on the other hand, opened one eye, flicked her tail once then closed it again. While I got some dinner prepared, Angie cleared up the half a dozen or so novels that Elvis had nervously shredded.

“In principle,” I said. “Whether I can in actuality or not I have no idea. After dinner I'm going to set up my computers in the shed and see if I can pick up their signal. Fortunately Hettie can transmit on 5Ghz so I should be able to pick it up with a standard wireless network card.”

“Can't you do it in the house?” asked Angie. “It'll be more comfortable and I can keep an eye on you so you don't work too hard.”

"I was going to," I said, "but while cooking the chops I figured it would probably be best to try to keep this quiet."

"And doing it in the shed will keep it quiet?" she asked, a forkful of mashed potato and peas hovering in front of her mouth.

"The thing is," I said, "if someone in town picks up their signal they'll probably just think it's background static or something like that but if they also pick up replies to that signal someone may start to wonder what is going on and come investigating. The metal of the shed will cut out most of the signals I transmit and I can put up some simple shielding to keep the rest away from everyone else."

"Who would come investigating?" she asked. "I don't imagine any of the farmers round here would give a damn."

"No, they wouldn't," I said, "but the Australian Defence Force might. The last thing we want is for them to think some enemy agent has set up a transmitter here."

"I hadn't thought of that," admitted Angie.

She fell silent and chewed her way through some underdone lamb while I pondered the problem of interpreting whatever signal I did pick up from Hettie. The problem is that a radio wave is just a radio wave. You can bend and shape it in various ways to make it carry meaningful information but you need to know what shapes mean what. That's where protocols, predefined standard meanings for signals, come in. Everyone who uses the internet uses a particular protocol, technically it is actually a suite of protocols but that is by the by, called TCP/IP. If the source and the destination both use TCP/IP then each will understand the other but if one uses TCP/IP and the other uses the older NetBEUI or IPX/SPX, say, then they will never understand each other. I had no idea what protocol Hettie would be using as we'd not been able to reach any form of understanding on that but I'd written 'DAVID' on a piece of paper and told her to keep transmitting an image of it over the radio link. When I picked up the signal I would play around with it until I was able to re-create the same image. Assuming I was able to do that, Hettie would then send an image of 'ANGIE', on the other side of the paper. Hopefully the

method I'd used to get DAVID from the signal would then produce ANGIE. If it didn't I'd have to find a different way. A bit rough and ready but I would have help in the form of a nifty little piece of software called Universal Radio Hacker which was designed to separate the different bits of data on an unknown incoming radio signal.

"Is the Australian Defence Force such a bad thing?" asked Angie, breaking into my ponderings. "Shouldn't we really be reporting this to the authorities? After all, they are frigging aliens!"

"Who'd believe us?" I said. "Seriously. If we go to the police or phone up whoever is Minister of State for Defence we'd get very short shrift. Maybe UFO Queensland would take it seriously but I bet even they would freak out at this level of interaction. They probably wouldn't believe it either."

"I suppose," she said, unconvinced.

"And if we were believed," I continued, "what will happen then? What will they do?"

"Umm," said Angie. "I've no idea. Maybe they'd try to set up some sort of dialogue."

"You think?" I asked, pushing away my plate. "I would think they'd probably send in a load of army bulldozers and stuff and start tearing the mountain apart then bomb them or something. You've seen E.T. and The Day The Earth Stood Still. No way would the government be willing to risk national security. They'd probably assume it was the Chinese anyway."

"What if they are a security risk?" she said, pushing the scrappy bone from the chop around her plate.

"There's only eight of them," I said, "and they've been living here quietly for a couple of hundred years so I doubt they're much of a security risk. Besides, Angus said they think we're the violent ones which is why they've kept quiet."

“True,” she said. “In every SciFi movie I’ve seen us Earthlings always assume the aliens are dangerous and come out with guns blasting.”

“Except Star Trek,” I said. “But that’s set in the future when humans have become enlightened and try to find peaceful solutions when the Klingons get uppity. Picard was always pretty hot on applying the Prime Directive.”

“But what if these aliens are like the Borg?” she asked. “What if they’re only peaceful because there’s only eight of them? What if they go back to wherever they came from and tell the rest of them how weak and soft we are and they send out an invading force to assimilate us?”

“Actually, that’s a good point,” I said, thoughtfully, taking Angie’s plate away from her. “Why haven’t they sent out a search party? Why haven’t our aliens been sending SOS messages or whatever they do. They’ve got radio technology if nothing else.”

“Maybe they have,” said Angie, pushing around the salt pot instead. “Maybe they’re just from a very long way away and their signals haven’t arrived yet or they have arrived and a rescue party is on the way.”

“Or maybe their planet has been destroyed,” I said, dumping the plates beside the sink. “That crops up quite often in SciFi. Some impending catastrophe caused the aliens to send out colonising groups all over the place and one ended up here.”

“So shouldn’t we tell the ADF or the police or someone?” asked Angie. “What if it ends up like Invasion of the Body Snatchers or something?”

“Oh, god,” I said, sitting back down with a thump. “You’re thinking Clive?”

“I wasn’t,” she said, looking alarmed, “but I am now, thanks.”

“So what do we do?” I asked. “Go to the police in Thrisk and tell them we’ve got aliens living next door and we think they’ve taken over Clive’s mind?”

She blinked several times then started rolling the salt pot around again, oblivious to the little trails of salt it left behind. Then she grimaced.

“No, that wouldn't work,” she said slowly. “Never seems to in the movies either. It's not until the war actually starts that someone says 'Oh my God! So and so was right after all!' and whoever it is reappears and saves the planet.”

“And by the time they've cut through the red tape and bureaucracy and got us out of whichever asylum they put us in it'll be too late,” I said, “and we've no idea how to save the planet anyway. How about we tell Angus that they'll have a better life over in America?”

Angie burst out laughing.

“No, I think we're looking at this from the wrong angle,” she said. “Assuming they have been here for a couple of hundred years, which ties in with what Wally and Eric were saying, then they could have snatched thousands of bodies or assimilated them and have armies of aliens all over the place by now. I'm guessing they really are just a group of scared and lost aliens on a potentially hostile world and desperately want to go home. Get a decent lungful, or whatever they have, of fresh methane and not the recycled stuff they're living on here.”

“Which is a good point,” I said. “Even if they have come here to colonise and take over, they can't because they can't survive unless they terraform the world to suit them and we're doing that for them anyway, what with climate change.”

“Do you suppose they've already taken over the bodies of the politicians in Canberra?” she asked. “That could be why the Aussie government is so anti-climate change?”

“I doubt it,” I said, “but if they have then we need to encourage them since they couldn't do a worse job than the polties we've already got.”

“So what do we do?” she asked, stopping rolling the salt pot and setting it upright.

“Ugh,” I said with a grimace. I wasn't too sure I wanted to think about what to do. “You want a coffee?”

I got up and went over to the kettle.

“Tea, please,” she said, sweeping the salt on the table onto the floor.

I put the kettle on and started messing around with mugs.

“You know, if we think logically,” I said, “if we tell the authorities about this, one of two things will happen. We'll either not be believed and probably have to leave town or be sent to a mental home or something or we will be believed and our house will be bombed when they try to destroy the aliens. They'll probably nuke the whole area and all of Thrisk will become just a memory. Actually it won't even be a memory as the whole thing will be suppressed to avoid a global panic. I think we'd be bloody idiots to tell anyone. It makes more sense to me to do what we can to help them on their way and hope they don't come back.”

“And if they do?” she asked.

“Maybe the Air Force will pick them up,” I said. “For sure we had no radar or anything back in the 1800s. It won't be our problem, anyway.”

“And they seem peaceful,” said Angie thoughtfully. “It's not like they're trying to get your cooperation through force or stealing your brain or anything.”

She went very quiet and stared at the door out to the verandah.

“There you go,” I said, plonking her mug on the table in front of her. “What's the matter?”

“They seem peaceful,” she said slowly, “but ...”

“But, what?” I asked, sitting down.

“Oh David!” she said suddenly and turned to look at me, anxiety

written all over her face.

“What?” I said, starting to feel anxious myself.

“They grew a new computer from life on this planet,” said Angie. “Hettie said so. That's why it isn't compatible with their old computer.”

“So?” I said.

“So Wally and Eric said several people have gone missing from here over the years,” said Angie urgently. “What if they're growing their computers from people?”

I had no answer for her.

Chapter Twenty

“How's it going?” asked Angie, dropping by the shed late the following afternoon. “I brought you some tea.”

My brain had been too overloaded the night before to make a start on even finding the signal from Hettie, let alone analysing it so I elected to get a good night's sleep instead. As it turned out I only got some sleep as my mind wouldn't leave the problem alone but some is better than none. In the morning I'd unpacked my three tower computers and set them up on the floor of the shed. For simplicity I had them configured so they ran through a single monitor on a table brought down from the house although I could quickly flip between them with a simple keystroke.

“Early days yet,” I said, taking my feet off the table and sitting more upright. I've never been one to sit hunched over a keyboard. I much prefer to recline. It's somehow less intense. “Thanks for the tea.”

“I'll do dinner, if you like,” she said, coming over to look at the monitor. “What's that?”

“That's the signal,” I said. “Or rather a waveform representation of it.”

“So you can pick it up?” she asked.

“Loud and clear,” I said. “Hey, do you want to listen to it?”

“Isn't it a data signal?” she asked, putting the tea mug on top of one of my towers. I took it off quickly and put it on the floor.

“It's just another radio signal,” I said, turning on the speakers. “Treat it as audio and you've got audio. Treat it as data and you've got data.” I clicked on the little icon that enabled audio.

“So why can't I hear anything?” she said, cocking her head.

“Umm, ...,” I said, scanning the screen for a clue.

Nothing was apparent so I flicked through the other virtual monitors,

somewhat fruitlessly. I got up and checked the cable running to the speakers. It seemed to be snugly connected and the little light on one of the speakers showed that power was getting through. Back on the waveform monitor the wave was happily dancing up and down so the signal was coming through.

“Well?” asked Angie.

“I’m not sure,” I said, puzzled. “It was working earlier.”

“Oh well,” said Angie. “Maybe you should offload this onto someone who knows about computers. Don’t let your tea get cold.”

“Ha bloody ha,” I said irritably. “Just a sec, let me try something.”

I opened up a music folder and double clicked on a file at random. The pounding beat of Frankie Goes To Hollywood’s *Relax* blasted out and made us both wince. Quickly I leaned forward and turned down the volume of the speakers.

“Sorry,” I said. “I enabled sound on the wrong computer.”

I disabled sound, switched monitors and enabled it on the computer receiving the signal.

“Still can’t hear anything,” said Angie.

“It’s pretty quiet,” I said, turning the speaker volume up again. “I’m not used to using a keyboard and mouse.”

A faint scratching, hissing sound came from the speakers.

“Oh,” said Angie, sounding disappointed. “Is that all? It sounds more like an anorexic modem than celestial music.”

“Yeah, that’s all,” I said. “It’s just a simple signal, repeating the same sequence over and over again.”

I turned off the speakers as the sound was mildly irritating.

“So you've figured it out already?” she asked, putting her hand on my shoulder and looking at the waveform again.

“I wish,” I said. “I've been playing around with it for a few hours but I can't figure out the bit structure. Nothing I do seems to work.”

“Bit structure?” she said, staring intently at the screen. “Is that the same as the bits inside the computer? You know, the thing that can only have two values?”

“That's right,” I said.

“Well, I'm no expert,” she said, “but there seem to be a lot more than two values there.”

“That's because it's a multichannel signal,” I said patiently.

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“You see how the wave goes generally up and down?” I said, tracing the outline on the screen. “Each of those little jagged blips is a binary signal on a different channel. Think of the channels as being strips going across the screen. It's a technique used to squeeze multiple data signals onto a single radio wave.”

“Oh, right,” she said. “That's pretty clever.” She leaned forward and used her finger to count the number of channels.

“They're using seven channels for some reason,” I said. “I thought they'd only use one. It would have been a lot easier.”

“What would it look like if they were?” she asked.

“The wave would just bounce between two values,” I said, picking up my tea.

“The two values a bit can have?” she asked, staring at the screen.

“Absolutely,” I said. “I've no idea what they're up to.”

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

“Probably go round and talk to Hettie again tomorrow,” I said. “This part is absolutely fundamental. If I can't get my computers talking to theirs then nothing else can happen.”

“It does seem odd, though,” said Angie. “You don't suppose she's misunderstood something and thinks you have seven computers, do you?”

“Why would she think that?” I asked.

I had a sip of tea and it was delicious. It also reminded me I hadn't had a cigarette for a while so I got one out.

“I have no idea,” said Angie, “but maybe she's sending a separate channel for each computer or something.”

“That makes no sense,” I said, lighting my ciggie. “It would be much more sensible to send the same signal on each channel so each computer got the same thing, if I had seven.”

“Just a thought,” said Angie, “but who knows how their minds work. I'll do dinner then, shall I?”

“OK,” I said, staring at the screen.

“Be about half an hour,” she said. “Will you come over or shall I come and get you?”

“Sure,” I said, absently. “That'll be perfect.”

She was right though. I didn't know how their minds worked.

“You know, I think I've been making a bad assumption here,” I said slowly, tapping the end of the cigarette against my teeth.

Angie didn't respond so I looked up. She wasn't there which surprised me a little.

“Oh well,” I said and settled back into a more comfortable slouch with my feet on the table. “Time to think like an alien.”

* * *

“David!” said Angie, slapping the top of my head.

“Oi!” I cried, jerking sideways. My keyboard clattered onto the concrete floor. “What did you do that for?”

“You said you’d only be a minute,” she said. “That was half an hour ago. I’m not going to let you do this.”

“Do what?” I asked, picking up the keyboard.

“Work yourself into oblivion again,” she said. “I’m going to give you set hours and if you’re still working at the end of them I’m cutting the power to the shed.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, puzzled.

“I came down half an hour ago to tell you dinner was ready,” she said in that very special tone of voice I’d learnt to be wary of. “You said you’d only be a minute. This is not going to happen.”

“Oh,” I said, “umm, sorry. Just let me finish writing this routine and I’ll be right up.”

“No,” she said, going over to the power board beside the door of the shed. “Aha, this looks like the main switch. You have five seconds to get out of that door or I’m turning the lot off.”

“Please,” I said, starting to panic. “Don’t mess with that switch. I’ve got stuff here that isn’t saved.”

“Five,” she said, staring at me.

I stared back, willing her finger away from the switch.

“Four,” she said, her finger staying firmly in place.

“OK, OK,” I said, holding up my hands placatingly. “Let me just save ...”

“Three,” she said.

“You’re going faster than seconds,” I said. “Slow down.”

“Two,” she said and her finger twitched.

“OK, I’m done,” I said, dumping the keyboard on the floor again and jumping up.

“Hope you like cold fish,” she said, turning out the light but not touching the main power switch.

“Love it,” I said, walking out the door. “Is there something wrong with the microwave?”

* * *

“Still no luck?” she asked, taking a plate of food out of the microwave and putting it on the table in front of me with a certain emphasis.

“How do you mean?” I asked, looking at the crumbed fillets gently steaming. The veggies had that washed out look that they get when they’re warmed up in a microwave.

“Interpreting the signal,” she said, setting the microwave timer for her own plate.

“Oh, I’ve done that,” I said. “I thought I told you.”

“You’ve been in the shed,” she said, “and I’ve been up here. How could you have told me?”

“But ...,” I started then shook my head. Her logic seemed inescapable. As did the warmed up fish. “No, it was pretty simple really, once you pointed me in the right direction.”

“I’m just naturally talented like that,” she said modestly. “So what

direction did I point you in?”

“Think like an alien,” I said, shaking salt over the fish.

“Shouldn't have been too hard for you,” she said. “You've done that ever since I met you.”

“Ha ha,” I said. “So I asked myself why an alien would send seven channels of data to just one computer when they know our technology is behind theirs.”

“And what answer did you come up with?” she asked.

The microwave pinged and she got her plate out.

“They didn't,” I said. “When I thought about it and got away from conventional human thinking, it occurred to me that instead of them sending seven channels of binary data, what if they were sending a single channel with fourteen values in it?”

“And that worked?” she asked, sitting down.

“Like a dream,” I said. “Mind you I had to write a little routine to convert from base fourteen to base two but it worked. When I put it into video I got an almost perfect image of the word DAVID.”

“Almost perfect?” she asked. “So you got the maths a little wrong?”

“God no,” I said. “The maths was spot on. No, there was a little wavy line running across the screen about a quarter of the way down. I think it was the metal of the washing line post interfering with the signal.”

“OK,” said Angie frowning. Whether it was because of the wavy line or the mouthful of fish she'd just eaten I wasn't sure. “So what were you up to when I dragged you out?”

“I used Paint to write the word HETTIE,” I said. “I was writing a routine to convert that image to base fourteen so I could send it back to her to see if she could read it.”

“And could she?” asked Angie.

“Dunno,” I said. “Someone interrupted me.”

“That’s a shame,” she said. “Still, you can finish off tomorrow.”

“Why not after dinner?” I asked, pausing in eating my dinner.

“Because I’m not letting you work through the night,” she said. “You’ll only get over tired and stressed. They’ve been here two hundred years so another few days won’t make any difference.”

“But I work best at night,” I said, putting down my fork.

“I can’t stop you thinking,” said Angie calmly, “but I’ve found a padlock that actually has a key so I’m locking the door to the shed when I go to bed and I’m not unlocking it again until I get up.”

“But that’s absurd,” I said, aghast.

“So is over-working yourself into oblivion,” said Angie. “The only reason we’re here now is because of that and I’m not moving again because you’ve got obsessed with some aliens’ problem. You can leave your computers running or shut them down, I don’t care, but if they’re not in the shed when I lock it there will be big trouble.”

“But ...,” I started.

“It’s not negotiable, David,” said Angie calmly. “I’m very serious. Eat your dinner.”

I pouted like a small child and seriously considered refusing to eat but decided not to. The last thing I wanted was for Angie to take that as an insult to her cooking. I slowly ate two more mouthfuls while looking for a loophole.

“OK,” I said when I found one.

“Good,” she said. “Oh, and I’m confiscating your laptop for the duration as well. I know you can network it to your other computers.”

Bugger.

"How did you suddenly become so knowledgeable about computers?" I asked, trying to sound light and airy.

"I know nothing about computers," said Angie. "But I know you inside out. You'd find a way. God, this fish is disgusting, isn't it."

* * *

"You're up early," said Angie, looking up in surprise as I slid open the verandah door.

"I guess," I said, putting down my coffee and picking up my cigarettes.

"Couldn't you sleep?" she enquired.

"So so," I said, slumping into my chair. "How're you?"

"Fine," she said automatically. "So how did you occupy yourself last night?"

"I went to see Angus and Hettie," I said and yawned.

"What?" exclaimed Angie, glaring at me.

"Nothing else to do," I said, not noticing.

She put her head in her hands and sighed theatrically.

"What's the matter?" I asked, noticing this time. "Headache?"

"Grrr," she growled then looked at me. "Do you do it deliberately?"

"Do what?" I asked, confused.

"Go out of your way to get yourself into trouble," she said grimly. "How can I protect you when you act like a fool?"

I pondered this.

"I took a torch," I said, hanging onto my coffee mug for safety. "I didn't see any snakes."

Angie put her hand to her head and closed her eyes. She seemed to be counting but I couldn't be bothered to wonder what she was counting. I don't do mornings.

"Why did you go to see them?" she asked after a while.

"To tell them I'd decoded the DAVID image and that she could send the ANGIE one as a check," I said, marginally happier now I was back on familiar territory. "I also asked about what they grew their computer from."

"And?" asked Angie, looking over.

"It took a little while," I said, nursing my coffee. "They didn't know the words."

"Was it the missing people?" asked Angie.

"No," I said. "I asked about them but they seemed to have trouble following me. I suspect since they have some sort of telepathy, as they can see strong images in our minds, they probably know where they all are all the time."

"So how do you know they didn't use people?" asked Angie.

"Oh, they use geckos," I said. "Amanda made one to show me."

"I can't say I'm overly happy about that either," said Angie. "Geckos have rights as well."

I shrugged.

"Why geckos, I wonder?" she said when I'd just about finished my second cigarette. "Wouldn't human brains be better?"

"Apparently gecko brains have more neurons per gram than ours do," I said.

“That must have been a difficult concept to get across,” said Angie. “Did they make some chunks of brains and a set of scales to show you?”

“No, she just said it,” I said. “Maybe Clive got the words from a library book.”

“Maybe,” she said. “Does that mean that geckos are more intelligent than we are?”

“Not really,” I said. “Brain size and intelligence aren't directly related. If they were then whales and elephants would be the most intelligent species on the planet. What matters is the number of connections between the neurons. Oh, and blood flow which would be a problem for geckos.”

“What's blood flow got to do with intelligence?” she asked, “other than the fact that if your blood stops flowing you'll become pretty stupid.”

“That's partly it,” I said, my own brain blood flow slowly increasing under the influence of caffeine and nicotine. “Geckos are cold blooded so their blood flow slows down when it's cold. But what's interesting is not so much intelligence but speed of processing. Studies have found that quicker witted people have wider blood vessels inside their brains so the blood flows faster.”

“How do you know all this?” she asked.

“I studied the brain a bit when I was researching Artificial Intelligence,” I said, finishing my coffee and standing up. “Can I have the key?”

“No,” said Angie, “I'll unlock the shed for you.”

“You think I'll take the key into town and get another cut?” I asked, a little taken aback.

“Maybe,” she said. “But I saw a YouTube video a while back where they used a hidden camera across the road to photograph someone's car keys on a cafe table then used a 3D printer to make another and

steal the car. I bet you could do that.”

“Actually that wouldn't be too hard,” I said, thinking about it. “But I don't have a 3D printer.”

“I don't know that, do I?” said Angie. “You've got a bunch of stuff down there and I wouldn't know what any of it is.”

“You're a suspicious person, aren't you,” I said.

“Yup,” she said. “Get over it. You want to get started now?”

“That's why I asked for the key,” I said. “I had a thought last night and I want to do some digging.”

“Was that before or after you went traipsing around in the dark?” she asked.

Clearly I wasn't going to get the key to the shed and Angie wasn't getting up to unlock it herself so I sat down again.

“After,” I said. “I got to thinking about neurons and it occurred to me that their old data might be stored in an organic database that has seven dendrites per neuron. That would fit in with why they sent a radio signal with seven channels.”

“And dendrites are ...?” asked Angie.

“The things on the neuron that pick up messages,” I said. “Either the dendrite is excited or it's passive, which would correspond with the blips in the signal.”

“I think I see that,” said Angie pensively. “So what digging do you want to do?”

“Two things actually,” I said. “If their old data store works that way then it gives me a clue as to how the new one grown from geckos works. All I'll need to do is find out how many dendrites gecko neurons have.”

“And the other thing?” asked Angie.

“That could be a problem,” I said. “If they are working in base fourteen then they quite possibly have more storage capacity than all the computers on Earth put together so shifting the data over could be an issue.”

Chapter Twenty One

“Surely not,” said Angie. “What about all the storage space that things like Google and Facebook have? That must be truly massive.”

“Oh, agreed,” I said, “it's mind-boggling the capacity of these data centres, but I don't think they'd be happy if I wiped all their data and filled it with ours. But even so, I suspect even they couldn't handle it although I haven't done the maths yet.”

“I still don't understand,” said Angie. “If they're working on fourteen and we're working on two, surely it's only a factor of seven times more? That doesn't seem too much.”

“Yeah, no,” I said. “Look, you know what a byte is?”

“Not really,” she said. “Something inside a computer but what, exactly, I don't know.”

“OK,” I said. “Well a byte is pretty fundamental, Formally it is just a group of eight bits, which is a nicely convenient thing.”

“Wouldn't ten be more sensible?” she asked. “After all, we have ten fingers and count in tens.”

“Ten is good for people,” I said, “but computers aren't people. They'll do what we want them to, most of the time. No, a byte is eight bits because it allows two hundred and fifty six different values.”

“I'll take your word for it,” she said.

“There's no need,” I said. “The maths is really simple. One bit has two possible values, so if I add a second bit, then that second bit can have two values for each value of the first bit, giving four possibles, yeah?”

“Umm,” said Angie, looking puzzled.

“OK,” I said, “look at it this way. Let's suppose a single bit can be red or yellow, OK?”

“OK,” said Angie.

“If I put it with another bit, that one can be red or yellow as well, yes?” I said.

“OK,” said Angie.

“So looking at the two together I could have red red or red yellow or yellow red or yellow yellow,” I said.

“Oh, right,” she said, her face clearing. “I get that.”

“Sweet,” I said. “So that's four combinations, which is two times two.”

She nodded.

“So what if I add another bit?” I asked. “How many colour patterns are there?”

“Six,” she said promptly.

“Uh uh,” I said. “Eight.”

Her face fell.

“If the new bit is red then I'll have the four possible patterns from the other two,” I said, “and if it's yellow I'll still have four possible patterns, so that's eight. Red red red through to yellow yellow yellow.”

“Umm,” said Angie, obviously trying to visualise three coloured shapes.

“Take my word for it,” I said. “Three bits gives us two times two times two patterns, which is eight.”

“OK,” she said. “So four would be sixteen?”

“You're a fast learner,” I said and she smiled happily. “So how about eight bits?”

“I need a calculator,” she said.

“Take my word for it,” I said. “Two hundred and fifty six patterns, all the way from eight reds to eight yellows.”

“OK, but that doesn't explain why a byte is eight bits,” she said.

“Actually it does,” I said. “Two hundred and fifty six patterns gives us enough patterns to have a unique pattern for each upper case letter of the alphabet, each lower case letter, each of the ten digits, each of the punctuation marks and some left over for other useful things like a dollar sign, pi and so on.”

“Oh really?” she said. “You know, that actually makes sense now.”

“Well, up to a point,” I said. “It was fine in the early days when the pioneers spoke English but when computers became popular and we needed Chinese, Arabic and so on it was nowhere near enough but that's another ballgame. The important thing is that, in English at least, a byte is effectively one character.”

“OK, got it,” she said. “So what's that got to do with aliens and fourteen?”

“Not a lot,” I said, “but you need to follow the principles first. So, now you know what a byte is. What's a kilobyte?”

“Eight thousand bits?” she asked.

“More or less,” I said, “but that doesn't mean much. It's easier to think of a kilobyte as a thousand characters, which is roughly two hundred words, or about a third of a page of A4.”

“Oh, is that all?” she asked.

“Fraid so,” I said. “So how about a megabyte?”

“That's a million, isn't it?” she asked.

“Yup, but it's also a thousand kilobytes,” I said, “which would be two

hundred thousand words or thereabouts, which is a decent sized book.”

She looked a little nonplussed by that.

“And a gigabyte?” I pressed on regardless.

“I’m guessing a thousand megabytes,” she said, “so a thousand books?”

“That’s right,” I said. “So a reasonable home library.”

“So you could get an entire library into one gigabyte?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said, “or one movie, but we’ll leave video storage for another day and stick with books. Do you know what comes after gigabyte?”

“I’m not sure,” she said, “terry something?”

“You’re a natural,” I said. “Terabyte, or a thousand gigabytes. Say a million books, so one terabyte would probably hold all of the books in the US Library of Congress. It mounts up pretty quickly, doesn’t it. And after terabyte is petabyte, which would be a thousand Libraries of Congress, then exabyte which would be a million of them, or a trillion books. You see where I’m heading with this?”

“Not really,” she said.

I laughed. “Not to worry. Just for the record, exabyte isn’t the end. After that comes zettabyte then yottabyte. There’s probably more after that but I don’t know them. The numbers are getting pretty big. Now, hard disk drives are generally a handful of terabytes so if we say there are a billion hard drives around, that would be a billion terabytes of storage which would be a zettabyte. Even if I’m out by a factor of ten or even a hundred we’re still not in to the realms of yottabytes.”

“You think our aliens use yottabytes?” she asked.

“I haven’t done the maths yet,” I said, “but it wouldn’t surprise me. Can I have my laptop back, just for a few minutes?”

"It's behind the freezer," she said.

"Oh shit, no!" I exclaimed and dashed into the kitchen to retrieve it.

"Is anything wrong?" she asked when I came back with my laptop.

"The freezer's got an electric motor," I said opening the laptop and pushing the boot-up button. "Electric motors generate magnetic fields which can wipe hard drives."

"Oh," she said. "Umm, sorry. Is yours wiped?"

"Don't know yet," I said, staring at the screen. Then I breathed a sigh of relief. Windows was booting so it was almost certain that the drive was intact. I'd run some checks later to make absolutely certain though.

"Seems to be OK," I said, as I logged in. "Now, the aliens. It looks like they are working around base fourteen, which means each whatever it is that's the equivalent to a bit can have fourteen values. So two of them would have fourteen times fourteen possible patterns, which would be ..." and I opened Windows handy little calculator, "... one hundred and ninety six values, which is almost the same as one of our bytes but only using two instead of eight bits."

"OK," said Angie. "So what?"

"Well, let's think about a byte of their bits," I said. "How many patterns would there be?"

"A lot," she said quickly.

"More precisely?" I asked.

"Umm, an awful lot?" she said, more slowly.

"Ha, ha," I said and quickly used the calculator. "A little under fifteen hundred million, as compared with two hundred and fifty six patterns with our system. Or, to put it another way, if I bring over eight alien bits of data, I'll need ...," more calculator work, "... thirty human bits."

“Well, that doesn't seem too bad,” said Angie.

“At this level it isn't,” I said. “But what if I bring over a million alien bits? How many human bits would that be?”

She just waggled her hands helplessly.

“That's not right,” I muttered, staring at the calculator on my laptop. I cleared it and tried again.

“I'm confused,” I said. “It should be a lot more than that.”

“More than what?” asked Angie.

“It's telling me that I'll need a little under four million bits,” I said, “but that's not right, surely?”

“Wouldn't have a clue,” said Angie, not in the least bit concerned.

“I'm an idiot,” I muttered, slapping my forehead. “It's $\log 14$ over $\log 2$. It's always going to be $\log 14$ over $\log 2$. Dickhead.”

“What is?” asked Angie.

“My mind is going,” I said. “For some reason I expected exponential growth but it isn't. However many bits they use we'll need a little under 4 times as many, regardless of the size. Three point eight to be precise.”

“Well, that doesn't sound too bad,” she said.

“I guess not,” I said, “but how much data have they got? Just think about the amount of data Google must have and we haven't been travelling around the universe. What if they've collected a thousand times as much data as Google holds? We'd need four times that capacity so that would be four thousand times the amount of storage Google uses. And then we've got to convert it to whatever form their new store uses.”

“Oh,” she said and thought about it. “But would they really travel with

that much data?"

"I suspect more," I said. "They've probably got vast amounts of data about all the places they and all the others have been to."

"Oh," she said. "I guess it's going to be a problem then. Couldn't you just process the data in smaller chunks?"

"I'm going to have to," I said, "which will be a problem in itself, but I was hoping to be able to keep a copy. It would be awesome if we could gain all the knowledge that they have."

"Maybe you could print it out?" she said.

"A million Libraries of Congress worth? There wouldn't be enough trees on the planet for that," I said.

"But they may not have that much data," she said. "Maybe they only have enough to get home."

"Unlikely," I said, "but that's why I have to do some digging. I need to find out the scale of this."

"You'd better get on with it then," she said.

"I will," I said, "but you're forgetting something."

"What?" she asked.

"I'm locked out," I said.

"They've blocked you already?" she asked. "That seems rather silly."

"Umm, no, they haven't," I said, "at least as far as I know, although I'm going to have to talk to Hettie about their security. No, you locked me out."

"Oh yeah," said Angie. "I forgot about that with all these terabytes and whatnot flying around. I'll come down with you and let you in."

“Great,” I said, shutting my laptop and standing up.

She stood up as well and held out her hand.

“What?” I asked.

“The laptop,” she said. “Hand it over.”

“But ...,” I started and she clicked her fingers at me. “Oh, all right. But keep it away from magnetic fields.”

“I will,” she promised, putting the laptop on her chair. “Now, it’s a little after ten. I’ll come and get you at two for a break and I’ll do dinner for about sevenish, OK.”

“OK,” I said, “although what you expect me to accomplish in nine hours I’ve no idea.”

“Probably more than you will if I let you work yourself into a state again,” she said. “Come on.”

* * *

“Lu-unch,” called Angie, coming in the door of the shed with a tray.

“What kept you?” I said. “I’ve been waiting.”

“Haven’t you been working?” she asked, looking around for somewhere to put the tray.

The one and only table was occupied so she put it on the floor beside my chair.

“I was,” I said. “What’s for lunch?”

“Chicken sandwiches,” she said. “And I’m doing meatballs for dinner.”

“You’re going to put me out of a job,” I said, pulling the cloth off the tray. “Ohh, yummy.”

“No way,” she said, sitting on the floor. “I’m more than happy for you to keep the cooking. So how’s it going?”

“Not as bad as I expected,” I said, picking up a sandwich. “By the look of it they’ve got maybe ten or twenty exabytes of capacity.”

“Ours or theirs?” she asked, taking one herself.

“Ours,” I said, “but I can’t tell at the moment how much of that is being used. Hopefully it’s less than half. I would have thought that when they went over half they’d add more storage but maybe they don’t think the same way I do.”

“Or maybe they just grow more as and when they need it,” she said. “So does ten exabytes mean you can copy it?”

“Sadly no,” I said. “All my drives are four terabyte jobbies, so at best I’d be able to store twenty five terabytes. I’ll need two or three hundred thousand more and we really can’t afford that. It’s, ohh, maybe \$30 million, depending on the discounts for bulk purchases.”

“Pointless even thinking about it,” she agreed. “So when are you going to start?”

“I need to find out what I need to convert the data to,” I said, “but that should be straightforward. No, the problem now is how to actually do the converting. That’s what I was thinking about when you came in.”

“I thought the maths was easy,” she said.

“It is,” I said, “but the problem is time. Even if I run all three computers together in parallel it’s going to take a fair old while.”

“Do you want to get another computer or two?” she asked.

“Twenty or thirty would be better,” I said, “but the electricity supply wouldn’t handle it and I don’t think the power company would be too happy about ramping it up, especially if it isn’t for long.”

“What about that supercomputer you used sometimes at work?” she asked.

“The one at ANU?” I said. “That would be perfect, especially now they've upgraded it.”

“I thought it was the fastest computer in Australia,” said Angie. “Why would they upgrade it?”

“Computers are a bit like cars,” I said. “Once you get the speed bug you can never go fast enough. They spent \$70 million to make it ten times faster. It would whizz through this lot in a few hours.”

“So why not ask them?” she said.

“It would cost a fortune,” I said, “and I'd never get approval anyway, not without a good explanation and crunching an alien's data isn't really going to be a believable explanation.”

“So what are you going to do?” she asked.

“Steal some computer time,” I said, taking another sandwich.”

“From the university?” she asked.

“Nope, the local farmers,” I said.

“Won't they mind?” she asked.

“They'll never know,” I said. “Probably best you don't know either since it's technically illegal.”

“That doesn't sound like a good idea, Davey,” she said. “What if someone complains to the police?”

“They wouldn't,” I said. “Worst case scenario is that someone will complain that their internet is running slower than usual but since NBN has such a bad reputation no one will take any notice and besides, I can do a lot of it at night.”

“You mean break in to a farmhouse and use their computer? Sounds like a pretty stupid idea to me.” she said and ate the last of her sandwich.

“It would be,” I agreed, “and wouldn’t work anyway. No, I’ll put a bit of software onto the Telstra comms tower at the top of the hill on the other side of town. That way I can spread the processing load over the spare capacity of any computers and mobiles that connect to it.”

“Can you do that?” she asked. “Sounds awfully complicated to me.”

“Actually it isn’t that complicated,” I said. “It’s just a matter of dividing up the work into lots of tiny little chunks and spreading them around. The only real problem is keeping track of all the chunks as quite a few will get lost when people turn off and even that’s not an issue since I’ve got some software that will do that. I’ll have to adapt it since it was written for bitcoin mining but it shouldn’t be a problem.”

“I didn’t know bitcoins were mined,” said Angie. “I thought they were all on computers.”

“They are,” I said. “They’re not mined like gold or coal. It’s just a word for the processing computers have to do to check if any particular bitcoin has been used.”

“Can’t they just look it up or something?” she asked.

“That’s really all the mining is,” I said, “but since every transaction involving a bitcoin is recorded a hell of a lot of processing is needed to check every transaction to see if any particular coin was involved. If it wasn’t then it can be mined. If it was then they have to start again with another. It’s not just bitcoins, it’s the same with all the cryptocurrencies.”

“And you’re sure no one will ever find out?” she asked.

“Yup,” I said. “The data is mixed up with everything else in the internet connections and everything stored on the computer or phone is hidden so it’s undetectable. And if anyone is savvy enough to look at what processes are running all they’ll see is something that looks

like a normal operating system process.”

“What about virus checkers?” asked Angie.

“It's not a virus,” I said, “or at least my version of it won't be since it'll be a previously unknown version. Maybe in a few months it'll be detected and put into the virus databases but I expect it'll only have to be used for a few days. Besides, no one will be able to trace it back here.”

“I bet every virus writer has said that at some point,” said Angie. “Didn't you catch most of them?”

“God no,” I said, eyeing the empty sandwich plate. “We caught a handful and only because they were targeting big corporate systems. No one's going to waste time trying to identify something that only stays for a few days on a fairly small number of devices. There's no money in it. It's not a virus, anyway. It isn't self replicating, won't spread from one device to another and doesn't do any harm.”

“You're sure there isn't another way?” asked Angie. “I don't like the idea of you doing anything illegal.”

“Sure there is,” I said, “I can just use my computers, but it'll just take a long time. Farm it out and we can get rid of the problem much quicker. Then Angus and the others can go home and we get the quiet life we were expecting. Don't forget, with them gone none of these weird things that were going on will happen anymore.”

“There is that,” said Angie. “This isn't turning out to be the relaxing retirement I was planning. You're sure you won't get caught?”

“I'm sure,” I said. “And even if I do, what's the charge? Theft of a little bit of internet access and processing time, that's all.”

Chapter Twenty Two

“Good god!” exclaimed Angie.

She craned her head forward to look upwards through the windscreen.

“Sweet, it worked,” I said happily and parked the car in the lee of one of the corners of the Eiffel Tower.

“What worked?” asked Angie, opening her door to get a better view.

“I did a little experiment last night,” I said, getting out. “I got that quilt cover with the Eiffel Tower on it out of the linen cupboard, you know the one.”

“And you got them to re-create it?” asked Angie, getting out as well.

“Kind of,” I said. “I hung it over the back of a chair and tried to hold the image of it in my head. I was curious to see if they would pick it up and use it or if they would stay with that mansion from the Agatha Christie book.”

“Pretty impressive,” said Angie. “I wish we could do that. It would make redecorating a lot easier. So where's Hettie and the others?”

“That's probably them in that cafe over there,” I said. “I tried to visualise them there but they look different, if it is them.”

The cafe was a stereotypical French cafe with several tables and chairs on the pavement and a striped awning emblazoned with Cafe de la Tour Eiffel. It was empty apart from a man and a woman sitting at one of the tables.

“Did you visualise them as well?” asked Angie as we walked over..

“Not really,” I said, “but it looks like they've picked up images of Charles de Gaulle and Brigitte Bardot.”

“You're a dirty old man, you know that?” said Angie.

“Me? What have I done now?” I said in surprise.

“Brigitte Bardot was never that busty,” said Angie. “Is that the sort of thing you visualise in your head?”

“Oh, she’s probably more of a caricature of the stereotype of a French woman,” I said hastily. “I didn’t visualise anyone in particular. See how de Gaulle is wearing a cravat and Bardot has one of those cute little French berets?”

“Hmmm,” said Angie, giving me a funny look. “Either way we’d better go talk to them.”

“Hello,” I said walking up to the table. “Are you Angus and Hettie or Charles and Brigitte?”

“Which identifiers are you more comfortable with?” asked Charles de Gaulle.

“Angus and Hettie,” said Angie. “They’re easier continuity.”

“As you desire,” said Angus. “Please join us.”

As we sat on the two vacant chairs at the table a razor thin young man in a white shirt and black trousers appeared from inside the cafe. I presumed he was a waiter as he had a cloth over one forearm.

“Vous desirez, m’sieur?” he asked.

“Deux café au lait, s’il vous plait,” I said in my atrocious French accent.

“D’accord,” said the young man and pivoted on a heel to march back inside.

“Parlez-vous Français aussi?” I said to Hettie.

“Naturellement,” she said.

“I’m impressed,” I said, reverting back to English. I’d learnt French at

school a long time before and barely used it since. "Did Clive get a French book from the library as well?"

"Comment?" asked Hettie.

"Please speak English," I said. "I was just wondering how you knew French but it doesn't matter. I transferred a small amount of data to your new data store before we came over. Are you able to access it?"

"I will enquire," said Hettie and froze.

"How do you do all this?" asked Angie, waving a hand. "I know it's an illusion but it seems so solid." She rapped her knuckles on the table to emphasise the point.

"It is an energy transference from another dimension," said Angus. "But I do not know how to explain it more fully in a way you will understand."

"But how do you get such realistic imagery?" she asked.

"We find a dimension that ... how do you say, 'fits' the image we see in your mind," said Angus.

"His mind," said Angie, glancing at Hettie's cleavage. "Nothing to do with me. So there just happens to be a dimension that looks like this?"

"Yes," said Angus.

I noticed he had a packet of Gauloise cigarettes on the table in front of him although he wasn't smoking. No doubt it was just part of the image.

"But what if there isn't a dimension that fits?" asked Angie.

"There is always a dimension that fits," said Angus.

"There must be a lot of dimensions, then," she said.

"They are without number," said Angus.

“No,” said Hettie, coming back to life. “I am unable to access anything in that place.”

“Bugger,” I said. “I was afraid of that.”

“What's the problem?” asked Angie.

“The new data store they grew has a different structure to the old one,” I said. “I was able to put some data into it via the radio link but it seems their computer can't access it. Incompatible formats, I would think.”

“Well, can't you just write something that will fix it?” asked Angie.

“Not a hope in hell,” I said. “I wouldn't have a clue about how to write code for an alien organic computer.”

“I don't really understand,” said Angie. “Surely if it's organic, like a brain, it'll just cope with whatever it finds just like our brains do. Ours don't worry about formats.”

“Actually, no,” I said. “I have no idea what format our brains use for data but the information coming from our eyes and ears and so on has to be in a format the brain can understand and process. If I wire a camera or a microphone into the central nerves in your spine you won't suddenly see what the camera sees or hear what the microphone hears because the signals will be in the wrong format and will be quite meaningless to the brain. If we could, then we could give ourselves sonar or x-ray vision or something just by plugging in a machine. I read an interesting SciFi novel about that a few years ago. It was set in the future and people had a connector implanted in the backs of their necks so they could plug in to the internet and interact directly with it. The writer glossed over how the brain actually handled that connection and we don't have the technology at the moment. Maybe one day.”

“Oh,” said Angie. “So how are you going to handle that?”

“I'm not sure,” I said. “I can certainly write a driver that can access the store but it'll have to be on one of our chips so it just shifts the

problem rather than solves it.”

The waiter came back with two small cups of coffee and carefully placed them on the table.

“Bon appétit,” he said.

“Thank you,” said Angie. “Oh, umm, merci.”

The waiter gave a half smile then sat down on a chair beside her.

“Oh,” said Angie. “Which one are you?”

“Amanda,” said the waiter.

“This is going to get very confusing,” said Angie.

“Would you prefer this?” asked Amanda and morphed rapidly into the old Amanda we knew.

“Thank you,” said Angie. “That makes things easier.”

“So you can mix up images from different dimensions?” I asked.

“There is no need,” said Hettie. “There is a dimension in which this setting exists. Amanda changed to that dimension.”

“So even though you and Angus and the Eiffel Tower haven't changed, you're from a different dimension?” I asked. “Different to the one from a minute ago?”

“Yes,” said Angus.

“This is wild,” I said.

“But you think you can figure it out?” asked Angie.

“Figure what out?” I asked.

“How their computer can read the data,” said Angie.

“Hopefully,” I said. Conveniently there was a small bowl of sugar on the table with a lid and a notch in it for a little spoon so I ladled some into my coffee and stirred it reflectively. “You know, there’s no such thing as an insoluble problem. It’s one of the outcomes of the physics of Schroedinger and Heisenberg. Any problem which seems insoluble can be broken down into a number of smaller problems, each of which will have a solution that contributes to the overall solution.”

“What if you can’t solve one of the smaller problems?” asked Angie.

“Then you break it down into smaller ones, ad infinitum.” I said. “There must come a time when the subordinate problems have becomes so small and trivial that they can be easily solved.”

“Then why are there any problems at all?” asked Angie. “By that reasoning everything should have been solved by now.”

“Ahh, the problem there is us,” I said with a small laugh. “Even though a problem can be broken down into smaller problems, it doesn’t follow that we are clever enough to do that. We might not be able to see how to break a problem down or we might break it down into the wrong sub-problems.”

“That sounds like pseudo-zen nonsense,” said Angie. “Is that what you used to tell clients to get them to sign up?”

“More or less,” I said. “It’s amazing the things you can get away with when you have a bunch of executives who are afraid to show how little they know. They have to pretend to each other that they understand, although I didn’t go to many of those meetings. I was more the one in the back office who chopped up the problems and found solutions. I’m sure you had people like that at your school as well.”

Angie had been a teacher until my little mishap, then she’d quit.

“Oh god, yes,” said Angie. “Teachers are almost professionally obliged to never admit they don’t know something, especially when it’s in their field.”

I noticed that Angus, Hettie and Amanda, her 1930s style outfit

looking incongruous in a, probably 1980s, French street cafe scene, were watching us placidly, seemingly disinterested in our discussion.

“Something's just occurred to me, Angus,” I said, because it had just occurred to me. “You said we can't survive in your environment.”

“Indeed,” said Angus.

“But in all these endless dimensions you were talking about,” I said, “isn't there one that corresponds to yours so that we can at least see what you really look like?”

“Indeed,” said Angus.

“Well?” I said.

“You wish to see us?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said.

There was a momentary pause then everything went dark.

“Why is it so dark?” I asked. I felt a hand grope around then grasp mine. I hoped it was Angie's. The gasp certainly sounded like her.

“Our gravity is much stronger than yours,” said Angus' voice. “Our atmosphere is much denser as a result.”

“Can you lighten it?” I asked.

The gloom brightened appreciably until it looked like we were experiencing a normal but foggy day with low visibility. I could see Angie sitting on the ground next to me and, thankfully, it was her hand grasping mine. I noticed her knuckles were white. Beyond her I could see very little, save some vague, indistinct shapes.

“Where are you?” I asked.

“Who?” asked Angus.

“You,” I said.

“I am here,” he said and one of the vague shapes came closer.

Its outline stayed vague and indistinct and, although the shape had a shape somewhat reminiscent of a slug, it still appeared more or less shapeless, if that makes sense. In colour it was a mottled dark grey with tiny flashes of pink and green that moved as its shape moved.

Someone once told me that a moose looks like a cow drawn by a three year old with a thick crayon. It popped into my head that Angus looked like a garden slug, drawn by that same three year old, except that his shape didn't stay constant. It was more like he was drawn by several three year olds, all fighting over the crayon while drawing.

Hettie, as far as I could tell, looked exactly the same, insofar as ever changing shapes can look the same, except she had mauve and yellow flashes. Amanda had black and red flashes.

“And your atmosphere is methane?” I asked, wondering what they felt like. I was reluctant to reach out and touch any of them however. Partly in the same way that one is reluctant to touch slugs and partly because it might seem rude.

“Mostly methane,” he said. “There are other components.”

“How do you talk?” I asked. “You don't seem to have a mouth.”

“We cannot talk in the way you do,” he said. “You have bags that force your atmosphere across vibrating strings inside your bodies. We do not have those. We communicate with each other through bending electrical fields.”

“So how do you talk to us?” asked Angie.

“We have learned to send those electrical fields directly to the sensors behind your ears,” said Angus. “It seems to work.”

“Clever,” I said. “Is that what you do visually with our eyes as well?”

“Yes,” said Angus.

“And how long can you do this?” I asked. “Does the effort make you tired?”

“There is little effort,” he said. “Your senses need very little power.”

“Interesting,” I said. “So you communicate with your computer in the same way? By bending electrical fields?”

“Yes,” said Angus.

“Can we go back to Paris?” asked Angie in a strangled voice. “I really don't like this.”

A moment later we were back in the cafe looking at the Eiffel Tower with Charles de Gaulle, Brigitte Bardot and Amanda.

“Thank you,” said Angie, not letting go of my hand.

“I suppose we'd better be going home,” I said. “I've still got a lot of work to do. Oh, before I go, Hettie, can you set your security settings so that I have unrestricted access to all your backup data?”

“I do not understand,” she said. “Security?”

“Security,” I said, “umm, permissions or restrictions to control who can access what data.”

“I do not understand,” she said. “Why would we have restrictions?”

“Well, you don't want the wrong, umm, I don't know how to refer to you,” I said. “You're not humans so I can't call you people.”

“Call us people if it is easier for you,” said Amanda.

“Oh, right then,” I said. “Umm, well I daresay it'll be clear from the context when I need to make a distinction between us people and you people.”

I had a vague feeling that that may have sounded rude but I didn't quite see how else to put it.

"Anyway," I said, pressing on, "you may want some of your data to be available to some people but not to others. I assume that Angus is in charge so, for example, there may be data he needs to access but which the rest of you should not."

"All knowledge should be for all," said Angus. "If some cannot share that knowledge then they cannot make decisions or benefit from that knowledge."

"This is absolutely true," I said, realising they had a different sense of trust to us humans. It occurred to me that if everyone had the same information as everyone else then no one could use some of that information to harm you. "This is how it should be but we, for some reason, have a different view."

After I'd said that it occurred to me that information can still be used to harm you even when you share that same information. Two people might have the same knowledge of guns but one could still shoot the other.

"So am I to understand that I have full access to all your data?" I asked.

"Of course," said Hettie. "We have no way of making it otherwise."

Then it struck me that their attitude wasn't about using knowledge to harm or help. Regardless of who possesses knowledge it can always be used to harm unless it was simply not possible for that individual to even conceive of harm. If there is no drive for personal gain then there is no drive to use knowledge for harm and so knowledge really can be made freely available to all.

It was a disturbing thought as it showed just how far humans still had to go in our development as a species.

It seemed even more disturbing when I realised that Angus and his mates must be truly objective because, if all knowledge is given to all

then all must draw the same conclusions from it otherwise there would be differences of opinion which would, in turn, lead to using knowledge for the gain of some – supporting their conclusions – and the detriment of others – undermining their conclusions. And if they were wholly objective then they would not have any of the biases that we humans have since it is our biases that make some of us interpret information in one way and others interpret the same information in another way. An excellent example being the existence of the aliens themselves. Make that knowledge available to all humans and some will feel threatened and take pre-emptive action and others will feel enthralled and welcome them.

From an alien's point of view it would make us as a species very difficult to predict and work with. No wonder they had lived inside the mountain for the past two hundred years and not found a way to get out and make contact with the wider world.

“That's excellent,” I said with the part of my mind that wasn't dwelling on the difficulties of being aliens in an alien world. “Even though I don't have an immediate solution to your access problem, I can start the process of re-formatting and transferring the data so it's available when I do find a solution. It's more efficient, assuming I'm doing the re-formatting correctly. Even if I'm not, it may be easier to correct the errors in the formatting than to start again from scratch.”

* * *

“What you said just before we left,” said Angie as we were walking from the car back to our house. “Was that true or more of your techno-corporate bullshit-speak?”

“You mean about the re-formatting?” I asked.

Elvis was barking his head off and it was difficult to hear.

“Yes,” she said.

“I don't know,” I said. “I felt I had to say something positive and it just came out that way. I think I was babbling more than anything.”

“Well, it sounded very impressive,” she said. “I believed you. I’ll unlock the shed.”

Chapter Twenty Three

“What the bloody hell?” I shouted at the ceiling and rolled over and buried my head under the pillows.

It was fruitless and all traces of the delicious dream I was having dissipated like early mist at sunrise. I groaned and clutched the pillow tightly, one corner clenched between my teeth for added resistance as the bed was vibrating. To make matters worse Shishke's tail was thrashing violently against the back of my neck.

“Sodding hell!” I hissed and Shishke hissed back at me.

Then the door flew open and Angie came running in. She rushed over to the window and Elvis landed dead centre on the bed, crushing my kidneys.

“Urgghhh,” I groaned and tried to roll back but he had me pinned like a professional wrestler.

“It's Garth's bulldozer!” exclaimed Angie, pulling up the blinds.

“Go and tell him to eff off,” I said, trying to get an arm out from under the bedclothes and around Elvis' neck. “It's Saturday.”

“Someone's stealing it,” she said. “Come on, do something.”

“Call the police,” I said, managing to get a grip on Elvis and pushing him off the bed.

“You're not going to believe this,” she said, peering out the window. “I think it's Clive.”

Exhausted by the effort of battling Elvis I lay back. Actually, if I could ignore the extreme rattling and banging of the battered old diesel engine, the vibrating of the bed was quite a pleasant sensation. I noticed the light pendant hanging from the ceiling was swaying.

I felt quite resentful, as well as exhausted. Garth had turned up unexpectedly about 7 the previous morning to rebuild our driveway

and had wrecked my sleep then as well. He'd spent the day digging up great scoops of the old drive and shifting them to other places to smooth it off and I'd spent the day in a semi-comatose state due to sleeplessness. He'd left mid afternoon with the promise not to return until Monday when he was going to lay several truckloads of nice new gravel before spending a couple of days driving up and down with a heavy roller to compact it.

After a few hours of catch-up sleep, Angie had graciously permitted me to work in the shed after she'd gone to bed and I'd stayed up later than usual working on a few odds and ends, secure in the knowledge I'd be able to sleep late. Fortunately the vibrations of the heavy bulldozer had only crashed one of my computers and nothing of any great significance was lost. They'd been busily working for the last few days in conjunction with, and managing, most of the phones and computers in the area on processing the aliens' data.

"Clive?" I said, closing my eyes. "Why's he working on our driveway?"

"I don't think he is," said Angie. "Get dressed and go and talk to him."

"You're already dressed," I said, opening one eye. "You go and talk to him."

"Oh, you're useless," exclaimed Angie.

"Yup," I agreed.

I must have drifted off again, despite the noise, since the next thing I knew was Angie shaking me.

"He's driving off in the bulldozer," she said. "Wake up!"

"So call Garth," I muttered. "It's his bloody bulldozer."

"David!" said Angie sharply. "Get up! You have to go after him and get it back."

She wrenched the bedclothes off me, much to Shishke's alarm. She,

Shishke not Angie, hissed and a thump suggested she'd jumped or fallen off the bed. I feebly tried to pull the bedclothes back up but Angie slapped my hands.

"He'll be miles away by now," I said sitting up and squinting at her.

"It only does like two kilometres an hour," said Angie. "You can still hear it. Go and get it back. He might damage it."

"How do you damage a bulldozer?" I asked, swinging my legs off the bed. "They're built like bloody tanks."

"David," said Angie, her voice ripe with warning overtones.

"Oh, all right," I said. "Then can I go back to sleep?"

"Yes," said Angie, holding up my trousers.

It took me at least a minute to put on the trousers, a shirt and a pair of trainers and another minute or so to get to the top of the driveway, with Angie urging me on every step of the way. It was already much easier to navigate as Garth had done a good job getting rid of the potholes and deep ruts cut by the rain. In that time, Clive had managed to get the bulldozer to the end of the road and was just about to go into the driveway of number seven. I don't know if bulldozers have gears but if they do he was still in first. Happily he'd figured out how to raise the scoop, which Garth had left flat on the ground, so he wasn't scraping a channel all the way up the road. Unhappily he hadn't quite got the hang of steering its caterpillar tracks and had crashed into the post that held up the rusty old metal gate. Even more unhappily he hadn't seen us walking quickly up the road and, having crunched the bulldozer noisily into reverse, he started clanking backwards towards me. I jumped out of the way and half ran around the bulldozer.

"Clive!" I shouted over the pounding of the big unsilenced diesel. "Clive!" I waved as well in case he couldn't hear me.

He must have noticed something as he looked over and saw me. He grinned and waved then crunched the bulldozer into forward and

started to curve around the gate post. The gate itself was hanging drunkenly and some of the concrete that held the post in the ground was now sticking up in the air. I ran forward a bit further so I was ahead of him but off to the side and repeatedly made cutting motions against my throat. He must have understood my meaning as the bulldozer lurched then died. The sudden silence was deafening.

“What are you doing?” I said, going up close to the driver’s compartment. “That’s Garth’s bulldozer. He needs it to do our driveway.”

“He ain’t working over the weekend, is he?” asked Clive, peering at me through a lattice of ropes.

“No, not until Monday,” I said.

“That’s all right then,” said Clive and pushed something in front of him.

The big engine turned over several times then caught with a roar and a jet of black smoke from behind it. I waved my arms again and made cutting motions at my throat. Reluctantly he killed the engine again.

“Why are you taking it?” I demanded.

“Always wanted to drive one,” he said with a grin. “Sides, them up there needs a spot of help.”

“You mean ...?” I asked and he nodded.

“What do you mean, a spot of help?” I asked.

“They needs some digging doing,” he said. “Been wondering how, like, then this 'ere beauty turned up so I’m making the most of it, like. Shouldn’t take too long with this baby.”

“Digging?” I said then turned to Angie. “Oh lord, I wonder if they need to dig their spacecraft out of the ground? I hadn’t thought of that.”

“Neither had I,” she said, staying well back from the bulldozer. “I assumed they’d just vaporise the ground or beam out or something.”

“Garth won’t mind,” said Clive, “specially if you tops up with diesel afore he notices.”

“You’re sure it won’t take long?” I asked. “He’ll be back Monday morning.”

“Should think so,” said Clive. “Can’t rightly say, though.”

“We’d better come with you,” I said, looking up and down the road in case someone was coming. It was rather pointless really as the only people who went up or down the road were us.

“If you like,” said Clive. “Makes no never mind to me,” and the engine started again with a throaty roar.

With a loud crunch of the gears the machine clanked forward again with a belch of diesel fumes, narrowly missing the other gatepost then ground its way slowly up the dirt track. We followed, in my case reluctantly as I should have been in bed.

Unusually there was no mansion or Eiffel Tower, just the dirt track, overgrown woodland and the dilapidated metal shed.

“Looks like we’re not expected,” said Angie as Clive brought the bulldozer to a halt near the shed.

He climbed out, leaving the engine running and went inside the shed. A few seconds later he reappeared then a complete stranger materialised beside the bulldozer. He looked unremarkable and I didn’t recognise him so he wasn’t from my mind. A glance at Angie confirmed he wasn’t from hers either. The stranger saw us and smiled then morphed into Angus.

“We were not aware you were here,” he said. “Greetings.”

“Hi.” I said. “We’ve, ah, come with the bulldozer. Clive says you need it.”

“Yes,” said Angus. “Hettie says the transference progresses well. You are near completion.”

“Yes,” I said. “Around 90% so it should be finished tomorrow or the day after. It's not a precise operation.”

“And we progress with our preparations to depart,” said Angus.

“You need the bulldozer to dig your spaceship out of the ground?” asked Angie.

“Indeed,” said Angus. “We cannot live in your atmosphere so our own efforts are limited.”

“Best be getting on with it,” said Clive. “Where ...?”

“This way,” said Angus and led Clive to a moderately steep slope that had no trees on it, only bushes and assorted undergrowth. Several orange marker posts appeared. They conferred then Clive marched over to the bulldozer and got to work.

Some chairs materialised as Angus returned to where we were beside the shed. Intriguingly, the noise of the bulldozer faded away to nothing even though we could see it not twenty metres away. It struck me that on previous visits there hadn't been any sounds of birds, wallabies or even the wind in the trees.

“Have you solved the problem of integration?” asked Angus, sitting in one of the chairs.

“I think so,” I said, sitting down as well. Angie hesitated a moment then sat down too.

I noticed Angie looking quizzically at me so I felt I had to expand on that.

“I've got a working translation routine on one of my computers that lets their computer access the new data store,” I said to her. “For testing purposes they send their data requests from the main operating area to my computer which then re-formats the request and

sends it over to the data store. The data is retrieved, sent to my computer, re-formatted back then sent to the operating area.”

“That seems inefficient,” said Angie.

“It is,” I said, “but it's good enough for testing. We now know that the data is being stored in the right form in the new data store and we've nearly finished doing the transfer. The problem that Angus is asking about is that we need a better solution for access. Speed-wise it isn't too bad at the moment but they can't take my computer with them because it draws too much electrical power and apparently it's too bulky as well. On the other hand, once they leave, the further away they get the slower the connection will be and, of course, the more power each of us will need to maintain the connection.”

“But you think you've solved it?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “I've re-written my routine to work on my mobile phone. It's small enough to go inside the spacecraft and will use very little power once I've disabled all the other apps and functions. The basic idea stays the same with the operating area sending data requests through the phone instead of the computer, but my new routine is also a lot more streamlined. The transfer time is slightly over 2% of that with my computer. Once it's installed inside the craft that time should decrease a little further because of proximity. All that remains is for Hettie to figure out a way of powering it. Electricity isn't their main energy source and, of course, they don't have any sockets for an LG recharge cable.”

“I suppose not,” said Angie. “You think she can do it?”

“Yes,” I said. “If not her then one of the others. A big motivator here is that this is the last obstacle to their returning to their home world. They'll probably convert a bicycle into a generator and pedal all the way home if they have to.”

“So they'll be leaving tomorrow?” asked Angie.

“God no,” I said. “We should finish the data conversion tomorrow, maybe Monday, but then it will all need to be double and triple

checked. The last thing anyone wants is to find errors in the data somewhere out in space. That'll probably take a day, maybe two. The good news is that some of it can be done on my machines and the rest by their own internal checking systems. I'm thinking perhaps Wednesday or Thursday. Actually, Angus, a question. Will the hole Clive is digging need to be filled in after you've gone? The bulldozer won't be here then."

"I leave that to you to decide," said Angus. "We will not be here and detection will no longer be an issue for us."

"OK," I said. "Let's not worry about it then. I doubt anyone will come here for a long time and nature will sort the hole out. There's nothing we can do here, Angie, so shall we go home? I really need some sleep."

"Sure," said Angie, getting up.

"Before you go," said Angus, and Angie sat down again. "If I may ask, why are you different to the others?"

"What do you mean?" I asked, puzzled.

"You help us," said Angus. "You have worked hard to help us. Others we have encountered have tried to harm us."

"Clive hasn't," I said.

"Truth," said Angus. "Let me re-ask the question. Why do some of you help and others seek to destroy?"

I laughed.

"It's a fundamental problem when dealing with humans," I said. "As a species we're inconsistent and we all have our own reasons for doing what we do. What do you think, Angie?"

"I disagree to an extent," she said. "A lot of people do things because that's the way they were brought up and they can't be bothered to think about things, so that makes it cultural as well."

“But you,” said Angus. “Why do you, David, help us? You have much skills and you have given them to us with no expectation of reward. We see reward as a primary motivator in the visual broadcasts we receive and Clive tells us this is so.”

“Visual broadcasts?” I asked, my brain not fully operational.

“I think he means TV,” said Angie.

“Oh, right,” I said. “Phew, that’s a big subject. Well, something you have to appreciate is that TV is not real, it’s made-up and things have to be kept fairly simple as not particularly intelligent people need to be able to understand it. In real life people do things for a hundred reasons, a thousand reasons, but on TV it has to be kept simple and, of course, fit into the time slot. Money as a motivation is commonplace but more importantly it’s easy for people to understand. Other motivators may be better but would be too difficult to explain. And, of course, a lot of people have several reasons and often they contradict each other so it would get very messy.”

“And your motivations?” persisted Angus.

“Oh lord,” I said, making a face. “Why would I help a life form from somewhere else in the universe? Well, I guess, as Angie was saying, part of it is cultural and my upbringing. I was brought up in England and taught not to discriminate against anyone. I guess also I’ve been a victim myself. I was overweight as a child and bullied at school because I was shit at sport and great in the classroom. Most people hate people like that for some reason. Maybe also since my background is maths and computers I’ve also been distanced from the sorts of things that people in social groups expect from each other. I’ve never really belonged to any groups. For sure I was never one of the trendies or even popular at school so I’ve been able to form my own opinions rather than take on other people’s simply to stay trendy or popular.”

I leaned back and thought about it some more.

“I think, too,” I added, “that I’m the way I am because I’ve seen the results of bad things and how devastating it can be for innocent

people. Umm, here's an example. Most of my working life has been trying to block or repair computer crimes. One in particular I remember. A group of hackers got into a Pakistani bank and transferred several million dollars to a number of accounts in a bank in the Cayman Islands. The money was then transferred from those accounts to a whole bunch of other places as part of the laundering process. The thing is, all this was carefully planned and the accounts opened to receive the money transfer several months in advance. The first transfer was to these accounts at a bank in the Cayman Islands and the manager there, a woman incidentally, had opened the accounts because she had been sent emails with all the correct documents instructing her to open the accounts. Of course, when the theft was discovered tracing began immediately and these accounts were identified. The manager was arrested as she was believed to be one of the hacking group but she wasn't. She was simply the manager of a small branch who was customer focused and followed procedures but her life was ruined. She was in and out of court for, ohh, nearly ten years and ended up killing herself. My company and I got involved when the trail ran cold after the Cayman Islands and we found no evidence at all that she was involved but someone had to take the blame. I hate things like that."

Angus left it there and Angie and I went home. Me to sleep and Angie to do whatever she did when I was asleep.

* * *

"So, this is it," I said, gleefully the following Wednesday evening.

"You mean ... ?" asked Angie.

"Yup," I said. "All the testing and checking is done. The phone is installed. The ground prepared. They're doing some final checks of their propulsion system, whatever it is, and they're planning to depart this world sometime around midnight. Do you want to come and wave them goodbye?"

"Absolutely," she said. "I've grown rather fond of them, even that Hettie. It would seem churlish not to bid them farewell and wish them a safe journey."

“Great,” I said. “I thought I’d go over around half past eleven. Do you think you’ll be able to stay awake that long?”

“If I don’t then wake me up again,” said Angie.

* * *

“Oh damn,” said Angie sleepily, as we were getting in the car to drive over to number seven. “I’ve left my phone in the house. Would you be a sweetie and get it for me? I think it’s on the table in the lounge.”

“Sure,” I said, as I was wide awake. “Won’t be a moment.”

I trotted back into the house and found her phone. When I got back to the car she had her head against the headrest and her eyes were closed.

“There you go,” I said, nudging her.

“Thanks,” she said, not taking it and not opening her eyes.

I put the phone in my pocket and let her be. Reversing up the brand spanking new driveway was a delight and I was tempted to drive back down again just to reverse back up a second time. Garth had done a good job and didn’t appear to have noticed that the level of fuel in his bulldozer had dropped or that it was parked a different way round to how he’d left it. Maybe he was used to people taking it for joyrides.

Regardless, Clive was already beside the derelict shed when we arrived and I woke Angie and we joined him.

“Big moment,” I said.

“I’ll miss ‘em,” he said, looking sad in the moonlight. “Known ‘em thirty year or more. Won’t be the same.”

“No, I suppose not,” I said and fell silent.

It occurred to me that perhaps I should have brought some champagne or something but it was too late. Even the bottle shops in

Thrisk were shut by 6pm.

We mooched around for a while idling the time away. Nothing in particular happened although a couple of wallabies came to see what was going on. They stayed at a respectable distance then disappeared. Angie seemed to be asleep, leaning against the side of the shed.

Then they materialised. All eight of them in the bodies they'd been using when Angie and I had first met them.

"It is time," said Angus.

"So you're off then?" I said, rather foolishly since that was why we were here. I nudged Angie and she woke with a start.

"Yes," said Angus. "We wish to thank you for your aid."

"You're welcome," I said. "And if you're ever in this neighbourhood again, drop in and say hello."

For some reason I held out my hand. Most probably because it was customary to shake hands with someone when they say goodbye. I felt foolish and dropped my hand quickly.

"Why did you do that?" asked Angus.

"Oh, umm, it is our custom to shake hands when we say goodbye," I said.

"Shake hands?" asked Angus. "What does that mean?"

"Like this," I said, shaking hands with Angie.

Angus watched closely then they all froze.

"Have they gone?" I asked.

"They're having a meeting," said Clive, "although god knows what about now."

A moment later the bodies re-animated and immediately morphed into the slug-like shapes of their native form. Each of them had different patterns of tiny coloured flashes in their bodies. The one directly in front of me, presumably Angus, came closer and a thick tendril grew out of its body. Something resembling a hand formed at its tip.

“Let us shake hands and say farewell,” came Angus' voice.

Two other tendril grew out of its body, one extending to Angie and the other to Clive and we all shook hands with him. Then, one by one, the other seven did the same. It was quite a moving moment, I think, for all three of us.

Then there was a brief pause as though none of us knew what to do then the aliens de-materialised.

“Have they gone?” asked Angie.

“I don't know,” I said. “They've gone from here but I don't know if their craft has left yet. Maybe they have to strap themselves in or something.”

We hung around, not knowing what to do then Angie suggested we move back in case there was a backwash or something. It seemed a good idea so we retreated. While our backs were turned there was a faint whoosh and a momentary flash of light. We turned quickly but all we could see was a rapidly moving star going upwards.

“Well, that's them gone, I reckon,” said Clive mournfully.

“I think we have a bit of a problem,” I said. “Look.”

Several of the bushes around the hole and one of the trees had caught light and the fire was spreading.

“What do we do?” I asked, feeling a little panicky the way a city person does when confronted by a bushfire.

“Call the RFS,” said Clive. “It's the dry season and everything's dry as

dust. Don't want the whole mountain going up.”

“Did you bring my phone, Davey?” asked Angie.

Yes,” I said, pulling it out of my pocket.

I felt a little nervous as I'd never rung 000 before but I squashed it and rang.

“Best clear off out of here,” said Clive. “RFS'll turn up with a couple of engines, I reckon. Dirt track ain't big enough for access with us here.”

“You two go,” I said, “and take the car. I'll wait here until they arrive.”

I didn't have to wait long. Twenty minutes or so. I had a brief word with the man in charge then watched for a while as they brought it quickly under control. I didn't get involved myself as an overweight, middle aged, city boy would be nothing but a liability in a bushfire. Angie was still up when I got back, waiting for me.

“What's happening with the fire?” she asked.

“It's pretty well out,” I said. “The RFS are packing up. Let's go to bed.”

“So it's all over?” she asked. “The aliens and everything, I mean?”

“Yes,” I said, giving her a hug. “It's all over.”

It's hard to believe now, looking back, that we were so naïve.

Chapter Twenty Four

“David,” came Angie's voice, penetrating my dream world. “David, wake up.”

Something in her voice carried a sense of urgency and perhaps even fear so I opened an eye and regarded her bleakly.

“David,” she said again, this time pushing my shoulder as well. “The police are here.”

Clearly it wasn't important after all so I closed my eye again and tried to burrow deeper into the pillow, wishing she'd go away.

The police?

“What?” I said, opening both eyes.

“The police,” she said, shaking me again although I was clearly awake.

“Oh,” I said and thought about it. “What have you done?”

“He wants to talk to you,” she said. “Get up.”

Wearily I got up and pulled on some clothes then wandered into the lounge. The clock on the wall said it was just after nine. Depressingly early.

“I'll make some coffee,” said Angie, only too familiar with my morning depressions. “Would you like some, umm, Constable?”

“No thanks, love,” said a bulky figure on the couch. “I'm on duty, like.”

Angie bustled off to make some coffee and left me alone and defenceless. Even Elvis had abandoned me as he was sitting in front of the policeman with his head on the man's knee getting his ears fondled. He showed every sign of being in love.

“Elvis, get away,” I said, clicking my fingers. “Sorry,” I added for the

policeman's benefit. Elvis, as always, took no notice.

"Nice dog," said the policeman. "He's no bother."

"Right," I said and collapsed into my chair, conscious that I probably looked like a desperado since I was scruffily dressed and unshaven. "How can I help you?"

"Mr David Fernly?" he asked, pulling a small notebook out of one of the many bulging pockets that festooned his, presumably bullet proof, vest. I noticed his holstered gun was snagged on the arm of the couch and was digging into his side.

"Yes," I said.

"Constable Bill Beaumont, Queensland Police," he said and went for his gun.

I flinched, having watched too many American cop shows, but all he was doing was easing the gun at his side so it wasn't digging in anymore. He opened his notebook and flicked over a few pages.

"You reported a fire at 7 Timber Court yesterday morning?" he said, glancing at his notes.

"Actually it was Wednesday night," I said.

"Your call was logged at 00:27," he said. "That makes it Thursday morning."

"Oh, OK," I said.

"You confirm that it was you who placed the call?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, seeing little point in denying it.

I looked over at Angie in the kitchen but she was waiting for the kettle to boil so I picked up my cigarettes and lit one. Constable Bill Beaumont was clearly not a smoker as he drew back a little and gave me a cold look.

“Can you tell me the circumstances?” he asked.

“Umm, what circumstances?” I asked, my brain working in a thick soup of sleepiness. “I saw a fire and called the RFS.”

He rearranged his face into what was presumably a smile.

“When did you become aware of the fire?” he asked.

“Ohh, just before I rang,” I said.

He nodded.

“And how did you become aware of the fire?” he asked.

“I could see it,” I said, wondering what he was getting at.

“I see,” he said. “And where were you when you saw the fire?”

“Oh,” I said, sensing a trap for some reason. “Umm, I was on the verandah. I thought I smelled smoke and went out to have a look.”

“So, in fact, you first became aware of the fire when you smelled smoke?” he said.

“Umm, yes,” I said.

“And you were inside this house?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said.

Angie came in and put my coffee beside me then went and sat down in the other chair.

He looked around.

“Is that the verandah over there?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Can I see it?” he asked.

“Certainly,” I said.

I got up and took him, and Elvis, out onto the verandah. He went over to the rail and peered out.

“Timber Court is over there?” he said, pointing back through the house.

“Umm, yes,” I said. “The house is at a bit of an angle to the road, you see.”

“Which means,” he said, ignoring me, “that the fire was approximately over there,” and pointed through the wall of the lounge.

“Umm,” I said, “I’m not sure.”

“So did you actually see the fire from here, Mr, umm, Fernly?” he asked.

I was sufficiently awake at this point to realise that there was a good chance that the fire couldn’t have been seen from the verandah.

“Umm, no,” I said. “I think I just saw a glow from behind the house.”

“I see,” he said. “And that was when you telephoned?”

I suddenly realised that when the RFS had arrived I was standing beside the shed watching the fire and the police might check the GPS position of the phone at the time of the call.

“Ah, no,” I said. “I went for a walk to see if I could find out what was causing the glow.”

“So you were not aware that this was, in fact, a fire until you encountered it,” he said, then glanced at his notebook, “on the property of number 7 Timber Court?”

“That’s right,” I said.

"How long did it take you to walk to the fire?" he asked.

"Ohh, perhaps ten minutes," I said.

"So it would be fair to say that from the time you first smelled smoke to the time you saw the fire itself would be, shall we say, fifteen minutes?" he asked.

"Probably," I said.

"And in that time did you see or hear anything else?" he asked.

"Not that I remember," I said. "What sort of things?"

"Voices, perhaps," he said, "or a vehicle?"

"No," I said, stubbing out my cigarette. "I didn't see or hear anyone else."

"Nothing that would suggest how the fire started?" he asked, looking at me.

"Umm, no," I said. "I have no idea how the fire started."

"It was a cloudless night," he said. "No storms or lightning. The property is not occupied. Perhaps someone was camping there?"

"We haven't seen or heard any campers," I said, "but I suppose it's possible."

"You heard no gunshots?" he asked. "Someone hunting?"

"No, sorry," I said.

"Hmm," he said, tapping his notebook thoughtfully. "And the fire was going when you arrived? You didn't, for example, go for a walk and discard a lit cigarette?"

"No," I said, desperately wanting to light another but they were inside. "I didn't have my cigarettes with me."

"I see," he said and looked out over the verandah rail again. "It would seem to be a mystery, then, wouldn't it," he added, quickly turning to look at me again.

I shrugged. "I'm a city boy," I said. "I have no idea how bushfires get started. We've not been here long."

"Where are you from?" he asked, a casual tone creeping into his voice.

"Sydney," I said. "We've only been here a month or so."

"Ahh, good for you," he said, putting away his notebook. "What made you choose Thrisk?"

"We're both retired," I said, "and we wanted to get away from the rat race."

"And you're enjoying life here?" he asked.

"Very much so," I said. "It's beautifully peaceful here."

"Yes, not much crime in Thrisk," he said. "Well, I'd best be off."

"Oh, right," I said, following him back into the lounge.

He nodded a polite goodbye to Angie and I shut the door behind him.

"Well," said Angie, "what was all that about?"

"Probably just a routine enquiry," I said. "Following up on the RFS report."

"Probably sensible not to tell them how the fire really started," she said. "He wouldn't have believed you. He didn't look the type to believe in aliens. You did well, saying you went to investigate the glow after smelling smoke. I believed you myself."

"Maybe," I said. "Although my brain is still not working. Damn, if I had any sense I would have anticipated this and thought something out beforehand."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," said Angie. "I've heard bushfires start all the time by themselves, especially when it's so dry."

We discussed the policeman's visit while I had another cigarette and drank my coffee then I went back to bed to get another couple of hours sleep.

* * *

I didn't get any sleep though. My mind went over Constable Bill Beaumont's visit in endless cycles and each time I imagined giving different answers and following through different avenues. Then I heard the soft crunch of tyres on our fresh new gravelled drive and the purr of a powerful engine. I got out of bed and looked out the window. A large four wheel drive police car had pulled up and Constable Bill Beaumont was getting out.

"Oh great," I muttered.

I got dressed again and went into the lounge. Angie was on the verandah, reading.

"He's back again," I said, sticking my head out.

Angie immediately looked worried. She got up and came inside just as heavy feet came up the steps to the front door.

"Welcome back," I said, opening the door. "Come in."

"You were expecting me?" he asked, looking at me suspiciously.

"I saw you come down the drive," I said. "Through the window."

He nodded and stepped inside so I waved towards the couch.

"Still on duty?" I asked. "No coffee or anything?"

"No, thank you," he said, staying just inside the doorway, blocking it. "Can I ask you to come down to the station? There are some more questions we'd like to ask."

“What, now?” I said, glancing at the clock for some reason. More of a habit than anything as I don't have much of a schedule. It was, incidentally, quarter past twelve.

“Shall we say two o'clock?” he asked. “Would that be convenient?”

“I suppose so,” I said. “What sort of questions?”

“Just routine,” he said. “And Mrs Fernly, as well.”

“Why do you want to talk to Angie?” I asked. “She was asleep.”

“As I said, sir, just routine,” he said.

“Should we bring a lawyer?” I asked, half jokingly. I think I wanted him to say there was no need since it was just routine. I regretted it immediately since taking a lawyer to a police interview makes it look as though you need a lawyer.

“You have that right,” he said, stiffening slightly.

“I was only joking,” I said placatingly. “We'll be there at two. How long do you think it will take?”

“I really couldn't say, sir,” he said. “Two o'clock it is, then. Goodbye.”

He nodded politely at Angie again then turned and walked heavily down the steps. I slowly shut the door behind him.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” said Angie.

“Me, too,” I said. “I wonder if they think I started the fire myself?”

“How could they prove it, even if you did?” she said.

“I've no idea,” I said, “but we're strangers here.”

“That's a point,” she said. “Maybe there's someone local they know who starts bushfires but they can't prove anything. Maybe because we're strangers they think we won't keep quiet about something that

would incriminate him.”

“I think you're clutching at straws,” I said. “Did you notice he's started calling me 'sir'? I wonder if we should get a lawyer.”

“I don't know if there is one in Thrisk,” she said, starting to pace, “and if we got one from Ipswich they wouldn't be able to get here by two. Can we afford one? It seems an unnecessary expense if this is just routine.”

“Might be an idea to see if there are any, at least,” I said. “That way if I'm arrested I'll at least have someone to call.”

“Oh god,” she said, “I've never been arrested.”

“If anyone's going to be arrested, it's me,” I said, booting my laptop. “I made the call and I was at the scene.”

“So why do they want me there?” she asked.

“They probably want to go over anything you might have seen or heard,” I said. “After all, you live here as well and we're the only ones nearby. Maybe they're talking to Clive too.”

“And god knows what he'll say,” she said, pacing back and forth. “He'll probably say we did it just to get rid of the police.”

I opened up a browser and typed in 'lawyers ipswich'. There was a surprisingly long list.

“I like the sound of this one,” I said. “Lovejoy and Hope, criminal lawyers.”

“Criminal lawyers,” said Angie. “Have you any idea what you sound like? You're beginning to sound like a criminal.”

“Look,” I said, trying to sound reassuring, perhaps more for myself than for Angie. “It won't hurt to at least have the phone number of a lawyer. I'm sure it won't come to that but just in case, eh.”

"I suppose," she said and sat down. A few moments later her fingers started drumming on the arm of the chair.

I wrote the phone number for Lovejoy and Hope on a scrap of paper and stuffed it inside my wallet. Then we sat and fretted until it was time to go.

* * *

The Thrisk police station was small, not much bigger than two large mobile homes joined together. The reception area was about the size of a wardrobe and had a sliding glass partition to the room behind it. Constable Bill Beaumont looked up when we came in and gestured to the narrow door further over.

I opened the door and went through into a narrow, white corridor lit by a single fluorescent light roughly halfway along. A door further down opened and the Constable came into the corridor.

"This way," he said, walking further along to a door with a sign that said, in a cold intimidating font, 'Interview Room'. He opened the door and blocked the rest of the corridor so Angie and I had to go inside.

"Senior Constable Morris will be here shortly," he said and shut the door.

I fancied I heard the lock click so I twisted the handle and pulled gently. It hadn't as the door opened enough to see the Constable go back into the room with the glass partition so I shut the door again.

"It's pretty cheerless in here," I said looking around.

There were four cheap plastic chairs, a table and a fancy looking dual cassette deck. There was a window but it had bars on the outside and didn't open anyway. Apart from a small air conditioning vent there was nothing else in the room and it was very drably decorated. Frankly it was a depressing place. We both sat down and stared at each other. We felt like criminals already.

“Sorry I’m late,” said the burly man who burst through the door twenty five minutes later. He wore the same sort of bullet proof vest as Bill Beaumont and his gun was very prominent. “Senior Constable Harry Morris.”

He looked up from the document he was reading and seemed surprised to find two of us there.

“Mrs Carlisle?” he asked, looking at Angie.

“No,” she said. “Mrs Fernly.”

He frowned and looked at the document again. “Back in a moment,” he said and hurried out again. We could hear voices from the room next door but couldn't make out any words. He reappeared a few moments later, this time clutching two files. One slim and the other a bit thicker.

“Right then,” he said, sitting down. He opened the slimmer of the two files and looked up. “Mr David Fernly and Mrs Angela Fernly?”

“Yes,” I said.

“3 Timber Court?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Pertaining to the brush fire at 7 Timber Court?” he asked.

“Probably,” I said.

“Why probably?” he asked, looking intently at me.

“I don't know why we are here,” I said. “It's probably to do with that fire but it may be to do with something else. We won't know until you tell us.”

“Quite,” he said. “Let's start with the fire then.”

“OK,” I said, wondering what the 'start with' meant.

He ran through the details I'd told Bill Beaumont earlier and confirmed that that had been what I had said. Then he asked similar questions of Angie and she explained that she had been asleep in bed.

"And neither of you have heard any noise coming from that property in the previous few days?" he asked, looking at another sheet of paper in the file.

"No," I said. Angie shook her head.

"And have you been on that property before?" he asked, looking at me.

"We may have done," I said. "We've only recently moved in and we've done some exploring of the woods. It would be quite easy to stray onto the neighbouring property as no boundaries are marked."

"Quite," he said. "Are you away a lot?"

"No," I said. "We're there almost all the time, apart from the occasional shopping trip."

"I see," he said. "So how do you account for the large excavation at the scene of the fire?"

"What sort of large excavation?" I asked.

"Made by a bulldozer," he said. "Recently. The tracks, although partially obscured by the wheels of the fire engine, are distinctive and go from the road to a large, recently dug hole."

"I see," I said. "I'm sorry, I can't account for that."

"Mrs Fernly?" he asked.

"I don't know anything about that," she said.

"I confess I am at a loss here," he said, sitting back in his plastic chair. "Neither of you is away and yet neither of you heard a bulldozer go along the road and enter 7 Timber Court. They are pretty noisy machines."

“Yes, we know,” I said. “We’ve just had our driveway replaced. Perhaps it went past and we didn’t hear it over the noise of the other one.”

“Perhaps,” he said, noncommittally. “Who did your driveway?”

Angie pulled out her phone and gave him Garth’s details. He clearly knew Garth but noted the details anyway. I wondered if I should have volunteered that information but decided they’d have found out soon enough if they went looking for a bulldozer.

“Well,” mused Senior Constable Harry Morris, looking out of the window, “we don’t seem to be making any great progress here.”

He neatly put the pieces of paper back in the file and placed it at the side of the table then picked up the other one.

“You’re new to Thrisk, aren’t you,” he said, flicking through the documents.

“Yes,” I said. “We’ve been here about a month now.”

“What do you think of the cafes?” he asked, glancing at Angie.

“We’ve only been to a couple,” she said, “but they seem quite nice.”

“That’s good to hear,” he said. “So you have no complaints?”

“No,” she said, looking puzzled.

“Excellent,” he said. “Did you visit any of our cafes on Tuesday, the 11th of last month?”

“I really don’t remember,” she said, her look of puzzlement deepening. “Why?”

He ignored her question.

“Do you remember, Mr Fernly?” he asked.

“That’s a few weeks ago,” I said. “Why do you expect us to remember

if we went to a cafe that long ago?"

"So no visits to cafes stand out in your minds from around that time?" he asked.

"No," I said. "Why?"

"Does the Blue Boar Cafe mean anything to you?" he asked.

"Wasn't that the one that burned down?" I asked.

"Indeed," he said. "It burned down during the night of the 11th and 12th."

"Oh," I said.

"Did you visit the Blue Boar Cafe that day?" he asked, "or any other day?"

"Umm, I think we might have done," I said, glancing at Angie, "although I'm not sure when. It was before it burned down, of course." I smiled.

He didn't smile back. "Think carefully, Mr Fernly," he said. "We do have a witness statement."

"A witness statement of what?" I asked, genuinely puzzled.

"A witness statement of an altercation between two members of the public and a member of the cafe's staff," he said.

"Oh," I said. "What does the witness say?"

He held up a document so I could see it, although the typing was on his side not mine so I couldn't read it. Having said that, I could see by the shadowing that the statement, if that was what it was, was barely a third of a page.

"The witness claims that a man and a woman had an argument with the staff member in question," said Harry Morris, "and the couple left

in some agitation.”

“Are you implying that we were that couple?” I asked, trying to sound a little indignant even though I was pretty sure that we were, indeed, that couple.

“You do answer the general description,” he said. “Both of you.”

“I’m sure a lot of people answer a general description,” I said.

“Oh, quite,” he said, genially. “Witness descriptions are not very reliable at the best of times, although ...”

“Although?” I prompted.

“In this case the descriptions align quite well with images retrieved from a traffic management camera further down the road,” he said, with a faint air of triumph. He paused to let that sink in. “Did you have an altercation with a member of staff at the Blue Boar cafe?”

“I wouldn’t call it an altercation,” said Angie. “I just got annoyed at her appallingly bad service.”

“Annoyed enough to set fire to the cafe that night?” asked Harry Morris.

“Of course not,” I said, genuinely indignant this time.

“It’s interesting, don’t you think,” he said, leaning forward to put his elbows on the table, “how fires in the night seem to follow you around. You’ve only been here a month and yet a cafe burns down the night after you get annoyed by poor service there and then a property two doors up from you catches fire, again in the middle of the night. Know the owner, do you? Annoyed you, perhaps? Took old Garth’s bulldozer and tried to churn the place up then set fire to it? Come on, mate, tell me the truth.”

Chapter Twenty Five

Angie gasped and looked worried. I just sat there, frozen to the plastic chair.

“Are you serious?” I asked after a while. “You think we set fire to that cafe and up the road? What’s your evidence?”

“I have to admit it’s a little thin at the moment,” said Harris levelly. “But there is certainly cause for concern which is why I’d like your consent to search your premises.”

“Search my premises?” I exclaimed in astonishment. “Whatever for?”

“Oh David,” muttered Angie.

“Leave this to me,” I said brusquely to her, then, “What are you looking for?” to Morris.

He flicked back through the file and studied some sort of report.

“Petrol,” he said, “or any other combustible material.”

“Oh,” I said. “Well we don’t have any of that, other than what’s in the car, of course.”

“We have some gas cylinders,” said Angie. “For a little camping gas cooker.”

“In that case you won’t object if we just confirm that,” said Morris.

“Don’t you need a search warrant?” I asked.

“Actually, no,” he said, sitting back. “If we have reason to believe there may be evidence that will be hidden or destroyed we can enter and search your premises and vehicles without a warrant and without your consent. It just saves on paperwork if you give your consent.”

“Oh,” I said.

Actually I had a feeling that was true. SDS had been involved in a couple of cyber crime incidents related to Australian citizens and I seemed to remember reading in the reports that the police had raided various premises without obtaining search warrants.

I sighed. "Well, we have nothing to hide, so I suppose we may as well consent."

"Excellent," he said, closing the file and standing up. "If you'll come with me we'll get your signatures on a Consent form and get started right away."

"What, now?" I said, staying seated.

"Of course," he said, opening the door.

"Oh," I said, feeling wrong footed. It occurred to me later that that may well have been his intent.

I got up and Angie looked up at me nervously.

"It'll be fine," I said reassuringly. "We've nothing that will interest them."

She took my hand and got up and we followed Morris into the front wardrobe where he tapped on the partition.

"Get me a Premises Search Consent form, Constable," he said when Beaumont slid the partition back, "and get Lanaya back off patrol. We've got a search to do."

"Rightioh," said Beaumont, his eyes going a little glinty as he scanned us. Clearly we had now moved up into the 'main suspect' category.

He rummaged in a filing cabinet for the form then got on the radio. Morris filled in the details and Angie and I both signed the form. He was pushing the form back through the partition when a patrol car pulled off the road and another policeman got out. When he came through the door it became apparent that he was actually a policewoman although the shapeless vest festooned with bulging

pockets and straps made her look identical to the other two. She also had two guns, one in a holster on her belt and the other in a holster clipped to the bottom of the vest. It was bright yellow with a strange shape and it took me a few moments to realise that it was probably a Taser. Her dark sunglasses hid her eyes and tufts of blonde hair protruded from under her cap. She took off the sunnies when she came in, no doubt to see us alleged offenders better, and she looked to be about 15 years old.

“Constable Lanaya Svypinskow,” said Morris, by way of introduction.

I noticed her eyes narrowed slightly as her name was mangled but she made no comment.

“Right,” said Morris as Beaumont emerged from the corridor. “You two follow in the ute. I’ll go with the Fernlys.”

“We’re the Nissan,” I said, pointing through the glass door. It was somewhat unnecessary as ours was the only non police vehicle there.

“How big is this property?” asked Morris when we drove down the drive and pulled up in front of the house. The police ute pulled up behind us.

“About 12 acres,” I said.

“Buildings?” he asked.

“The house,” I said nodding towards it, “and the shed over there.”

“Right,” he said, getting out.

The other two came over to join him.

“Bill, you take the shed,” he said, pointing towards the shed, “and Lanaya, you scout around the grounds. It’s 12 acres so you won’t be able to cover all of it but use your brain, OK. I’ll take the house.”

“Just a minute,” I said, pulling my keys from my pocket. “You’ll need the key to the shed.”

I undid it from the keyring and handed it to Beaumont then he and Lanaya headed off to do their official duty. We'd barely got inside the house when Morris' radio crackled.

"You there, Harry?"

"What is it, Bill?" said Morris. He took off his sunnies and rubbed the back of his neck.

"You'd better come and have a look for yourself," crackled Beaumont. "It's like bloody Brisbane HQ Data Centre in here."

"You what?" said Morris.

"Shed's full of computers," crackled back Beaumont.

"There's only three," I muttered.

"On my way," said Morris, glancing at me.

We followed him down.

"Are these operational?" he asked after looking around the shed.

"Yes," I said, "although they're off at the moment."

"Why's there only one monitor?" he asked.

"All three run off it," I said. "It's easier."

He nodded and inspected the computers from a distance.

"Professional looking setup," he commented. "What are they for?"

"I worked in IT," I said.

"You're retired now," he said, "so what are they for?"

"It's difficult to explain," I said, "but I built them myself and they're heavily customised. I just didn't want to leave them behind."

“So they're corporate grade machines?” he asked. “Not gaming?”

“Oh, they're way beyond gaming machines,” I said.

“Servers, then, eh?” he said, looking enquiringly at me.

“They have to be,” I said. “I used to work with huge volumes of data.”

“OK, Bill,” he said. “Take 'em.”

“What do you mean, 'take them'?” I asked as Beaumont walked towards them.

“Exactly that,” said Morris. “We'll give you a receipt. You will get them back in due course, unless they are needed for evidence. Do you have any other computers?”

“Just my laptop in the house,” I said. I felt a little anxious at being parted from my toys.

“We'll take that too,” he said. “Right. Bill, not much else here so when you're done come up to the house.”

“Rightioh,” he said and started pulling cables out of the back of the machines. I winced.

“I'll get you a quilt to wrap them in,” I said. “If you bounce them round in the back of your ute you'll damage them.”

“Thanks,” he muttered in a tone that suggested he wasn't overly familiar with the word.

“What do you expect to find on them?” I asked Morris as we walked back to the house. “There's no kiddie porn or anything like that on them.”

“I have no expectations,” he said levelly, “but our technical staff will check them over.”

“Well, most of what's on them is encrypted,” I said.

“That shouldn't bother our technical staff,” he said. “They're familiar with all forms of encryption.”

“OK,” I said wondering if I ought to explain further.

I had no doubt that their technical staff were familiar with most forms of encryption but it was unlikely that they'd be familiar with mine. After all, I'd devised it myself and some of our guys at SDS had tried to crack it and failed. The thing is, after the shock of being virtually accused of arson and being subjected to a search I really wanted the whole mess to go away and I knew that if I started trying to explain about the encryption it would all get a lot messier. A few days delay to give me time to come to terms with things would help greatly and it would be lot easier to explain to one of the techies anyway. Morris didn't strike me as being more than average when it came to computer literacy. Certainly he wouldn't be one of the techies himself.

I took a quilt down to Beaumont as I wanted to supervise the transfer of the computers myself, leaving Angie to watch Morris going through her cupboards and drawers. She put Elvis out on the verandah so he couldn't be accused of tampering with evidence. Once Beaumont had loaded the computers into the ute and filled out the paperwork he joined Morris while Angie and I just sat in the lounge, worrying. At one point we heard Morris talking on the radio, probably to Lanaya, although we couldn't make out any words. Fortunately they didn't find anything else of interest, although they did take my laptop.

When they were done they came back into the lounge and stood, side by side, near the door. They didn't say anything, just stood there, quietly watchful, letting the tension rise. I jumped when Morris' radio crackled again.

“I'm back at the house,” said Lanaya. Her voice sounded a little breathless.

“Coming out,” said Morris. “Stay here,” he said in an aside to Beaumont.

He came back inside a couple of minutes later.

"If you will both accompany us to the station," he said, looking serious.

"What, again?" I said.

"Yes," he said. "I have some more questions."

"Will it take long?" I asked.

"We are permitted to hold you both for questioning for up to 24 hours, without charge," he said drily.

"24 hours," yelled Angie. "But what about Elvis and the cat?"

"Can they be left indoors?" he asked.

"Yes, I suppose so," I said. "You are seriously taking us in for 24 hours?"

"That depends on your answers to my questions," he said.

"You've found something," I said, the penny dropping. "What is it?"

"We can discuss this at the station," said Morris evenly.

"Do we have to?" asked Angie. She'd gone white and the fingers of one hand were clenching and unclenching repeatedly. I felt a little light headed and my heartbeat seemed to echo in my ears which was usually a sign my blood pressure had risen.

"If you refuse to attend a police interview without good reason you may be charged with obstructing our enquiries," said Morris.

"And what would constitute a good reason?" I asked.

"That would be for the judge to decide," said Morris.

I stared at him blankly for a few moments.

"We need a lawyer," I said suddenly. "I don't have a clue about our

rights and I don't understand what's going on. I'm going to phone a lawyer.”

Morris seemed to sag slightly for some reason.

“You have that right,” he said.

“Do I have time to phone from here?” I asked, “or do we have to go to the station immediately?”

“You can phone from here,” he said. “Constable Beaumont will wait and bring you down when the arrangements have been made.”

He looked stonily at us for a few moments then turned and muttered a few words to Beaumont who nodded. Then he left without another word.

“Just a minute,” I said, “how can I find a lawyer? You've taken my laptop!”

“In your wallet,” said Angie. She looked on the verge of tears.

“Oh, yeah,” I said. “Can I use your phone?”

She passed it over and I fished out my wallet.

“I suppose I'd better put some food out for Elvis and Shishke,” she said trying to bring some practical normality back into the world. “We may be gone all night.”

“Oh Jesus,” I said worriedly, noticing the clock. “It's five to five on a Friday afternoon. What if there's no one in the office?”

It seemed to me that Beaumont was smirking and I wanted to kick his shin or something.

“They may have an after hours number,” said Angie, getting up.

“Hopefully,” I said and rang the number for Lovejoy and Hope. It seemed to ring for an eternity.

“Lovejoy and Hope,” said a cheerful young female voice. “How may I help you?”

“I think I'm going to be arrested,” I said. “I need a lawyer.”

“Excellent,” she said even more cheerfully. “Have you dealt with us before?”

“No,” I said, “I'm not a criminal.”

“I'm sure you aren't,” she said soothingly. “What offences do you expect for be arrested for?”

“Umm, arson,” I said, “and possibly something else but I don't know what.”

“I'll just see if our Katarina Quayle is still in her office,” said the girl. “What was your name?”

“Fernly,” I said, “David Fernly.”

“Just putting you on hold,” she chirruped happily. Some light orchestral music started to play.

Angie put a bowl of food down for Elvis and let him in from the verandah. He'd been pacing, wondering why he wasn't allowed in to play with the nice visitors. He bounded over to Constable Beaumont, sniffed him then bounded over to his food bowl.

“I'm on hold,” I said, looking at her.

She nodded and went to top up Shishke's bowl.

“Mr Fernly,” came a strong sounding female voice. “I'm Katarina Quayle. Thank you for reaching out to us in your time of need. I understand you are about to be arrested? By that do you mean taken into custody and charged?”

“I don't know,” I said. “It's just that my wife and I were questioned by the police this morning, then they came back and took us to the police

station for more questioning then they decided to search the house and now they want us back at the station for yet more bloody questions and they're saying we could be there for 24 hours."

"You mean you have been questioned three times already without a lawyer present?" she exclaimed in horror.

"Umm, twice," I said. "We're about to go for a third session."

"Do not say anything," she said firmly. "Both of you must remain silent until I am there as you may jeopardise your position inadvertently. Where are you, by the way?"

"Thrisk," I said.

"Thrisk," she repeated. "Ah yes, that would be Senior Constable Morris?"

"That's him," I said. My stress levels were dropping as Katarina seemed highly capable, even over the phone.

"I've had dealings with him before," she said. "You are both to be interviewed at Thrisk Police Station?"

"Yes," I said.

"And are you there now?" she asked.

"No, we're still at home," I said, "although another policeman is waiting to take us to the station."

"Right," she said. "I should be there within an hour. Remember, say nothing until I arrive."

"OK," I said. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course," she said.

"Can they really hold us for 24 hours?" I asked.

“Sadly yes,” she said, “unless it's terrorism related then it's 72 hours.”

“And what's your hourly rate?” I asked, anxiously.

“We can discuss our fee structure when we've established the extent of the situation,” she said smoothly.

“Ouch,” I thought, “that sounds expensive.”

“OK,” I said.

“Excellent,” she said. “Talk to you soon. Goodbye.”

“Oh, er, goodbye,” I said.

“She said to say nothing until she gets here,” I told Angie.

Angie nodded slowly. “A woman?” she asked. “What's her name?”

“Katherine someone,” I said. “She sounded very capable.”

“I changed the cat litter as well,” said Angie, glancing over at Beaumont. “I don't want to come back and find the house in a mess.”

“What about Elvis?” I asked. He'd given up on Beaumont and was lying on the couch watching us.

“God knows,” she said. “What do people do with pets when they're arrested?”

“We haven't been arrested,” I said.

“Bloody feels like it,” said Angie. “Do you suppose he'll put us in handcuffs?”

I looked over at Beaumont and he slowly shook his head.

I blew out my cheeks then lit a cigarette.

“So what do we do now?” I asked him. “The lawyer said not to say

anything until she arrives so do we go to the station now or wait here for a while?"

"I suggest you come now," he said. "That way we know where you are and the 24 hours, should it be necessary, begins when you arrive at the station. The sooner you're there the sooner it ends."

"Oh right," I said. "Makes sense to go now then, I suppose."

* * *

Fifty eight minutes later a short stocky middle aged woman with dark blonde hair held in a bun on the nape of her neck was shown into the Interview Room.

"Hello," she said cheerfully. "I'm Katarina Quayle. You're Mr and Mrs Fernly?"

"Yes," I said delighted she'd arrived to break the monotony of the room.

"I would like to speak with my clients alone, please," she said firmly to Lanaya who had remained in the doorway.

Lanaya shrugged and closed the door behind her.

"You need to treat them firmly," she said, putting a briefcase on the table, "like dogs."

"Right," I said.

She sat down and opened her briefcase and pulled out an iPad.

"Now then," she said. "Let me just get a few details so I know with whom I'm speaking."

I gave her our full names, address, Angie's phone number since I hadn't got a new phone yet, and email addresses.

"Excellent," she said. "Now I'm presuming that I am to act on behalf

of both of you?"

"Umm, Angie?" I asked.

"Sure," she said.

"You can change that arrangement at any time," she said, "but for the moment if you could both sign this Appointment To Represent," and she spun her iPad around so we could see it.

We both signed on the iPad with our fingers.

"Excellent," she said, sitting back in her chair. "Tell me what's happened thus far."

I told her as much as I could remember and Angie chimed in with several details I'd forgotten. It's fascinating how stress can turn your memory into a sieve. She listened patiently, interjecting every now and then to ask a question.

"From what you tell me," she said when we'd finished, "I can see why Morris and his cronies are interested in you but you're a long way off being arrested. You reported a fire on a neighbouring property and were seen coming out of a cafe that later burned down, no doubt along with many other people. It's hardly a strong case. It is a little concerning though that something was found on your premises, aside from your computers."

"Is it true that the police can carry out a search without a warrant?" asked Angie.

"In certain circumstances," said Katarina, "one of which being the reasonable belief that evidence may be destroyed while waiting for a warrant to be issued. I'm not convinced that there were reasonable grounds but it's too late now. You sit tight and I'll have a chat with Harry Morris. Find out what's happening on his side."

"Do you think we'll be here much longer?" asked Angie.

"That depends," said Katarina, standing up.

“Do you think I'll be allowed out for a cigarette?” I asked.

“I don't see why not,” she said. “Neither of you would seem to be a flight risk. Come with me and we'll ask.”

Katarina disappeared into Harry Morris' office after obtaining permission for me to go outside to smoke, provided I remained within sight through the glass door at all times. It was twenty minutes or so before she came out again. She was looking a little more serious than when she went in.

“Right,” she said, sitting down behind the table again. “On the matter of arson, Morris concedes there is little evidence against you at the moment although he has called in a Scene of Crime team from Ipswich to go over the fire site at 7 Timber Court. The matter of the Blue Boar cafe is almost certainly irrelevant at this point. There is nothing to directly tie either of you to the fire itself.”

“Well, that's good news, at least,” I said. “What did they find at our house?”

“Yes,” she said, leaning forward and clasping her hands in front of her on the table. “Your computers are on their way to the analysts in Brisbane. Morris has impounded them on the grounds that they appear to be too powerful for ordinary home use. He suspects you of hosting something illegal on the internet as you had no apparent explanation for their existence.”

“What sort of illegal hosting?” I asked.

“He's inclined to suspect child pornography,” said Katarina, “but it could be anything. Sedition, perhaps, or music copying or perhaps records of some other illegal activity.”

“Absolutely not,” I said, aghast. “I would never do anything like that.”

“And I'm sure their analysts will come to that conclusion,” said Katarina. “However, what they did find is somewhat serious.”

“Oh god,” said Angie.

“Quite,” said Katarina. “It seems they found drugs. More specifically, cannabis plants and tools for their cultivation and harvesting.”

Chapter Twenty Six

“Actually,” said Katarina conversationally, although her shrewd eyes studied our ashen faces, “of the two, the growing of cannabis is less serious than arson. The penalty, if convicted, is a maximum of two years in prison, whereas for starting a bushfire it's fourteen years and arson is, potentially, life.”

“But we've never grown cannabis,” said Angie plaintively. “I don't even know what it looks like.”

“Senior Constable Morris will be in shortly,” said Katarina. She paused and scratched her cheek thoughtfully. “I'm sure there is a perfectly innocent explanation, or at least a plausible one. After all, the onus is on the prosecution, if it should come to that, to prove guilt, not us to prove innocence.”

“Where was this stuff found?” I asked.

Morris came in at that moment, his face grim and forbidding. He nodded at Katarina and put a file on the table before sitting down. The temperature in the room seemed to have dropped several degrees. He pushed a button on the tape recorder and stared at the spools for a moment or two then cleared his throat.

“This interview is being recorded,” he said formally. “A copy will be given to you at the end.”

He then proceeded to state the date and time and identify himself, us and Katarina. The effect was very intimidating.

“Mr and Mrs Fernly,” he said. “During a consensual search of your premises a quantity of dried cannabis plants, two spades, a pair of gardening shears and an axe were found inside the entrance to a cave located near the northern boundary of your property. How do you account for these items?”

“We know nothing about them,” I said, glancing at Katarina. “we only moved into the house a few weeks ago. Maybe the previous owners put them there.”

Katarina nodded encouragingly.

Morris then asked a few questions about when, exactly, we moved in and I gave him the details of our conveyancer and the real estate agent as well.

“Have you any evidence directly connecting my clients to these items?” asked Katarina.

“Our enquiries are ongoing,” said Morris, giving her a disinterested look. “Now, Mr Fernly, a number of trees and bushes on your property have coloured ribbon attached to them. Did you put the ribbons there?”

“Yes,” I said, frowning as I didn't quite see the relevance of the ribbons.

“The ribbons mark out a path directly to the entrance to the cave,” he said. “Why did you mark that path?”

“We were told there was a cave,” I said, “and Angie likes caves.” Angie nodded vigorously at this. “So we went exploring and tied the ribbons so we could find our way back.”

“And who told you of this cave?” asked Morris.

“A friend of ours,” said Angie. “Desmond. He runs the House of Aatm Shaanti in town.”

“Just a minute,” I said, “you're wrong. The ribbons don't lead straight to the cave. It took us a while to find it and the ribbons mark the path we took. At one point it goes down the hill a lot further then doubles back up. To say it goes straight there is very misleading.”

His eyes narrowed and he was about to say something when Katarina interjected.

“Have you followed the ribbons yourself, Constable Morris?” she asked, “or had them mapped?”

“Senior Constable,” he said irritably before conceding that he had not.

“How big is the property?” she asked me.

“Twelve acres,” I said.

“Senior Constable,” she said, with a slightly sarcastic emphasis on the ‘senior’, “my clients readily admit to exploring their newly purchased property and putting up ribbons to aid them in returning to their house, both of which they are legally entitled to do. And, I might add, with a property of that size and being unfamiliar with it, the placing of markers is eminently sensible. I ask again, have you any evidence directly connecting my clients to the items in question?”

Morris glared at her then ended the interview, noting the time for the benefit of the recording. From start to finish it had only lasted eighteen minutes. He took out one of the tapes and handed it to Katarina who put it in her briefcase.

“You can go,” he said gruffly, “but there’s something very fishy going on here and you two are hiding something, I can tell. I’ll get to the bottom of it, you mark my words.”

“Are you threatening my clients?” demanded Katarina, stiffening.

“No,” said Morris, watching us flinty-eyed. “Merely informing them that our enquires will be continuing.”

“Then we shall leave,” said Katarina, “unless you have any other matters to discuss?”

Morris scowled at her but she ignored him and left the room. Angie and I glanced at each other then quickly scuttled after her.

“Do you have your car here?” she asked, noticing there were only police cars and her own Land Cruiser outside.

“No,” I said. “They brought us down in one of their cars.”

“I’ll give you a lift home,” she said. “That went rather well, I thought.

Entirely plausible.”

“And true,” I said, following her to her car.

“Will Desmond get into trouble?” asked Angie.

“Unlikely,” said Katarina, pausing beside her car, “unless he has a record of drug offences but even then, simply knowing of a cave doesn’t mean you are using it for that purpose. Give him one of my cards, just in case,” and she fished a business card from the pocket of her jacket.

We got in her car and she drove us home. We hadn’t yet discussed her fees but I reflected that it would probably have been a lot cheaper to get a taxi.

“One question, before you go,” I said, as I was about to get out, “isn’t starting a bushfire a form of arson?”

“Yes,” she said, putting on the handbrake, “but to constitute arson there must be a building or structure of some sort involved.”

“Oh, right,” I said and got out. I paused before shutting the door. “Would a run down old shed be a structure?”

“It doesn’t matter what condition the structure is in,” she said. “It doesn’t even need to be complete. Under a pedantic interpretation of the law even a single post could constitute a structure. Why?”

“The bushfire up the road was close to a dilapidated shed,” I said.

“And there’s a mine shaft close by as well,” interjected Angie.

“Oh dear,” said Katarina frowning. “Then we’d better hope that nothing turns up to directly connect either of you with that fire.”

“I didn’t start it,” I said hastily.

“I’m sure you didn’t,” she said although she didn’t look as convinced as I would have liked. “Keep me informed of any developments.”

“We will,” I said, “and thanks for your help at that interview.”

I shut the door and she drove away.

“I wonder how long it will take them to find the tunnel between the cave and the shed,” I said watching her go, “and what fantasies they dream up about it. Maybe they’ll think we were going to set up crystal meth manufacturing in the shed and use the tunnel to take it to the cave for storage”

“Or the other way around,” said Angie. “Make the stuff in the cave and use the shed for distribution and sales. Oh Davie, we’re really going to have to tell them about the aliens.”

“Yeah, right,” I said. “Katarina said it has to be plausible and there’s no way those aliens are going to be plausible.”

“If you get sent down for life,” said Angie, “I’ll bake you a cake with a file in it.”

“I very much suspect if I get sent down you’ll get sent down as well,” I said, “and you don’t know how to bake cakes anyway.”

“You’d better teach me,” she said seriously, “I have bad feelings about this.”

“You and me both,” I said heavily. “I’m beginning to wish we had stayed in Sydney.”

* * *

A police van turned up on our doorstep on Saturday morning together with Lanaya. Several people in hazmat outfits followed her down the tartan ribbon path. We weren’t allowed to go and watch. A few minutes later another police van whizzed up the road, no doubt to inspect the charred remains of the fire. It was all very stressful and we spent the weekend drinking too much coffee and worrying ourselves to death. It would have been a lot less stressful if we were guilty as we could have used the time productively thinking up plausible scenarios of our innocence instead of stressing over what might be misconstrued

to show our guilt. The group down at our cave packed up and left on Sunday afternoon, saying absolutely nothing to us. We saw the van of the fire group leave late on Monday and when it didn't go past on Tuesday morning we assumed they'd finished as well. We were too scared to go up and check.

We'd bought the place to have a quiet, relaxing retirement and consequently had little to do. This meant that time dragged by very slowly and we spent a lot of time just sitting on the verandah, thinking up weird and wonderful things that the Scene of Crime people might have found and ways of plausibly denying our involvement. When nothing had happened by the following weekend, we were either beginning to relax again or we'd run out of ideas for what might have been found, it was difficult to tell. I dare say also, if you are in a situation for an extended period you begin to get used to it and, possibly, learn to live with it. I think we were both also beginning to hope that nothing had been found and the police were quietly dropping their enquiries. Logically, there hadn't been enough time as no doubt their forensic people had other crimes to work on as well, but hope tends to ignore logic and is pretty irrepressible. The longer something doesn't happen the more you hope it's never going to happen.

That hope took a severe jolt when that Tuesday, almost two weeks after the aliens had left, we were politely but firmly told to go to the police station to have our fingerprints taken. Katarina said to go ahead as it was routine and she didn't see the need to come and watch them ink our fingers.

"It's so degrading and violating," said Angie in the car afterwards as she studied her fingertips. "Just having my fingerprints taken makes me feel guilty." She sighed. "And I suppose they'll be in some database somewhere for the rest of eternity."

It took a while to scrub the ink off.

* * *

It was four weeks to the day after the aliens had gone that there was a single, heavy, officious knock on the door. I'd been up long enough to

have started on my second coffee and Angie was having a nap as she hadn't been sleeping well. Elvis was having a nap as well as he tended to follow Angie in his routines. I got up and went to the door, my spirits dragging along the floor behind me.

"Mr Fernly?" asked the man. He was in a police uniform but didn't have the jacket with bulging pockets. "Mr David Fernly?"

"Yes," I said, glancing at the woman behind him. She, too, wore a police uniform without the accoutrements. They looked different to Morris and his mates.

"Sergeant Wilkins, Australian Federal Police," he said, flashing some sort of badge at me, "and Constable Raymond, also AFP." The woman flashed a badge as well. "Is your wife here?"

"She's asleep," I said.

"You will both accompany us," he said with no trace of leniency in his voice. "Please awaken her."

"Can't we come round later?" I asked, half wondering why the Federal Police were here. "We're happy to cooperate."

His quarter smile went nowhere near his eyes.

"It is not optional," he said.

"Oh, very well," I said with a sigh. "You'd better come in."

Sergeant Wilkins came in and stood in the lounge. Constable Raymond came in, closed the door and stood blocking it.

"Why the Federal Police?" I asked.

"Please awaken Mrs Fernly," he said stolidly.

I stared at him for a few moments then looked at the woman. I detected not one shred of sympathy so I went and woke Angie. She wasn't too pleased and was less than happy to discover we were being

taken in for questioning again. Her rebellious streak made her decide to take a shower before dressing and I sat in the lounge watching the two police watch me while she did. Elvis had bounded in to greet the visitors but, for some canine reason known only to himself, he backed away and then high-tailed it back to the bedroom. I knew how he felt but didn't have the option.

“Right,” said Angie, emerging after a while, “let's go.”

We were escorted down to the parked, unmarked, car and sat in the back seat. Raymond drove.

“Have you called Katarina?” asked Angie.

“Not yet,” I said, unwilling to admit I'd been too intimidated to ring while being stared at by two silent police officers. “I'll do it now.” I felt fractionally more confident with Angie there.

I pulled my new phone out of my pocket and called up Contacts. As yet there was only Angie and Katarina listed. I was about to tell it to ring Katarina when I noticed that we hadn't pulled into the police station. Raymond had driven straight past and was on the road to Mossvale.

“Umm, aren't we going to the police station?” I asked.

Wilkins thought about it then answered, “no.”

“Where are we going, then?” I asked.

Wilkins thought about it some more.

“Federal Police Headquarters in Brisbane,” he said tersely.

“Oh,” I said.

“Federal Police Headquarters?” I mouthed silently at Angie.

She hunched her shoulders and spread her hands in puzzlement while shaking her head.

I grimaced then pressed the little picture of a green phone.

“Can I speak to Katarina Quayle?” I asked when someone answered. “It's David Fernly.”

“Putting you through,” said the voice efficiently.

After several moments of silence broken by a few clicks, Katarina answered.

“I take it there are developments, David?” she said without bothering with pleasantries.

“Definitely,” I said. “Angie and I are being taken to the Federal Police Headquarters in Brisbane.”

“Federal Police,” she said in surprise. “Federal?”

“Yes,” I said. “Why would the Federal Police be involved?”

“Have you been importing or exporting drugs?” she asked then quickly, “no, don't answer that.” She paused to think. “I confess I don't see why the Federal Police are involved. They're usually only involved with international crimes or matters to do with government officials. Are you there now?”

“No,” I said, wondering if the Blue Boar cafe had been owned by the Premier of Queensland. “We're being taken there.”

“Right,” she said decisively. “I have an appointment in five minutes. I'll leave directly afterwards and meet you there. Do not say anything before I arrive.”

“OK,” I said but she'd already hung up.

We were ushered into a room whose sign said it was Interview Room 5B which made me wonder why it wasn't just numbered 6. The only thing I could think of was that the sign maker had run out of numbers and opted to use a letter instead. The room was somewhat larger than the one in Thrisk Police Station and the décor was a little better.

There was a table in the room, with a laminate surface, and a computer and the chairs had thin padding to make them more comfortable. There was also a camera mounted high in a corner, pointing towards where we sat. Constable Raymond, no doubt with several years of exacting training behind her, took up her post at the door so we couldn't escape. She leaned slightly backwards so she was resting against the wall and looked to be extremely bored.

And so we sat there. Silent yet somehow resigned, or at least I was. With the involvement of the Federal Police it was obvious that whatever we were suspected of was coming to a head and there was a good chance that this, whatever it was, would be over soon, one way or another. I also had a fairly good idea that I wouldn't be allowed outside for a cigarette. The atmosphere here wasn't as relaxed as it was at the small, rural station in Thrisk. I could hear the sound of heavy traffic coming from the street outside, something I hadn't heard since leaving Sydney. It was depressing.

It felt like several hours before anything happened but it was more likely only twenty minutes. The door suddenly opened, making me jump, and a tall, thin man in a moderately well cut tan suit came in. He looked to be in his fifties. He was followed by another man in a dove grey suit with a plain pale blue tie. He didn't look Australian but being a multi-cultural country you never can tell. The man in the grey suit pulled a chair over to a corner and sat with one leg crossed on his knee, watching us. Constable Raymond had come away from the wall and was trying to look alertly attentive.

"Superintendent Jeavins," he said in a strangely high pitched voice. His lips didn't move much either, which was disconcerting. "You are David Fernly and Angela Fernly?"

We both nodded.

"Please say yes or no," said Jeavins. "This is being recorded."

"Yes," I said. Since we were presumably being filmed I wondered why we needed to verbally confirm our identities.

"You are a former director of Secure Data Systems Pty Ltd of Sydney?"

he asked, lifting his eyes from the file in front of him. "Now retired?"

"Yes," I said.

"And you are a former teacher of English at the Menikarn Ladies College in Sydney?" he asked, shifting his gaze to Angie. "Also retired?"

"No," said Angie. "I taught English Literature. Very different."

"I see," he said and made a note.

"Umm," I said hesitantly and his eyes leapt up and locked on me.

"Yes?" he said testily.

"Umm, we'd been advised not to say anything until our lawyer arrives," I said.

"I see," he said and his thin lips turned down at the sides to show his displeasure. "And who is your lawyer?"

"Katarina Quayle, of Lovejoy and Hope in Ipswich," I said. "She's on her way."

"Constable," said Jeavins, his eyes not leaving me, "find out where this Katarina Quayle is."

"Sir!" exclaimed Raymond and slipped out of the room.

Jeavins continued to regard me for a few moments then looked down at his paperwork again.

"How long have you been a hacker?" he asked suddenly, looking piercingly at me again.

"I'm not a hacker," I said in surprise.

"You were employed by Secure Data Systems as a hacker," he shot back.

“No, I wasn't,” I said. “My role was to secure systems against hackers, and track them if they breached the security.”

“And that would, at times, involve hacking,” he said, more as a statement than as a question.

“Obviously there are certain techniques used by hackers that I would use against them,” I said.

“So you are a hacker,” he said firmly.

“David,” said Angie. “Katarina said to say nothing.”

“You're right,” I said, fighting the urge to defend myself. “No comment.”

Jeavins' nostrils flared but he sat back in his chair and stared at me. It was very intimidating.

There was a tap on the door.

“Come,” he said, raising his voice a little.

“Their lawyer is here,” said Raymond, coming in. Katarina pushed her way in behind her.

“Katarina Quayle, lawyer,” she said, plonking her briefcase firmly on Jeavins' table. “These are my clients. Please identify yourselves.”

“Superintendent Jeavins, AFP,” he said, “and Constable Raymond, AFP.”

“And who is that?” asked Katarina, looking at the silent man in the grey suit.

“Dan Kaminski,” said the man after a short pause. He had an American drawl. “CIA Liaison, Australia.”

For once Katarina was lost for words and Angie and I looked at each other in wide eyed astonishment. What on earth was the CIA doing

here?

“Now we are all here,” said Jeavins, a touch sarcastically. “Mr Fernly, what is your interest in the President of the United States?”

Chapter Twenty Seven

You could have heard a dust mote drop.

The room was absolutely silent. Even the traffic outside seemed to have gone somewhere else. Jeavins and Kaminski watched closely as Angie and I looked at each other in astonishment and Katarina's jaw fell. Then the penny dropped.

“Oh god,” I said slowly. “You've got into my computers.”

The tension in the room lifted as Jeavins realised this was a statement that could be used in court against me. As far as he was concerned it was all over bar the filling in of details.

“Why did you do it?” he asked.

“I think it's time to tell them everything,” said Angie quietly.

I nodded and Kaminski leaned forward a little.

“How did you get past the encryption?” I asked.

“I'm not a technical person,” said Jeavins, “but we have some very able people.”

“Clearly,” I said then took a deep breath and started to tell them about the aliens.

Within a minute Jeavins had lost interest and was sitting there with a sceptical expression. Kaminski got up and walked to the window where he stood looking down at the street below. I stumbled through the rest of my explanation, acutely conscious that they didn't believe a word of it. Judging by Katarina's expression she was clearly wondering what sort of clients she'd landed herself with and how she could palm us off onto someone else.

“So you're saying it's all an alien invasion?” asked Jeavins.

“No,” I said, feeling very lost and empty. “They arrived by accident

and were trying to get home. I was just trying to help them.”

Jeavins looked over at Kaminski who continued staring out the window.

“He's telling the truth,” said Angie.

Jeavins just looked at her and she fell silent. Then the grilling began as Jeavins tried to extract what he believed was the real truth out of us. It went on for hours and any number of times Katarina had to interject as Jeavins grew increasingly frustrated. By the end of it I felt drained and exhausted and Angie was white as a sheet and her hands were shaking. Even Jeavins was looking stressed when he eventually fell silent and looked over at Kaminski, who hadn't said a word. Kaminski shook his head slightly and Jeavins brought the interview to a close.

“Right,” he said heavily. “We'll get this typed up into statements for you both to sign and we'll take it from there.”

“Can we go?” asked Angie.

“Once the statements are signed,” he said. “But do not attempt to leave the country.”

“We won't,” I said in relief.

He got up and he and Kaminski left the room. Raymond was left to make sure we didn't try to escape while the statements were being prepared.

“Now I know why they're called 'hardened criminals',” I said. “You have to be hard to survive this kind of treatment. So what'll happen now?”

“Ordinarily, once the statements are signed they'll continue their investigations,” said Katarina, “but I suspect in this situation they'll get a warrant for your medical records first.”

“Why?” I asked, desperate for a cigarette.

"To see if you have a history of mental health issues," she said calmly.

"Ahh," I said. "There's something you ought to know then," and I told her about why I'd left SDS.

"Unfortunate," she said, frowning. "Still, no charges have yet been brought and this issue may well be sufficient to cause them to not bother."

"You mean me being mad?" I asked wryly.

"Yes," she said. "It's a grey area of the law and one where the so called experts rarely agree. They might prosecute and they might not and the courts may well decide to go for diminished responsibility."

"So I'm either going to prison or a nuthouse?" I asked. "Oh goody."

"Oh, we're a long way from that," said Katarina. "We don't even know what damage has been done or how the President and the CIA fit into all this. It may yet come to nothing. I'm pretty sure they won't be bothering with either of the fires, though."

* * *

Back home, Angie and I simply stopped going anywhere other than the odd quick trip out to get food. We spent most of our time just waiting for something to happen and worrying over what would happen to Elvis and Shishke if we both went to prison. Katarina seemed to think that if they did press charges that Angie would be charged with aiding and abetting as it would be readily apparent to anyone that she didn't have much in the way of computer skills.

The inevitable knock on the door came nearly two weeks later. I was on the verandah and Angie happened to be walking past the door on her way back from the bathroom so she opened it. Elvis was affected by our mood so he just looked up instead of going wild with excitement.

"More uniforms," said Angie, coming onto the verandah.

This one was dark blue and he had a cap under his arm.

“Mr Fernly?” he asked, following Angie. There was someone indistinct behind him.

“Yes,” I said, looking him up and down. “I don’t recognise your uniform. We’ve had the Queensland Police, the Federal Police and the CIA. What are you, KGB?”

He looked startled.

“Fraid not,” he said, recovering quickly. “The KGB was disbanded in 1991. I’m Air Commodore Ian Wanderer, Royal Australian Air Force.”

“Appropriate name,” I said. “Will this be a long visit or are you taking us somewhere as well?”

“Oh, I’m hoping this will be a long visit,” he said, “and a friendly one. We can stay here, if you like. You have a lovely view.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Have a seat.”

“We were just about to have some lunch,” said Angie, sensing that Ian Wanderer was different to our previous visitors. “Would you both care to join us?”

“Oh, delightful,” said Wanderer. “Yes, thank you. This is Warrant Officer Lau.”

Lau stepped forward out of the shadows of the lounge and I instantly recognised him, or his type at least. He was a fellow computer nerd.

Wanderer sat on the couch and Lau took the fold-up camping chair that we kept on the verandah in case of visitors. Angie went off to busy herself in the kitchen as it was obvious that I wouldn’t be making lunch.

“I really should come to Queensland more often,” said Wanderer, admiring the view. “This is really quite delightful.”

“You're not from Brisbane, then?” I asked.

“No, Canberra,” he said with a deprecating smile. “Lau's from Queensland, though. RAAF Amberly.”

Elvis wandered over to inspect the visitors and got a pat from both of them so he decided to stay.

“So how can I help you?” I asked. “Should I get my lawyer round?”

“Oh there's no need for that, old man,” he said. “No, this is just a friendly visit.”

“Oh really?” I confess I was a little intrigued.

“Coffee?” asked Angie, poking her head out.

“Oh, yes please,” said Wanderer. “White with two, thanks.”

“Just white for me,” said Lau gravely.

“Well, then,” said Wanderer, picking up his heavy looking briefcase and putting it on the couch beside him. “It seems you've had an alien encounter. Would you care to tell me about it?”

“What would you like to know?” I asked.

I picked up a cigarette and lit it.

Wanderer beamed. “Mind if I join you?” he asked, pulling a packet out of his pocket.

“Have one of these,” I said in surprise. It's unusual these days to meet a fellow smoker.

“Thanks,” he said, taking one. “My, umm, brief is to track and analyse alien sightings and encounters. Most are nonsense, of course, but one or two every now and then have some, shall we say, validity. I received a report from the Federal Police about you. Purely routine, of course. Standard procedure when the word 'alien' or 'UFO' crops up.”

He lit his cigarette and gazed thoughtfully at me.

My explanation went better this time as it wasn't met with scepticism and blatant disbelief. In fact, Wanderer was sympathetic and understanding and asked intelligent questions. Angie returned with the coffees and some sandwiches and joined in the conversation.

"Fascinating," he said when Angie and I finally drew to a close. "And that ties in with the telecoms intrusions."

"I'm sorry?" I said.

"It was Lau who detected them," said Wanderer. "He spotted some non-approved activity on one of the secure systems at Amberly and tracked backwards. It seems that a small piece of software got onto the secure system from a system used by civilian staff at the base."

"How did the software get onto the civilian system?" I asked, feeling a chill come over me.

"It seems that the software was brought onto the base via the mobile phone of that civilian," said Wanderer.

"I don't suppose that civilian lives anywhere in the Thrisk area?" I asked, knowing that that must have been the case.

"Indeed," said Wanderer. "RAAF Amberly is, after all, only thirty kilometres away so Thrisk is quite convenient."

"I'm not following this," said Angie.

"It's pretty simple," I said, "and I should have thought of this. That software I put on the Telstra node went onto the phones and computers of anyone who connected to the node. I stupidly forgot that mobile phones are mobile and someone round here must have taken their phone to the RAAF base. I'm not sure how but it looks like it got onto their computer and from there into the base's secure system."

"Actually it was worse than that," said Wanderer. "There happened to be a visiting USAF Lieutenant General on a tour. The software got

into his phone.”

“Ahh, that explains the CIA then,” said Angie.

“Actually no,” said Wanderer. “That in itself wouldn't have interested the CIA. No, the thing is, that USAF Lieutenant General was from Joint Base Andrews, in Maryland.”

“And Joint Base Andrews is ...?” I asked.

“Formerly known as Andrews Air Base,” said Wanderer. He seemed amused. “A fairly average USAF air base apart from one thing.”

“Which is?” I asked.

“It's the home of Air Force One,” said Wanderer. “The President's official aeroplane.”

“Oh shit,” I said.

“Quite,” said Wanderer. “Thus making your software an international incident. Hence the CIA.”

I collapsed back into my chair, horrified.

“Oh god,” I said, reaching for my ciggies. “I might as well shoot myself now.”

“Well, that is one option,” said Wanderer.

“I don't really see any others,” I said grimly.

“Oh, there are always options,” said Wanderer, studying the tip of his cigarette. “I am not without influence.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Oh, it might be possible for all enquiries into your, umm, activities, to be dropped,” said Wanderer. “Especially as there is a bit of a turf war going on.”

“What do you mean, a turf war?” asked Angie.

“Well now, let me see,” said Wanderer, ticking them off on his fingers. “The Queensland Police, obviously, since whatever crime there has been was in Queensland. The Australian Federal Police as it has an international aspect. The RAAF, of course, because our systems were infiltrated and with them the rest of the Australian Defence Force, The Defence Department and the Department of Home Affairs. Also the Australian Secret Intelligence Service, which is our version of the CIA, is kicking up a bit of a stink, as is the Australian Cyber Security Centre who thinks it should be entirely theirs, even though they come under the auspices of the Federal Police.”

“Oh lord,” I said, knowing he was right since computer crime was my field. I’d just forgotten all about these bureaucrats. “You think you can persuade them all to drop it?”

“In exchange for a little cooperation,” said Wanderer, watching a parakeet fly by.

“Are you serious?” I asked. I noticed Angie was staring hard at Wanderer. “What sort of cooperation?”

“Ahh, yes,” said Wanderer. “When I got the report about you I confess I was immediately interested and I requisitioned your computers from the Federal Police.”

“How on earth did you do that?” I asked.

“I cited national security,” said Wanderer. “Defence outranks the police in such matters.”

“I suppose so,” I said. “So you know that I’m telling the truth?”

“Actually I don’t,” he said. “This is why I brought Lau with me. He’s our top man and he’s been playing with your machines for the last few days. I have to say he’s rather upset with you.”

“Wow,” I exclaimed, realising what he meant. “You couldn’t break my encryption?”

“What method did you use?” asked Lau, his first words other than in matters to do with food and coffee. He looked both intrigued and resentful at the same time.

“My own,” I said. “It’s based on PGP but with a few little tweaks of my own.”

“I’ll let you two technical bods get together later,” interrupted Wanderer. “But as soon as I found out what your piece of software did, and Lau has confirmed its methodology, I knew I needed to talk to you.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Wasn’t the software encrypted as well?” asked Angie.

“It couldn’t be,” I said. “It had to run on normal systems without the encryption.”

“Oh,” she said, looking baffled.

“Your method was to split the alien’s data into small segments and translate the structure on a distributed multi-tasking platform,” said Lau. “There’s a very good chance that quite a lot of those segments are still on those platforms.”

“Yes,” I said. “A lot will have been overwritten, of course, but a lot will still be there. Mostly on the computers rather than the phones, I would think. I’ll still have a lot on my computers as well.”

“Exactly,” said Wanderer. “And if you’ll get us through the encryption we should be able to recover a percentage of those segments and rebuild the aliens’ database, if only partially.”

“It won’t help you,” I said. “I looked at some of the data but it’s in their own language. I couldn’t make any sense of it.”

“We do have access to some of the best linguists and scriptologists in the world,” said Wanderer, mildly. “It’s worth a try at least. And, if nothing else, the data will add verisimilitude to your story. It would be

quite a coup for Australia, don't you think?"

"There is that," I said, beaming. "When shall we start? Where are my computers?"

"They're at RAAF Amberly," said Wanderer. "How about now? The sooner we get started the less data will have been overwritten."

"Awesome," I said, jumping up. "Angie, hon, I may not be home for dinner."

"You mean it's all over?" she asked.

"More or less," I said gleefully, giving her a hug.

I was still being naïve. Nothing is ever truly all over.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Fourteen Months Later

I cooperated fully, of course, I thought I might do quite well out of it, too, as the Australian Navy liked my encryption methodology and had been thinking of licensing it for use on their senior officer's laptops as it was more efficient than their existing method. They decided not to in the end, to my disappointment. We recovered about 45% of the aliens' database and I got co-opted onto a civilian team to try to translate it. We met twice a month at RAAF Amberly.

Clive also got drafted. He wasn't at all happy about it but he didn't have a lot of choice. It was either that or face the consequences of starting the fire at the Blue Boar cafe and, with over thirty years experience of the aliens, he had unique knowledge on how their minds worked, as well as a vague idea of their language. Apparently it was auditory but produced by scraping stiff sections of their bodies against each other, much like a cicada only with a lot more mucus.

Amusingly Senior Constable Morris came round to tell me the news that all enquiries were being dropped, by order of the Chief Constable of Queensland. He was quite respectful as it meant that I clearly knew people in the highest echelons of power and was therefore someone to be wary of.

* * *

Angie's phone rang one evening, just after dinner. She picked it up to see who it was and looked at me in surprise.

"Why are you ringing me?" she asked.

"I'm not," I said, picking up my own phone and waving it at her.

"It says it's you," she said. "Ohh, it's your old number. I never got round to deleting it from Contacts."

"Ignore it," I said. "Must be a scammer. My old number's long gone."

She touched the 'end call' icon and the phone stopped warbling. It started again a minute or so later so she touched 'end call' again. Then it rang again.

“Oh, this is ridiculous,” I said. “Give me the phone.”

She tossed it over and I accepted the call.

“Whoever this is,” I said, “I know you're a scammer. Go away,” and hung up.

I sat there with the phone in my hand for a minute or so but it didn't ring again.

“Bloody scammers,” I said, passing the phone back to Angie.

It rang again so I snatched it back.

“For god's sake,” I said angrily into the phone then froze, the phone pressed against my ear.

“Who is it?” asked Angie.

“Shhh!” I said, flapping my hand at her. “Yes,” pause, “How ...?”, pause, “Yes,” pause, “Really? So not that far ...,” pause, “Yes,” long pause, “What?” long pause, “You're joking,” even longer pause, “I mean ...,” pause, “Can I think about it?”

Slowly I hung up then sat there, staring at the phone.

“Who was it?” asked Angie.

“Good god,” I said.

“Oh I don't believe that for one moment,” said Angie. “I know you're good at what you do but you're hardly the second coming of the Lord.”

“That was Angus,” I said.

“Angus who?” she asked.

“Angus the ...,” I said, gesturing with my thumb towards the property at number 7 Timber Court.

“You mean ...?” she said, putting her hand over her mouth. “But how ...?”

“I gave them my old phone,” I said. “Apparently they’re parked round the back of our 7th planet.”

“Wow,” she said. “Which one’s that?”

“Neptune, I think, or Uranus,” I said.

“Have they broken down or something?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “Angus said they stopped there while they had discussions with their home world.”

“Why couldn’t they have done that from here?” she asked.

“I’ve no idea,” I said, “but the thing is they were talking about Earth. They’ve reported the existence of this planet.”

“Oh god,” said Angie, leaning forward with a worried look. “And he’s warning us that an army is on its way?”

“No, it’s worse than that,” I said. “Apparently whoever makes these decisions back where they come from wants me to be their first Ambassador to Earth.”

“Jesus,” said Angie. “They must be desperate.”

“I’m not joking,” I said. “They were serious.”

“Wow,” said Angie, getting up. She walked over to the verandah door and stared out then turned back to me. “Why you?”

“Angus said something about it being because I helped them,” I said.

“Wow,” said Angie again. She went out onto the verandah then came back inside. “I mean, wow!”

“Exactly,” I said, still staring at the phone. “I asked if I could think about it. What do you think?”

“So I'll be Madame Ambassador?” she asked. “I rather like the sound of that!”

“I don't think so,” I said. “We can check but I think the spouse of an Ambassador stays as just plain Mrs.”

“Oh, isn't that just bloody typical,” she said crossly. “It's a man's world, all right.”

“I wish it was,” I said, “but I rather think these day's it's a computer's world. Nothing can happen anymore without them.”