



**THE
GHOST**

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THE GHOST

Phillip Petersen

FOREWORD

They call me 'the ghost'—not because I haunt houses, am a spy, or anything like that, but because I ghostwrite. You won't ever have seen my name in print but the chances are very good that you have read or heard something of mine. Many of those incisive analyses you read under some journalist's byline or hear on the radio or TV are mine. So are some of the brilliant speeches by many of our country's leaders—business, political and even clerical. And if some celebrity who can't do an interview without a very slowly turning autocue produces a beautifully lucid, well structured autobiography, you can be sure he (or she) has had more than a little help from me or someone like me.

Not that there are many like me. Sure, there's plenty who do my sort of thing but most of them are the type who produce books with titles like *Mr Famous: An Autobiography with Albert Scribe*. Not me; I let the supposed author take all the glory and only he (or she) and I know it wasn't all his/her own work.

There is a price for all this (beside missing the ego trip of seeing your name in print): if you're looking for work, you can't show your prospect all the great work you've done. However,

believe me, word does get around; enough of the one's I've helped pass on the info to others looking for a similar service for me to get by pretty nicely—helped by the fact that the guarantee of perfect secrecy of my service allows me to double the usual price.

I started right back in high school, where I wrote essays, poems, all sorts of assignments for other kids. I came unstuck when one teacher refused to believe one kid produced an assignment he turned in and the idiot confessed all. He got an automatic fail and we were both nearly tossed out.

I learned a valuable lesson from that and, when I went to university and started doing the same thing for students there—everything from literature, history, political science, economics, science and even nursing—I kept it more or less within the bounds of possibility for the student. The trouble was I spent so much time doing other students' work I never had time to study. I failed.

Fortunately, the guy who topped the graduating journalism class—largely due to my efforts—saw the benefits of continuing the relationship when he landed a job. It was not too long before I had a sizable clientele in the journalistic profession and gave up my half-hearted attempts to finish uni—though I kept up my student services for some years after.

Don't I ever regret the respect—even adulation—I might have had if my name had appeared on all I've written? I'd say not, but then why am I writing this under my own name when I know at least one person involved who would have paid me double what I'm likely to make from this if it is ever published?

CHAPTER 1

We shook hands and sat down on the park bench, looking out at the lights dancing on the river. With a different companion, it might have been romantic; but when your companion is a guy you know is one of the biggest crooks in town and you know his bodyguard is lurking in the shadows behind you and is probably armed and it's pretty late at night and awfully quiet and very few people about, it's anything but romantic. Chilling, is probably the word I'd use.

Yes, definitely chilling, even though I was pretty sure Marco Ballisteri wouldn't have got me here just to have me 'taken care of'. It was rather puzzling why he had chosen this rather theatrical meeting on a park bench in the Botanic Gardens rather than in his office or at his home or mine but I was guessing there was a good reason I would soon learn.

‘So, Marco,’ I said. ‘You're the last person I would have thought would want his autobiography written... I guess that's why you dragged me here?’

‘Not exactly.’ He cleared his throat, in a manner I would have interpreted in anyone else as nervous; but Marco Ballisteri was the kind who made people nervous, not the other way

round. 'I want you to write a book for me from stuff I'll tell you but you'll put your name on the book and I won't ever be mentioned as author or source or anything else.'

'That's not the way I do things.'

'I know, but that's the way this has to be.'

'I won't do a snow job.' I was rising as I spoke.

His hand reached out and grabbed my arm. 'Don't go,' he said urgently. Behind me I felt the shadow of the bodyguard move. I sat down again.

'Look,' I said. 'I will not do a biography that makes you out a saint, and I don't see how I could do an honest biography that wouldn't land you in jail. Assuming you gave me all the facts, of course.'

'How do you ever get anything written when you keep interrupting, jumping to conclusions and slandering your subject?' he demanded. To me, there seemed to be a hint of amusement as well as exasperation in his voice. 'I thought writers were supposed to listen.'

'I'm listening.'

'Okay, look, I'm a crook. I admit it. But there are much

bigger crooks than me. So I run a few pros, I have an illegal casino or two, I put out a bit of porn, I slip in the odd illegal immigrant, see a bit of cash safely in and out of the country. So it's all on the seamy side and most of it illegal. But the big crooks are the cops and officials I have to pay off and the scum who deal the drugs. That's something I don't do, have never done.'

I looked across the river at Marco's riverside mansion. 'Come on, Marco,' I said. 'Everyone knows you built your house where you did to make it easy to bring drugs in.'

'Then why haven't they ever caught me with any?'

'Same reason you've never been pulled in for any of your other crimes—you pay them off.'

'No.' He spat out the denial.

'So, what's all this got to do with me?'

'You're going to expose the big crooks.'

'You have evidence... Yeah, I guess you at least have a record of the ones you've paid off... Why don't you send it to the police or the CJC or the Crime Commission?' A light dawned on me. 'Yeah. How do you know who you can trust?'

Marco hunched forward. ‘Exactly. I actually gave the stuff to a cop and he ended up in jail himself.’

Memory of a recent case came back to me. ‘Michael Gigante?’ I queried.

He nodded.

I considered. ‘I take it you still have this material?’

‘No. I guess it's somewhere in the police system—if they haven't destroyed it.’

‘But you have a copy?’

‘No. It was on my computer and, oddly enough, my house was burgled and my computer stolen.’

‘So, what do you want me to do? I'm a writer. I write. I do my digging for files in some quiet library or on the internet, not in official police records and other places I have no access to. It seems to me what you need is a private investigator if you can't trust anyone in the police.’

‘I did hire one. He slipped off the platform at Central Station and ended up under a train.’

‘And you expect me to set myself up for something similar? Thanks, but no thanks.’

‘I’ll give you a minder.’

I laughed aloud at this. ‘Thanks a lot,’ I scoffed. ‘That would really put the mark on me, wouldn’t it?’

This time I did rise. I was quite angry. ‘Look,’ I said, ‘you are stark, raving bonkers. I would have bugger all chance of getting this stuff. Even if I did, what the hell would I do with it? Unless you are prepared to cough up with a helluva lot of other stuff, it would be the shortest book on record after the famous books with all blank pages that came out a few years back. And even if you got me stacks of evidence—enough to make a decent book—no-one would publish it.’

‘You’re smart. You’ve got contacts. You can get the stuff. And you can self-publish it.’

I groaned. ‘And get the arse sued off me or tried for criminal libel if I wasn’t killed? No thanks.’

‘Fifty grand now and fifty grand on completion?’

That did sort of stop my breath for a few seconds. ‘You really want to get these guys, don’t you? What is it—revenge? Cruel the opposition? It seems to me you’ve got more to lose than to gain by rocking the boat. I can’t believe you’ve suddenly got religion. What aren’t you telling me?’

He buried his face in his hands and sobbed, but when he raised his head, his eyes were dry and blazing. ‘I want the bastards who killed my son. He died of a heroin overdose, but I know he never used drugs in his life.’

‘Can you be sure of that?’

‘Yes.’

I wasn't so sure. No father thinks his kid's on drugs till undeniable evidence is rammed in his face. My flash of pity for him was being buried by a conviction that it was probably a case of poetic justice and that his son had probably overdosed himself on heroin that his father, despite his denials, had brought in.

Suddenly, the whole scene disgusted me. I turned abruptly and walked rapidly away.

CHAPTER 2

I was still fuming when I got home to my bachelor pad. My mood wasn't improved when I found no beer in the refrigerator. I dug out some scotch, poured myself a stiff slug, squirted in a dash of soda, put on a Ray Charles CD and flopped down in my favourite armchair.

I was in the mood for some blues. Usually, I'm quite happy with my life—a life many would see as lonely, almost friendless. I guess by nature I'm a loner; I've never had a yen for the domestic scene. But, just occasionally, I take a look at myself and see a true ghost moving insubstantially through life and making no real contact with any other person. It is then that I contemplate what might have been.

Right now, I had a bad case of the 'what ifs?'. What if I'd chosen a different career? What if I'd made more friends? And the biggest call of all—what if I'd been swept off my feet by some woman who had made me into that strange creature called a husband—someone who put concerns of wife and children above his own?

I quickly put the last image out of my head but an ache for mental and physical union with a woman remained. So, when

the doorbell rang and I opened the door and saw a stunningly attractive woman standing there smiling at me, I wasn't sure I hadn't conjured her up from the depths of my imagination.

‘Marco sent me. I'm your minder,’ she said and, before I had a chance to say or do anything, brushed past me into the flat.

I turned to follow her and closed the door behind me. She was already comfortably ensconced in my favourite chair.

Surprise gave way to anger. Who the hell did she think she was and who the hell did Marco think he was?

‘I don't need a minder,’ I snapped at her. ‘I told Marco what he could do with his job...Or are you supposed to convince me?’

She took a sip of my whisky and smiled. ‘You'll do it,’ she said. ‘I can be very convincing.’

‘Make me an offer I can't refuse? That's been tried before.’

She merely smiled. There was at least a minute's silence between us.

‘Well?’ I finally asked.

‘Well what?’

‘Well, convince me.’

She rose gracefully, walked languidly over to where I stood, put her arms around my neck and kissed me deeply.

I shook her loose. ‘That's been tried before too,’ I said.

‘And usually succeeded, from what I hear.’

‘Hear from whom?’ I queried.

‘The ghost of Christmases past.’ She laughed, revelling in her own wit as much as in my discomfort.

I relaxed, picked up the spirit of the repartee. Maybe it was the whisky but I was almost beginning to enjoy this. ‘And all my Christmases will come at once if I agree?’

She laughed again. ‘You may well think so.’

‘So, you'll be my live-in minder—except when you have to sneak off to tell Marco what I'm up to, of course.’

She opened her eyes wide in feigned surprise. ‘That's most unworthy,’ she said.

I laughed. ‘This is really quite hilarious. It's all so transparent...but I like it.’ I looked at her and shook my head sadly. ‘Look, you might even convince me if I thought I had a

hope in hell of delivering, but I don't. And it doesn't strike me as real smart entering into a contract with Marco and not being able to deliver.'

'You can do it.' She sounded like she actually believed it.

'And, as I told Marco, even if I did take the job, no way would I want a minder. Having a minder would just be like painting a huge bullseye on my back.'

'That's why he sent me. No-one will suspect I'm your minder.'

'But they will know you work for Marco and that's just as bad.'

'No-one who could wish you any harm knows I work for Marco.'

'Maybe. Then again, I hope you won't take this the wrong way, no disrespect intended and all that, but if I wanted a minder, I'd want one a bit tougher than you.'

'I've done my unarmed combat training. I can look after myself.'

As she spoke the last word, she slashed out with her right hand connecting with the side of my neck. Ignoring the pain

and faintness induced, I instinctively spun her round by thrusting sharply back at her left shoulder as I slapped her right shoulder forward with my left hand, then took her down backwards over my leg and fell on top of her, pinning her to the floor.

‘Not too bad, but it seems you need a little practice,’ I said.

‘I didn't want to hurt you.’

‘The only reason you ever do that manoeuvre is to hurt someone. You need to be a lot bigger and stronger than you to put someone out to it that way.’

‘Why would I want to put you out to it? I want you conscious.’

‘Here or in the bedroom?’

‘I guess the bed would be more comfortable.’

I got off her and stood up. She went to do the same and immediately collapsed. I was sure I hadn't been that rough with her. I checked her breathing, her pulse and her pupils. Everything seemed okay. Maybe she was a diabetic? I grabbed her purse and rummaged through it, looking for the card diabetics carry. I didn't find one but I did find something even more interesting—a police ID in the name of Maria Gigante,

and a Beretta automatic.

She opened her eyes. ‘So tired,’ she said and promptly went back to sleep—for that's what it seemed to be. Narcolepsy? What should I do with her? I picked her up, carried her to the spare bed and gently laid her there.

The effort, combined with her earlier blow and the oppressive heat, made my head swim. I staggered to my bedroom, hurriedly stripped, turned on the ceiling fan, dropped onto the bed and fell headlong into sleep.

Sometime in the night, I woke, dreaming I was being ridden by a woman. Then I realised it wasn't a dream; Maria was straddling me and giving us both the sweetest sensations. She was good at it and I was almost sorry when climax finally came. A few seconds later, I was definitely sorry; again she collapsed, this time right on top of me. Again, a few minutes later, she opened her eyes, said ‘so tired’ and went back to sleep.

I rolled us both over and we went to sleep entwined.

CHAPTER 3

I awoke with the sun streaming in, defeating the curtains' attempt to block it. I looked at the clock: 7.34. Memories of the night before came trickling back and I wondered if I hadn't dreamed it all—or part of it, at least. Then my brain focused the strange noise I was hearing and identified the unmistakable sounds of pots and pans being rattled in the kitchen—undeniable evidence that there was a woman in the flat.

I got up, showered, shaved, toileted, dressed and went out to the kitchen.

‘Pretty well timed,’ she said. ‘It's only half cold.’

‘I'm surprised you found anything to cook.’

‘Fried eggs and baked beans. Not exactly a gourmet meal but that's all there was in the place.’

‘Yeah, I don't do much cooking.’

‘Or cleaning.’

‘Hey, it's not that bad...I thought I was getting a minder, not a wife.’

‘What's wrong with a wife?’

‘Wives nag too much.’

‘Only when they have to... You ever think about having a wife—or a live-in woman?’

‘Only in my nightmares.’

‘Yeah, I guess if you had a woman living with you, you'd have to think about her sometimes instead of just thinking about yourself.’

‘Hey!’ I objected. This was getting just too personal and just a little bit nasty.

‘Sorry,’ she said. She sighed. ‘I'm sorry about everything. It was all my idea. I asked for it.’

‘No you didn't; you took it.’

‘Not that; the job.’

‘Asked Marco or your superior in the police force?’

‘Marco.’

‘Why?’

‘Marco seems to think you're our best hope and I thought maybe I could persuade you.’

I was still frankly puzzled by why Marco had turned to me. ‘I wonder who put him on to me?’ I mused.

‘No idea...Have you ever done anything like this before?’

I considered. ‘I did Lenny Carpenter's autobiography that lifted the lid on a spot of graft in the New South Wales force. But he ended up in jail himself and supposedly hung himself in jail.’

‘That rules him out...I can see why you're not too keen on the idea.’

‘Yeah. I still think Marco's best bet would be to go to the CJC and make an immunity deal. He'd need a whole platoon of minders if he did, though...and then one of them would probably do him in.’

‘And he no longer has the evidence.’

‘Yeah, I guess they've got rid of that permanently. It might be an idea trying to get hold of it on FOI or lodge an appeal for Michael Gigante and try to get it on subpoena.’

Saying the name reminded me. ‘You wouldn't be a relation of his, would you?’

‘His sister.’

‘And you're working for Marco! He must be dumber than I thought. Does he know you're Michael's sister?’

‘No.’

‘It won't be long before he finds out—especially if you keep carrying that ID around with you.’

Suddenly, it struck her. ‘You looked through my purse,’ she accused.

‘I thought you might be a diabetic. I was looking for the card they carry. You should have one to say you're a narcoleptic.’

‘I guess I should. I've ended up being carted off to hospital a few times by good samaritans who didn't know the symptoms. You were pretty smart picking it up.’

‘It never really dawned on me till your second attack. I was too woosy from your gentle tap to the neck to think much about anything. I pretty well collapsed not long after I put you to bed.’

‘Just as well I did it softly then.’

‘Yeah... Tell me about your brother.’

‘Michaelangelo. That was his given name,’ she explained,

seeing my quizzical look. ‘He changed it by deed poll. Would have changed the Gigante too except I talked him out of it. He was doing undercover work for the drug squad on Marco and found evidence that Marco was running prostitution and illegal gambling and paying off several members of the force—mainly with free sex, but some in cash.’

‘But no evidence of any involvement with drugs?’

‘No. I believe Marco when he says he's never had anything to do with drugs. He has reason to hate them. You know his son died of a heroin overdose?’

‘Yeah, which Marco maintains was administered by someone. Sounds like a father's reluctance to admit his son was a druggie to me.’

‘Maybe. Maybe not. He certainly believes it. That's what this is really all about. Above all else, he wants to bring his son's killer to justice. How he's going to do that I really don't know. I guess that's where you come in.’

I shook my head and grimaced. Just who did Marco think I was?

‘On the other hand, his wife didn't believe it. Or, at least I guess that's why she left him. I imagine she thought their son

had got hold of drugs Dad had brought in and blamed him. But I could be wrong.’

‘So, your brother got hold of this evidence somehow or other and presumably gave it to his chief. What happened then?’

‘That’s when it gets really murky. The chief claimed the evidence was nothing but a crude attempt to incriminate members of the force. Apparently, what was produced later as the evidence Michael had given him was merely a list of supposed payments, some of which were impossible—officers not even in the state at the time they were supposedly made, that sort of thing. The chief berated him as an incompetent who had been duped by Marco into doing his dirty work, but others spread the rumour that he was in Marco’s pocket. Shortly after, he was arrested in possession of drugs and money that had been obtained in a drug raid. Obviously, they’d been planted, but he was charged and went down for seven years. That’s all I can tell you. I was in Italy at the time and have only heard all this secondhand.’

‘Let me get this right,’ I checked. ‘You haven’t spoken to your brother?’

‘No. When I came back from Italy, two detectives—

Alistair McKenzie and John Abell— met me. They told me all about it. They'd worked with my brother and were sure he'd been framed. They'd been quietly digging into the files, sure that Michael hadn't lied and that there was some real information in there somewhere, but they kept drawing a blank. They wanted to know if Michael had told me anything. I told him I'd been moving round all the time and hadn't known a thing till they told me. Then they asked me if I knew Maria Ballesteri, Marco's niece. Of course, I told them how the hell would I know Marco's niece. I was rather offended at the question, actually; it had a hint of the old racial slur that all Italians know each other and they're all somehow involved with "The Family". Then they showed me a photo and I knew what this was all getting at. I'd sat next to her in the plane from Rome to Hong Kong and we'd chatted all the way. In fact, she'd practically told me her complete life story. I told the detectives this and they looked very interested. They asked me if I knew where she was now. I said she stayed on in Hong Kong for a few days to do some sightseeing and shopping. They told me she was being held by the Hong Kong police. Apparently, she had been carrying gold to deposit in a Hong Kong bank—ill-gotten gains, no doubt. I still had no idea what all this was leading up to and it was a real shock when McKenzie came out with it.'

She suddenly stopped, for what I suspected was a theatrical pause to heighten the drama—not that it needed much heightening. Then I saw the glazed look on her face and realised she was having another narcoleptic attack. While I was still wondering what to do, she seemed to shake herself awake. She looked at me for a moment as though not recognising me and then proceeded just where she had left off, though on a surprising tangent.

‘If you'd looked carefully at my police ID,’ she said, ‘you would have seen that it was issued nearly five years ago. I didn't last long in the police force. Well, I guess a narcoleptic cop is a bit of a worry.’

‘How long have you had it?’ I butted in. ‘Surely you didn't go into the police force knowing you were like that?’

‘No. I guess my first attack, though I didn't recognise it as that at the time, was when I tried to make my first arrest. I collapsed and the baddie got away. After that, they became more and more frequent and I was sent on a round of doctors and tests until it was eventually diagnosed and I was invalided out.’

‘And now?’

‘Most of the time it only happens when I get excited or

stressed... Anyway, after I got chucked out of the force, I was so embarrassed about it all that I shot off to Italy away from it all. This was the first time I'd been back.'

'Yeah, you sound like you learned English as a second language.'

She glared at me, then laughed. 'I guess McKenzie and his partner thought so too. I guess they wouldn't have asked me to do what they did otherwise.'

She paused again, while I watched anxiously for signs of another sleep attack. It didn't come.

'They suggested I impersonate Marco's niece. I thought they were crazy and said so but they persuaded me it was the best chance of finding out the truth.'

'How could they have asked you to do such a thing?' I demanded. 'It's crazy. You aren't even in the force.'

'I think they thought that was an advantage.'

'Maybe, but it makes you even less protected. Though, if you were a cop and Marco found out you were a cop... Why do you carry your old police ID? It seems like suicide to me—especially when you're likely to drop off at any time. And, apart from what crooks like to do to undercover agents, you could be

charged with impersonating an officer or something similar.’

‘It’s lived in my purse since I first got it. I managed to hold onto it when I got booted out. I’m so used to it being there I don’t even see it most of the time.’

‘If you want my advice, you’ll get rid of it—now. And that gun—where did you get that?’

‘From McKenzie. He said I needed some self-protection.’

‘Do you have a licence for it?’

She shook her head.

‘If I were you, I’d get rid of it too,’ I advised. ‘How do you know it isn’t a set-up too? Someone could even have been killed with it.’

‘You forget I’d just arrived back in the country when he gave it to me.’

‘True, but it’s still unlicensed—or maybe it’s licensed to someone you wouldn’t want to be associated with.’

She thought about it. ‘I guess you’re right but I do feel safer with it.’

‘You don’t think maybe shooting someone could be just a

teeny bit stressful and you might go bye-byes?’

She winced at the obvious sarcasm but exasperation at the absurd situation overcame my flash of sympathy.

‘This is the stupidest, most absurd plot I’ve ever known hatched,’ I said. ‘I take it Marco’s never met his niece and that he doesn’t know too much about her or you wouldn’t have survived this long. I can only hope to hell your detectives knew that. But sooner or later some relly’s bound to turn up who does know her well and then...’ I drew my finger across my throat in the time-honoured gesture. ‘How long is this farce supposed to go on?’

‘Only a few weeks. That’s how long the authorities in Hong Kong agreed to keep it quiet.’

‘So nothing has appeared in the papers there?’

‘No, and they’re holding her out of the way somewhere till then before charging her.’

‘That’s something I guess... There wasn’t someone expecting her in Hong Kong who is going to wonder what happened to her and query Marco?’

‘I guess not. I didn’t think to ask.’ She was looking increasingly worried and I began to think I’d better let up or

she'd collapse again.

‘The bank.’ Despite my resolve, I blurted it out. ‘They must have been expecting her and they're going to get a bit concerned if she doesn't turn up and then there are likely to be messages flying to whoever was sending it...I guess there was probably meant to be a signal acknowledging receipt. I can't imagine the sender would just wait for it to appear on their next bank statement. I wonder if your detectives who dreamt up this great scheme thought of that.’

My outburst had the effect I should have anticipated. She fell back in the chair, slack-jawed and went out to it again. I looked at her and felt a strange urge to protect her. If ever anyone needed a minder, she did—and I seemed to be the only one available.

She was out to it for probably less than a minute this time. ‘You look exhausted,’ I said when it was clear she was really seeing me again. ‘Go back to bed for a while and we'll talk again later.’

‘I have to go back and report to Marco.’

‘You're not going back there again. If you feel you must contact him, phone him.’

She shook her head. ‘I must go back. He must have something that can help clear my brother and I’m the only one who can find it.’

‘He told me the only copy of the stuff he gave your brother was stolen when someone broke in and stole his computer.’

I reflected on what I had just said.

‘Did you hear what I said?’ I queried. ‘He told me he *gave* evidence of corruption to a cop. That cop would have to be your brother. That means he knew your brother was a cop. Maybe he knew it all along. Maybe he was using your brother. It certainly looks like he was using your brother, but for what? To give the authorities some genuine information or just to mislead them. Maybe even to set your brother up. Have you heard your brother's side of the story yet?’

She looked very wistful. ‘I haven't even seen my brother yet. The detectives told me I shouldn't go near him until this was over.’

‘That makes sense...Come to think of it, you'll need to keep a very low profile in case you run into someone who knows you. I hope the ace detectives thought of that.’

‘Yes. They warned me against going anywhere I didn't

have to.'

'I still can't believe you've gotten away with it even this long. Marco swallowed it all hook, line and sinker?'

'Yes. I had to fly back to Hong Kong, phone him from there that I was coming and catch the next flight back to Brisbane. He met me and took me home. My narcolepsy actually helped. As you can guess, I was pretty stressed and kept nodding off at frequent intervals. He thought I was just jet-lagged and I've slept most of the time I've been there.'

'But you were awake long enough for him to tell you all about your brother and about me?'

'Yes. The first night I was there he told me about his son and his wife and my brother. The next day he told me he was getting on to you. After he'd been to see you, he came home pretty despondent. He told me you were too chicken to take it on, even though he'd offered you a minder. I suggested I go and talk to you. He didn't seem to think much of the idea at first, but then he became almost eager. So, here I am.'

'And here you stay...Look, I know you're supposed to be his niece and all but it seems strange him volunteering all this information like that. I wonder if he doesn't know more than you think he does and isn't using you or setting you up like he

did your brother.'

'Only one way to find out.'

'It's too risky.'

She shook her head, the light bouncing off her lustrous raven-black hair. 'I have to do it. It seems to be the only thing that can help my brother.'

'You won't find anything. You're risking your life for nothing.'

'How can you know that? I've got to try.'

'Leave it to your detective mates.'

'They haven't got anywhere.'

I sighed. 'Okay, then leave it to me. I don't know how yet but somehow or other I'll find the truth and get your brother out of there.'

'Okay!' she said. 'I'll phone Marco and tell him you'll take the job.'

'That's not what I said. I don't want to be beholden to Marco in any way. I'm doing this for you, not for him.'

‘I can't afford your fees.’

‘I'll take it out of your hide.’

‘Promise?’ she asked, with a seductive little lick of her lips and a tiny tilt of her pointed breasts.

I laughed. ‘Oh, go to bed,’ I said.

‘Not unless you come too.’

CHAPTER 4

I was very gentle and we managed it with only about a thirty second blackout at the crucial moment on her part.

Afterwards, we lay cuddled together while I tried to plan my next move.

‘Do you know the name of the barrister who represented your brother?’ I finally asked.

She pulled back from me and looked into my eyes. ‘No, but McKenzie would know. He gave me his number. I’ll ring him.’

‘I hope you don’t carry that around in your purse too...No. I don’t want them to know I’m involved. I’ll dig it up in the newspaper morgue.’

That’s what I did—after telling Maria to stay inside, keep the door locked and open it to no-one except me.

I was heading for the public library when I thought why not make use of my contacts. I tracked down the chief crime reporter for the "Courier", one of my old customers, and he

dragged out his original notes as well as the printed story.

‘I don't keep all this for every story I write,’ he said, ‘but this was a bit of an odd one. I had the distinct feel that the whole story wasn't being told and that some day there would be a follow-up. What's your angle?’

‘You know better than that. You know I never divulge who I'm working for.’

‘Ummm. I didn't say “who”; I said “what”. But I guess if you weren't such a cagey bastard, we wouldn't use you so much.’

‘So, what was wrong?’

‘Oh, the whole thing. The prosecution's case was too snug, the prosecution witnesses sounded like they were reading from a script, the defence counsel frankly didn't seem too interested.’

‘Who were they?’

‘Um...some losers paid for by the Police Union.’ He was flipping through some notes as he spoke. ‘Barbara Kirkegaard was the solicitor and Norman Madsen the barrister.’

‘Never heard of them.’

‘Not surprised.’

‘Got phone numbers, addresses?’

He pushed a huge address book over to me. ‘Help yourself.’

I found the names I wanted and copied the details. ‘Am I in here?’ I asked as I handed it back.

‘Of course.’

‘Should have sneaked a peek to see what comment you've got under my entry.’

‘Just name, rank and serial number.’

I thanked him, went back to my car and phoned Madsen. To my surprise, he agreed to talk to me at 2:30 that afternoon.

That was still three hours and I pondered going back to my flat but Maria's presence there made me strangely reluctant to do so. I wanted desperately to have something positive to give her next time I saw her and I was hoping, just as desperately, that this barrister might give me something.

I parked in the King George Square car park and walked down towards the Botanic Gardens, stopping on route to buy some sandwiches and a Coke and consume them at a sidewalk table.

In the Gardens, I sought out the bench where Marco and I had sat. It may be crazy but I do have this thing about picking up vibes from the 'scene of the crime'. I sat and smoked a pipe but all that came were ibises and possums looking for food. The problem was that my thoughts kept stalling on Maria. I'd always thought of love as an abstract concept used to justify sex but now I wasn't so sure.

I made it to the barrister's offices at the appointed hour. They were a rather dingy few rooms reached by a creaky old lift in a rather run-down four storey building in George Street.

Madsen was seated at a desk that looked like it might have come from a Salvation Army recycling depot, eating an orange, while the juice trickled down his arms. He hastily thrust it aside, stood up and made to shake my hand. Then he remembered the juice, took out a handkerchief and absently wiped his hands, while gesturing me to a seat.

'So, Mister Petersen, you wanted to see me about Michael Gigante's case.' He sounded perplexed and almost peeved.

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Well, for a start, why was there no appeal? I thought

everyone appealed any Tegner decision. There must have been more successful appeals against him than anyone else who's ever sat on the bench. He always stuffs something up.'

'Not this time.'

'What about this evidence Michael is supposed to have given his chief? Did you subpoena it?'

'Of course, but it was just what they said—a load of nothing.'

'Sure there wasn't anything else?'

He shrugged. 'We couldn't actually go into the place and tear it apart. We basically have to take their word for it.'

'What did you get?'

'A transcript from a computer CD-R disc.'

'You couldn't get hold of the original disc to see if it had been tampered with?'

'It seems to have disappeared.'

'And yet you allowed this supposed transcript to be used as evidence and haven't appealed?'

‘On what grounds?’

‘On the grounds that there is no way of proving its genuineness.’

‘I put that to the jury. They preferred to believe that policemen never lie.’

‘Michael was a policeman.’

He didn't answer. He was obviously becoming flustered. I was beginning to see that this was all a waste of time but I was reluctant to give it up.

‘How about FOI?’ I asked. ‘Can we get anything useful under FOI?’

‘Such as?’

It was my turn to be stuck for answers. I turned it all over in my mind. This was going to get me nowhere. Maybe I'd have more luck with the solicitor but I doubted it. I prepared to take my leave and go home to brood on what else I could do when another possible angle came to me.

‘Could I visit Michael in jail?’ I asked. ‘So that I can talk to him in confidence I mean.’

‘You can come with me. I'll arrange it.’

I wasn't too keen on having him tag along but I decided that was better than nothing.

‘Okay...When?’

‘Give me your phone number and I'll let you know.’

I gave him my mobile number, shook hands and thanked him and showed myself out.

I've always hated underground car parks; they're the ideal place for an ambush. I'm always very cautious in them—except this time. I was so deep in thought I didn't see the two guys slinking out of the shadows until they were almost on me. I reacted without thinking, stepping to the outside, kicking hard at the nearest man's popliteal fossa with the side of my shoe as I shoved him into the second. He pitched forward onto the second man, knocking him to the ground and landing on top of him.

Thank God for central locking and an easy-starting car. I was out of there before either of them regained his feet. Fortunately, there was no line-up at the exit and I was quickly away.

What was that all about?, I wondered. Coincidence, or was

someone trying to give me a message? If so, were they crooks or rotten cops? Just to be sure, I drove what was probably the most law-abiding drive of my life home to my flat; I wasn't going to give any possible rotten cop who might be in cahoots with my would-be attackers an excuse to stop me.

I gave a sigh of relief as I drove into my garage but my feeling of well-being vanished when I went to lock the door and saw a police car slowly cruising by.

I went upstairs and let myself in to my flat. There was no sign of Maria. I walked through the place hoping against hope she was in one of the rooms. She wasn't. I came back into the kitchen and spotted a note on the bench. It read simply:

I have to go.

M

I was still ranting at her stupidity when my mobile rang. It was the barrister telling me to be at his offices at 10 the next morning and he'd take me out to see Michael. I said okay and decided I was going to take a cab. No way was I going to park in King George Square car park again.

I poured myself a stiff whisky; I needed it. I was wondering just what I had got myself into and contemplating a quick trip to anywhere out of the mess.

I didn't even have time for a sip before the doorbell rang. I went to the door and looked through the peephole. Two men looking suspiciously like cops stood there but at least they weren't the two I'd disposed of in the car park. I cursed the fact that my flat had only one entrance/exit and decided there was nothing I could do but let them in. I opened the door and they pushed in.

‘Where's our girl?’ one of them demanded as I swung round to face them.

‘What girl? And who the hell are you anyway?’

They flashed police IDs at me.

‘Maria Gigante,’ the detective who'd queried me said. ‘Where is she?’

‘I wish I knew... You must be McKenzie. And shouldn't you have asked for... whatever Marco's niece is called?’

He looked discomfited. ‘Aye,’ he stammered. ‘Why isn't she here?’

I pulled the crumpled note out of my pocket and handed it to him. ‘It seems she's gone back to Marco...So you're the geniuses who came up with that insane scheme.’

‘Aye,’ he admitted.

‘I take it it doesn't have official sanction. Do your bosses know about it at all?’

‘Nay, lad, and you make sure you don't spill it.’

‘I won't if you pull her out of there right now.’

‘If she's at Marco's, we can't just phone her and tell her to get out of there,’ the second detective pointed out.

McKenzie looked at him. ‘Aye, the lad's right...Why the urgency?’

I shook my head at his stupidity. ‘Her cover's tissue thin. Anyone who knows her or the other Maria or a message from someone in the family or from the bank in Hong Kong or anyone else in the know could blow it at any moment.’

McKenzie looked crushed. ‘I guess you're right. We'll get her out as soon as we can. Then it will be up to you.’

‘I want out too. I went to see Michael Gigante's barrister today. I was jumped when I got back to the car park—well, I

would have been jumped if I hadn't got in first.'

'Did you get a good look at the ones who jumped you?'

'Good enough. One of them was a big bloke with a bit of a beer gut and a nose that looked like it could explode if you jabbed it.'

'Sounds like our old friend Sergeant Bruce Schwaner.'

'You know him?'

'Only too well. He's been in on a couple of drug raids with us. I'm convinced some of the drugs and cash we seized made its way into his pocket but I can't prove it.'

'The other guy was pretty average build. I didn't get as good a look at him but I did see that he had a chunk out of his right ear.'

'Sounds like Gary Dempster. He's a PI who specialises in digging up dirt for insurance companies. Manufactures most of the evidence, I suspect. Don't tell me those two rogues are together.'

'Why would they pick on me?'

'Scare you off, I guess...Did Michael's barrister tell you anything?'

‘No. I can't make up my mind whether he was under instructions to lose the case or is just clueless. He's taking me out to see Michael tomorrow. I want to hear his side of the story.’

‘I'd watch my arse pretty carefully if I were you. You're obviously not Mister Popularity. And I wouldn't be surprised if Madsen's in with them.’

‘Looks likely...I was kinda hoping you could cover my arse for me but I think you could have trouble covering your own. Getting Maria out of there is the first priority anyway.’

The younger detective looked shrewdly at me. ‘What's Maria to you?’ he asked. ‘You didn't know her before, did you?’

‘No. But I tend to decide pretty quickly whether I like someone or not. And I'm a bit of a sucker for someone who gets into trouble through no fault of their own.’

He smiled. ‘We'll look after her,’ he said.

‘Yeah.’ I let my voice express my total lack of reassurance.

McKenzie looked again at Maria's note, still clutched in his hand.

‘She’ll be okay, laddie,’ he said.

He took out a pen, wrote something on the back of the note and handed it back to me.

‘That’s the number of my private mobile,’ he said. ‘Ring me if you find out anything or if she comes back here or if you need anything.’

They left and I went back to my Scotch. I tried to think out my position and decide what I should do but Maria saturated my thoughts. The realisation, when it came, that I was totally obsessed with her shook me to the foundations of my being. No woman could do that to me—but she obviously had.

CHAPTER 5

I caught a cab into Madsen's offices and arrived at the stipulated time. He appeared with a briefcase, which he threw carelessly into the back seat, and we drove to the prison. On the way, I queried him about the interview.

‘Officially, I'm visiting to canvass the possibility of an appeal,’ he explained. ‘I won't introduce you; they'll assume you're my junior counsel.’

‘The interview will be somewhere private, no-one listening in?’

‘Of course.’

‘No chance of being recorded?’

He was aghast. ‘They wouldn't dare. Conversations between an accused and his legal representative are sacrosanct.’

‘Any chance of my talking to him alone?’

He seemed somewhat taken aback. ‘Difficult,’ he finally said.

I let it rest at that though I desperately needed to speak to Michael without Madsen being there.

It happened at the prison just as he said it would. He was well-known there and we were ushered without fuss to the interview room, where we waited until Michael was brought. I was shocked at his appearance. He looked a completely broken man. If there was a flicker of hope that his barrister's visit would eventually bring his freedom, it was too minute to notice.

Madsen introduced me as a writer who was interested in his case and thought he might be able to help prove his innocence. Perhaps a slighter bigger glimmer of hope greeted this announcement but it rapidly faded.

‘Michael, tell me about it,’ I prompted gently.

There was no response beyond a blank, bemused look.

‘The evidence you got from Marco—what was it and how did you get it?’

He focused, with some difficulty, on the question.

‘Take your time,’ I said. ‘Tell me everything you know and maybe I can help you.’

He looked at me with the pitiful expression of almost

daring to hope in one who has abandoned all possibility of salvation and I felt a stab of guilt that it was probably false hope I was raising.

‘The drug squad had been trying to plant someone on Marco for a long time,’ he said, in a whisper so low I could hardly hear. ‘When his son died and his wife left him, he advertised for a handyman-housekeeper couple. My partner, Mary Holmes, and I applied and we got the job. He kept us pretty busy but we didn’t learn anything of value. Then one day Marco asked me if I knew about computers and I showed him how to do some things and I set up some systems for him and then I managed to copy all his computer files.’

‘This is what you gave to your chief?’

‘Yes, but...’ He looked completely bewildered, mystified. ‘...but the chief says the only thing on the disc was some worthless files supposed to represent payoffs to various police and officials. But some of them just couldn’t have happened—the officer was out of state or in hospital or something like that at the time.’

‘So, the chief lied or someone tampered with the disc.’

‘They must have. All the other stuff was there, I swear,’ he pleaded with us to believe him.

‘Where is the disc now?’

He shrugged and looked at the lawyer. ‘I don't know.’

‘I told you. We subpoenaed it but all we got was a transcript,’ the barrister growled.

‘Your chief believed Marco had duped you?’ I queried.

Michael nodded.

‘Do you think it's possible that he knew you were a cop and set you up?’

He sighed. ‘I don't think he set me up. He might have known I was a cop, but even if he did, I still think it was all genuine information.’

‘Why would he incriminate himself?’

‘He's got this bee in his bonnet that his son was murdered. He'd do anything to prove it and bring his killer to justice.’

‘What do you think?’

‘I haven't got a clue.’

‘You weren't on the take yourself?’

‘No.’ I'd expected anger but the denial was delivered in the

same flat, lifeless tone as the rest of the conversation.

‘Eight hundred dollars a week is a lot to pay a handyman. I understand it was advertised at not much more than half that.’

‘I did a lot of things for him that an ordinary handyman wouldn't do.’

‘Such as?’

‘Oh, computer work, security, all sorts of things.’

‘And Mary?’

‘She did other things too.’ There was a definite flash of anger there and I decided not to push that one.

‘What happened to your partner?’

‘That was odd too. They said she had other evidence against Marco and made her a protected witness.’

I looked at Madsen.

‘Do you know what this evidence was?’ I asked him.

‘No.’

‘And she didn't give evidence at her partner's trial?’

‘No.’ The admission was delivered in a whisper that seemed to me loaded with guilt.

‘Do you know where she is?’

‘No.’

I looked at Michael, silently asking him the same question. His ‘no’ was an anguished plea and I guessed there was more than a professional relationship between the two partners.

‘Who would know?’

‘Only those who administer the program.’

‘I saw something on TV once about a crooked cop who got a name out of the computer system.’

He looked me and appeared to be deliberating with himself. ‘Yes, it can be done,’ he finally said, ‘but you have to know how or else know a lot about computer systems.’

‘Do you know how to do it?’

He was silent for quite a while, staring into space. Finally, ‘can I have some paper and a pen?’ he asked.

I produced my jotter pad and a pen and handed them over. He painstakingly printed several lines on the pad and handed it

back to me

‘That will probably work if you know enough about computers to do it,’ he said.

‘Can you do this from any computer?’

‘No. It would have to be on the network.’

‘Thanks.’

I took the pad and pen back from him, turned over a few pages, wrote

Maria is home and helping me.

Read and destroy. Tell no-one.

and handed it over to him.

Astonishment, joy, puzzlement were all written on his face as he read the note. He made to speak but then merely handed the note back to me. Smart, I thought; I can more easily get rid of it than he can.

‘Just one more thing,’ I said. ‘Who arrested you on the

drugs possession charge?’

‘Sergeant Schwaner.’

‘Figures.’

On the drive back, we sat in silence for some time, though I could tell Madsen was trying to say something but just couldn't seem to get it out. Finally, ‘Just who are you and who are you working for?’ he blurted out.

‘I'm a writer and I never divulge who I'm working for.’

He let out his breath and I guessed he was relieved to find I had no official capacity.

‘If I were you, I'd butt out before you get hurt,’ he warned.

‘Why would anyone want to hurt me? I'm only looking for the truth.’

‘The truth is what gets people hurt.’ There was deep bitterness in his voice.

‘Lies can hurt even more; so can failure to tell the truth or to bring out the truth in court.’

‘Yes.’ He sounded even more bitter.

‘Why do you work for them?’

He sighed. ‘I’ve got no choice. Firstly, they’ve got photos of me soliciting in public toilets. Secondly, this isn’t the first case I’ve deliberately lost because they told me to. Thirdly, they’d kill me if I walked out and came clean.’

‘Go to the CJC, cut a deal.’

‘They’d still get me. At the very least, I could never practise again.’

‘So, how many more innocent people are you going to help send to jail?’

He suddenly visibly paled and I thought for a moment I had shaken him. Then I noticed that his eyes, which had been flickering back and forth, seemed almost transfixed on the rear vision mirror. I skewed my neck to take a look and saw a police car on our tail.

‘Your buddies?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe.’

‘Didn’t they approve this expedition?’

‘I didn't ask them.’

He slowed down to make sure his speed was well inside the limit and the following police car slowed down too, although there was plenty of passing room. So intent was he on watching it that he almost missed seeing a car stopped by the side of the road not far ahead. It was unmarked but had a blue light stuck on its hood. The driver stood beside it, signalling us to stop. Madsen eased the car to a stop some distance ahead, turned off the ignition and sat trembling.

This is it, I thought. I've blundered straight into a trap. I looked back. The driver of the unmarked car was waving the marked police car on. It went slowly by and I saw the face of Sergeant Schwaner glaring at me. While I was still watching him disappearing from view, my door was pulled open.

‘Okay, Madsen, we'll take him off your hands,’ a gruff voice said. ‘We want to ask him some questions. Come with me please,’ he ordered me.

There didn't seem to be much point in resistance. I got out and followed him back to the other car, where I was shown into the back seat. My guide got into the front passenger seat and the driver retrieved the blue light and got into the driver's seat.

‘We've been looking for you,’ he said. ‘We went to your

flat and found McKenzie and his partner there with some girl.’

‘Thank God,’ I said. They must have found Maria.

He looked at me quizzically, but when I didn't offer any explanation, went on: ‘McKenzie told me what you were up to. He was quite concerned about you going up here with Madsen—quite rightly by the look of it. He didn't want to leave the girl alone and didn't want to take her with him so he was quite relieved when we said we'd go. So, here we are.’

‘Thank God!’

‘Thank McKenzie mainly...Do you mind if we ask you some questions?’

‘Well, no, but it would be nice if I knew who you were first.’

He laughed. ‘Sorry. We don't usually do interviews this way. I'm Anthony Pastega and he's Gary Jurkovic.’ They flashed police IDs at me. ‘We're with the Crime Commission. We regularly track Marco's financial transactions and we noted a transfer of fifty thousand dollars from his account to yours. We thought we just might ask you for an explanation.’

I frowned. ‘Isn't that rather a strange tactic? I mean if Marco and I were involved in something underhand, wouldn't

you just be tipping us off?’

He shrugged. ‘Maybe. But we know more about you than you may think. You’re rather famous really.’

That was pretty good for the ego, though rather perplexing. I was about to ask for an explanation when he got back to his line of questioning.

‘So, why the fifty grand?’ he asked.

‘He wants me to write a book for him.’

He raised his eyebrows. ‘I’ve heard you’re good, but fifty grand?’

‘Fifty grand advance,’ I said.

He whistled softly. ‘I’m obviously in the wrong game...So, what’s this book about? I don’t see how he could write his autobiography without putting himself in deep shit. I don’t think even you could do it. You’re not going to do a whitewash job on him, are you?’ he pleaded.

‘No, that’s something I won’t do.’

‘Remember Lenny Carpenter,’ his partner put in.

‘Yeah, poor old Lenny. You did a good job with that but it

didn't do Lenny much good...Don't tell me Marco's going to spill the beans?'

'Yeah.'

'Why? Got religion in his old age or something?'

'Revenge mainly, I guess. He insists someone murdered his son and he wants his killer brought to justice.'

'His son's death was a simple OD. Happens all the time.'

'He claims his son never did drugs.'

'So does just about every father of every user...Probably stuff his old man brought in.'

'He claims he doesn't do drugs.'

'Everyone knows that's why he built his mansion on the river and has a boat that can outrun anything else in the harbour.'

'If everyone knows, why isn't he in jail?'

'Yeah, yeah. Because he has bastards like Sergeant Schwaner in his pocket.'

'Can't you do anything about Schwaner?'

‘We'll pin him one day.’

‘Yeah.’

Jurkovich had been watching me while his partner questioned me. Now he looked to the front and cried out in surprise: ‘The dopey bastard's still sitting there. He can't be waiting for us to give him his passenger back, can he?’

His partner swung round to have a look. ‘Maybe he thinks we'll want to talk to him too. Could be an idea, at that.’

‘I'd say he's just plain petrified,’ I said.

‘Of us or Schwaner?’

‘Maybe both, but Schwaner much more I'd say.’

‘Could be a good time to talk to him.’ He opened his door. ‘Come on, Gary,’ he said. Then he turned to me. ‘You stay here and relax. We haven't finished with you yet.’

They went off to the car ahead, leaving me to brood. Well, at least they trusted me not to abscond. Then again, maybe that was what they were hoping I'd do; give them an excuse to shoot me. I had been beginning to trust them but I was also rapidly learning not to trust anyone.

They were back within ten minutes. ‘You were right,’

Pastega said to me as he got in. ‘He's scared shitless. I'd say he wasn't sure before whether we were in with Schwaner and were going to bump you off on the spot, or if we'd actually tumbled Schwaner and would be able to charge him as an accomplice in something. He swore he didn't know what Schwaner was doing and that he hadn't told him about your trip. He was lying, of course, but he's more scared of Schwaner than he is of us.’

‘I'd say what's really worrying him is that Schwaner will blame him for you being here. The way it happened could well look like a trap to Schwaner,’ I observed.

Pastega considered. ‘I guess. A pretty clumsy trap though. Sergeant Schwaner will have some explaining to do as to what he's doing out here but he's bound to come up with some good explanation and, apart from that, what have we got on him?’

‘So you didn't get anything out of Madsen?’

Pastega shook his head disgustedly. ‘Bugger all really.... Okay, what did you get out of Michael?’

‘About as much... There was one thing. He told me his partner, Mary, was made a protected witness just after he was arrested. Supposedly, she has some evidence against Marco. You'd think she would have been produced as a witness at Michael's trial one way or another—whether for defence or

prosecution. Or is my knowledge of police methods fair up the spout? If she has this evidence, why hasn't it been used? Are they waiting to build up a stronger case or what?'

Pastega frowned. 'Well, I guess so. Can't say I've ever given his partner much thought. All I really know is that he was working for Marco while working undercover.'

'Seems they were both hired by Marco as a sort of double act—handyman plus housekeeper or something like that. The story seems to be that, when Marco's son died and his wife left him, he advertised for a couple to do this double act, Michael and Mary applied and were hired.'

'Seems almost too convenient.'

'Yeah. I guess it could be just sheer dumb luck. Then again, it could be that Marco knew they were cops and hired them because they were cops.'

'Why?'

'Well, either to give them honest info to pass on or to dupe the force.'

'There is a third possibility,' Jurkovich said. 'Michael, and maybe Mary, could have been in the game all along.'

I sat back in my seat. ‘Oh, shit, I don't know,’ I said. ‘I never really wanted anything to do with this. You're the detectives; you solve it.’

‘Having second thoughts?’ Jurkovich asked. ‘What about all that money?’

‘The way things are going I'm not sure I'll be able to enjoy it...I'm not doing it for the money anyway.’

‘Yeah, I could be very public-spirited for fifty grand,’ Pastega said.

‘Fifty grand advance,’ his partner said. ‘Plus what—another fifty?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Can't imagine Marco being that public-spirited either.’

‘Not even if we could prove his son was murdered and bring his killer to justice?’

‘That's bullshit.’

‘Maybe.’

Pastega shrugged, turned round in his seat, buckled his seat belt and started the engine.

‘Let's go,’ he said and took off.

Madsen was still sitting in the same position in his car. The detective's move had taken him by surprise but he quickly got his vehicle moving and followed us.

‘What's he up to?’ growled Jurkovich.

‘Guess he wants an escort,’ his partner replied. ‘If he wants to follow us, there's nothing we can do about it.’

‘Or maybe he wants to see what you do with me,’ I suggested. ‘So that he can tell Schwaner.’

We could have easily lost the barrister in the traffic but the detective chose not to do so, driving normally and merely checking in his rear vision mirror from time to time that the other car was following. As we neared the city and traffic lights became more frequent, the barrister inevitably missed a light we went through and was lost to sight.

‘Should I slow down and let him catch up?’ Pastega mused. ‘Bugger him. If he's using us as an escort, he'll just have to take his chances. We're not going to guard him for ever anyway.’

‘You know, I can't help feeling sorry for the poor bastard,’ Jurkovich said.

‘Me too,’ I said. ‘But I feel sorrier for the poor bastards behind bars because he was instructed to lose their cases.’

‘You reckon he's done that?’

‘Don't you?’

‘Probably...I wonder why?’

‘Why he does it? They've got photos of him in compromising situations in public lavatories. And when you've done it once, that gives them another hold over you. Besides being scared stiff of the bastards.’

We arrived at my flat and they let me out.

‘Maybe you should leave the detective work to us,’ Pastega said. ‘Look after yourself. And let us know if you find anything.’

‘Yeah, I owe you. Thanks, guys.’

CHAPTER 6

I was still brooding on the day's action when I opened the door of my flat and walked in. When I took in the scene, I could hardly believe my eyes. Some guy was drilling holes in my wall, there seemed to be rolls of electrical wire everywhere and all sorts of electronic bits and pieces were scattered around.

‘What the hell!’ I demanded.

McKenzie appeared from my bedroom. ‘Sorry. Couldn't wait for your permission. We've wired your place so everything that happens will be recorded—vision and audio.’

‘Christ, if I wanted to be on a reality show, I would have applied. I hope you don't really mean everything. I guess I can put up with the living areas but the bathroom and the bedroom are out.’

McKenzie considered. ‘Okay,’ he said reluctantly, ‘I'll grant you the bathroom but the bedrooms stay. If anyone has a go at you it's most likely to be when you're tucked up in bed.’

‘So, I'm to be the cheese in the trap, am I? Thanks for asking.’

‘You've made yourself the bait. We might as well take

advantage of it.’

‘Like you did of Maria.’

By this time, I had made my way into the lounge and, with some relief, spotted Maria sitting, looking rather dazed, in my chair. My anger flared.

‘Look,’ I said, ‘I don't mind being the bait but I don't want Maria squirming on the hook. You've done enough to her already.’

‘Don't you see this is the best way to protect her? We can't stay with her all the time and we don't know anyone else we can trust to leave her with.’

‘You're saying this is live TV?’

‘It will be from tomorrow. Unfortunately, no vacancies in your block. The nearest we could get was a house round the corner. The Optus van will arrive tomorrow. You've taken up a great offer of two phone lines and pay TV all in one cable. So have we round the corner.’

I was slightly puzzled. ‘Are these for real Optus guys?’

‘Private contractors—Q and Co.’

I looked at the electronics guy. ‘You're Q?’ I asked.

He nodded.

‘After the guy in James Bond?’

He nodded again and grinned.

I turned back to McKenzie. ‘What happens if Schwaner and his crony come tonight?’

He grinned at me. ‘Then we’ll get all the evidence we need.’

‘Yeah, great.’

‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘I happen to know he’s on an all-night stake-out tonight.’

‘He won’t sneak off like he did today?’

‘He wouldn’t dare.’

I was somewhat reassured, but only somewhat. Then again, not being live would at least make my plans for the night easier to carry out.

As soon as the detectives were gone, I turned on my computer, logged onto the internet, went straight to the site

Michael had written down for me, downloaded the files whose names he had given me, and copied them onto a 120 Mb Imation floppy disc.

I'm ashamed to admit that it is only then that I thought of Maria. I looked up to see her still sitting in my chair, still looking rather shell-shocked. I went to her.

'Are you okay?' I asked.

'Tired.'

'Go to bed.'

'When you do.'

'Why don't we have a shower first?'

She knew what I was getting at. 'I don't have showers; I might collapse.'

'Oh.' Of course. 'If I come in with you, I can catch you if you do.'

She considered and I think she was almost about to agree when I was suddenly struck by the risks involved.

'No,' I said, 'I'd never forgive myself if anything happened to you. Tomorrow, I'll get hold of a chair and one of those roses

on a long tube you can hold in your hand. Then you can have sit-down showers.’

‘You make me sound like a decrepit old lady.’

‘Well, you are... Well, not old. Come to think of it, I'm not too sure of the lady part either.’

She knew I was joking but even the scintilla of a hint of hurt I thought I sensed in her made me instantly contrite and I rushed to comfort her.

‘You're not decrepit; you're beautiful, vibrant and young. But you are a lady—a very lovely lady. You don't belong in all this.’

She sighed. ‘I belong in it until Michael is free.’ She sighed again, even more deeply. ‘And I belong here with you—if you want me.’

‘I want you.’

She stood up and kissed me, a long, lingering kiss. ‘And I want you—now.’

‘On candid camera?’

‘Cameras can't take pictures in the dark... Can they?’

‘If they're infra-red, they can. I wouldn't put it past them.’

‘They can't take pictures through blankets.’

‘In this weather? We'd sweat to death.’

‘A sheet then.’

‘You go first. Strip down to your underwear in the bathroom, then get into bed under the sheet and turn off the light. I'll be along soon.’

She looked at me a little quizzically but did as I said. I gathered things I would need, turned off the lights and took the collection to the bathroom with me. I stripped and made my way in darkness to the bedroom.

‘You took a long time,’ she said.

‘You're just eager.’

‘Yes.’

She was eager but we made love so gently that we barely rippled the sheet. She went to sleep locked in my arms.

CHAPTER 7

Leaving her was hard—not just because she seemed to sense every slightest move I made away from her and tried to draw us even closer together but also because I desperately wanted to stay with this woman who, quite unaccountably, had so quickly come to mean so much to me.

At last I managed it and made my way in darkness to the bathroom. I dressed and stowed my kit in various pockets, then silently made my way through the flat and out to my car. The closing of the door to the flat and the opening of the door to the garage seemed incredibly noisy in the night stillness but I hurried on making as nearly like a ghost as I could. I let the car roll down the drive and down to the end of the street before I started the engine and switched on the lights.

I drove to the Morningside police station, where I knew Sergeant Schwaner was stationed. No lights were on. I drove past, parked in a quiet area a couple of blocks away and walked back to the station.

I guess no-one expects police stations to be burgled. With my pick tool, it took about twenty seconds to get inside. It was awkward finding my way through the unfamiliar surroundings

with just the few millimetre beam from my torch but it didn't take me long to locate the Sergeant's office and his computer.

The computer screen was dark. I turned up the illumination and a demand for 'log in' and 'password' came into view. Now, what had Michael told me? First log in was the computer number. I found the number on a sticker on the computer where he'd told me to look and put it in.

Password was simply the initials of the person followed by a numeral depending on how many others with the same initials had got in first. How many others with 'bs' had got in ahead of Schwaner? Unfortunately, Michael didn't know and couldn't guess. You only had three tries before the system decided some unauthorised person was trying to gain entry and shut down the computer. I tried 'bs1'. A message flashed up 'You are not authorised to use this computer'.

I tried again with 'bs2' and was admitted to a second screen demanding 'log in' and 'password'.

The 'log in' bit was easy: just the old 'bs2' again. But the password was one Schwaner had chosen himself. Time for a little help. I took from my pocket the floppy disc with the programs I had downloaded earlier and put it in the slot. A screen came up with several options. I clicked on 'find

passwords' and it went to work, unmasking pwd files.

It did a good job. It told me:

bullshit access all local files link to network
 access plusmail

bullshit then cockspur access file witproc.xls

Jackpot! I entered in the required log in and password and was presented with various options, none of which seemed particularly helpful.

Then I noticed the icons at the bottom of the screen, one of which was the standard network representation. I clicked on it and was presented with a different set of options. I found the one I wanted—'witness protection'—and clicked on it. It demanded a password, which I supplied. The next thing, an unexpectedly large database table started unloading.

It seemed an exasperatingly long time before I located Mary Holmes and found that she now went under the name Lisa Pullan and was at Flat 2, 31 Bulcock Street, Caloundra. Okay, that was what I wanted. Now, how did I get out of here?

That was something I'd forgotten to ask Michael and he had neglected to tell me.

Then I noticed the 'help' row along the bottom of the screen. Aha, that was it: 'F4 logout.' I hit F4. Nothing happened. 'F1 previous screen'. Well, what did I have to lose? I hit F1 and I was back at the network entry point. I hit F4. A log in screen came up. I cursed softly. I wanted 'log out', not 'log in'. Maybe they did the same job. But if I just logged in again, surely I'd just end up back where I came from.

I was almost deciding that I'd have to leave it and let the Sergeant know someone was fiddling with his computer when inspiration struck. Far from congratulating myself, I cursed my fading memory. I had remembered other programs where the log out procedure was simply to type 'bye' in the log in field. I tried it and, to my immense relief, it worked.

I was back at the Sergeant's local files. I reluctantly decided I didn't have time to examine them in detail and completed logging out. I slipped my floppy out of the drive and turned the illumination down again.

I was just about to leave the way I had come in when I heard voices and the sound of the front door opening. Lights were snapping on and the voices getting closer. I did the only

thing I could think of doing and dived under the desk.

‘Turn those fuckin' lights off, you fuckin' idiot,’ a gruff voice snarled. ‘We're not supposed to be here, remember.’

‘Turn your fuckin' torch on then,’ someone snapped back as the lights dowsed. ‘What are you worried about anyway? I'm sure you could talk your way out of it.’

‘Sure, sure. Maybe I could dream up a good excuse for being here instead of on the stake-out, but how do I explain you being here?...Unless I was arresting you. Sounds like a bloody good idea, come to think of it.’

‘If I go down, so do you.’

‘You threatening me, you weasel? I might just have to pull you into line.’

‘Ah, fuck, that wasn't what I meant.’

‘You better fuckin' not.’

They'd reached the Sergeant's office by this time. I was hoping to hell they'd do what they had to do quickly and without turning lights on. I was in luck. I could see a glow from a torch but that was about all. Now, as long as someone with long legs didn't decide to sit at the desk. As if summoned by the

thought, a large butt parked itself on the chair and a large pair of feet came ominously close.

‘Just wipe those fuckin' files and we'll be out of here,’ said a voice that seemed to belong to the menacing body.

‘I told you it wasn't smart keeping them on your computer.’

‘So you fuckin' did....I don't like the idea of that fuckin' ghost snooping around. We'll have to get rid of him. That Holmes bitch too.’

‘What about his live-in girlfriend?’

‘She can go too for all I fuckin' care.’

‘She's Marco's niece or something. He won't like it.’

‘Fuck him! What the shit's he up to anyway hiring this guy to stir everything up?’

‘He's got a bee in his bonnet that one of us bumped off his son.’

‘Shit! Why would we bother? He always was a useless prick. What could he do to hurt us? If he did know anything, no-one would ever believe him.’

‘Well, someone had better talk to Marco.’

‘Not me. Let him do his fuckin' worst. He'll swing higher than we will.’

‘Maybe, but I'd prefer that my toes didn't leave the ground at all.’

‘That's it. All done. Let's get out of here. I'll give you a bell in the morning and we'll work out what to do with the whole bunch of shits.’

He heaved himself up and they made their way out of the building.

Even after I heard the front door click shut, I sat cramped up under the desk for several minutes till I dared to believe I was safe. While I sat, I thought of what I had heard. It seemed that nothing was likely to happen before morning, which gave me a bit of a breathing space. However, it seemed very likely Maria and I would receive a visit fairly early tomorrow. Would the live feed be fixed up by then? Unlikely. But then at least the guys would be likely to be on the job pretty early, which would provide some protection.

Perhaps the most urgent thing was to warn Mary or, preferably, get her out of her 'safe' house. I reasoned that she'd be safer if I brought her down to my flat, and anyway I was desperate to talk to her. That seemed to be the only lead of any

description I had going for me at the minute.

Unless...I wondered what the files were the pair were so desperate to wipe and I wondered how much they knew about computers. If they'd merely deleted the files as normal, they could still be retrieved from the disc. If I had the necessary software, they could, but that was one bit of software that wasn't on the floppy I'd brought with me. The only thing to do was to swipe the hard disc. Fortunately, my kit included a torch with an adjustable head that I could lay on the desk to throw a beam on my work area, as well as necessary screwdrivers and pliers.

As I worked, I thanked computer manufacturers for now making their machines so easy to install and remove components. I took me a bare fifteen minutes to remove the hard disc and stow it in a pocket and another five minutes to replace the cover on the computer.

I made my way as fast as I could to my car and drove as fast as I legally could to Mary's address in Caloundra, wondering as I did so how closely she was guarded.

Not unexpectedly, the place was in darkness. I could think of no smart way of doing things so merely parked, walked up to the front door and knocked. It was a long time before the door

was opened a couple of inches on the safety chain.

‘Who is it?’ asked a husky voice.

‘Someone who's trying to get your ex-partner, Michael Gigante, out of jail.’

‘Maybe that's where he should be.’

‘Do you have any evidence for that?’

‘No. I couldn't believe it when it happened. I'm not sure that I do yet.’

‘Look, Mary, there's a couple of crooked coppers planning to kill you. That's why I'm here—to get you away.’

‘How do I know you're not the one planning to kill me?’

Good question. I couldn't believe I hadn't thought of that. She knew nothing at all about me.

‘You know Alistair McKenzie?’ I asked.

‘Yes. Good cop.’

‘You could ring him; he'd vouch for me.’

‘Know the number?’

I recited it for her. I could hear the sounds of a mobile phone.

‘He suggested I leave a message,’ she said after some delay. ‘These days, I don’t like leaving messages, even to him. What do you want me to do?’

‘Get dressed, chuck a few things in a bag and come with me.’

‘Where to?’

‘My flat.’

‘What makes you think I’d be any safer there?’

‘McKenzie has just had the whole place wired for sound, film and video.’

There was a long delay. ‘Okay,’ she said at last. ‘I don’t know why, but I trust you—more than I trust these people who are supposedly protecting me anyway.’

Both of us were on edge on the trip back to Brisbane but the trip was uneventful. I quizzed Mary about events and her story was much the same as Michael’s.

‘I still don't get why they made you a protected witness,’ I said. ‘What evidence do you have that's so dangerous?’

‘I don't really know.’ She sounded genuinely bemused. ‘I found out Marco's linked to prostitution, illegal gambling and money laundering but I think they knew all that anyway. I'm not even sure that my evidence would stick in court and I can't see that Marco would really try to kill me or even muscle me to stop me giving it.’

‘Why on earth did they put you in witness protection then? Whose idea was it?’

‘Ian Hummel.’

‘The Assistant Commissioner?’

‘Yes.’

‘You've been up there since?’

‘Yes.’

‘They guarded you?’

‘There's a couple of cops in the downstairs flat. They went out in a screaming hurry not long before you arrived.’

‘Fortune favours the brave—or the stupid.’

She looked at me, clearly puzzled.

‘Me,’ I explained. ‘Blundering up to your flat like that.’

‘So, my guardian angel has his own guardian angel maybe.’

My thoughts suddenly went back to my conversation with Michael.

‘Michael said he did things for Marco that a handyman wouldn't normally do—computer things, security—know anything about that?’

‘I spent most of my time doing housework but he did seem to spend a lot of time fooling around with Marco's computer. He told me he was sure he'd be able to find out lots about Marco's operations that way.’

‘So he could quite possibly have copied all Marco's files?’

‘I don't see why not.’

‘Strange Marco should have trusted him so much. You don't think he set him up?’

‘He couldn't have fooled Michael into thinking he'd copied things he hadn't. Someone must have tampered with that disc.’

‘I'm inclined to agree but I can't see why Marco would deliberately let himself be compromised like that. He seems genuine about bringing his son's killer to justice but I don't see how that would help.’

‘None of it makes much sense to me,’ she agreed.

‘Michael also said something about you doing extra things for Marco. What did he mean?’

‘Poor Michael, he's so jealous. I used to give Marco a massage now and then. I thought it might be an ideal opportunity to catch him with his guard down but he never let anything worthwhile slip. There was never anything sexual involved and Marco never made the slightest hint of an advance but Michael hated the idea.’

Well, I'd found Mary and talked to her but still hadn't got any further—only deeper into the mire. It suddenly occurred to me that my action in taking Mary could land me in more hot water. I'd worry about that when I had to. Right now I wanted to get home and see what was in the files Schwaner had erased. Then I'd have to decide what to do with the disc; it certainly wasn't safe to have it hanging around.

CHAPTER 8

There was a light on when we got back to my flat. Maria pounced on me as I opened the door.

‘Where have you been?’ she demanded. Her eyes flashed with anger and hurt. Then she saw Mary and her expression became even more stormy.

I ushered Mary in and closed the door. ‘Mary Holmes, your brother's partner,’ I introduced her.

‘Oh.’ Maria's attitude changed immediately. Then her anger and hurt flared up again. ‘Why didn't you tell me what you were doing?’ she demanded.

‘The place is bugged, remember.’

‘You could have told me in the bathroom.’

‘Hey, if you two want to have a domestic, I'll just go to bed,’ Mary broke in.

‘Sorry,’ I said. I showed her to the spare bedroom, told her to go to bed and sleep well and went back to Maria. Only then did it strike me how she was dressed.

‘You've been out, haven't you?’ I demanded.

‘I had to.’

‘You didn't go back to Marco?’

‘No,’ in a very small voice.

‘But you phoned him?’

‘I had to. If I don't report in every day, he'll get suspicious. I couldn't do it from here with your phone being tapped.’

‘Is it?... Maybe it is. But so what? Why would that stop you phoning Marco from here?’

‘Look, you trust McKenzie, I trust McKenzie, but he's not going to be the only one who hears and sees all this surveillance is he?’

She had a point but I wasn't completely sure it was a valid one. Then the disturbing thought came to me that we were being recorded now. I grabbed a pen and paper and warned her to remember we were being recorded. She read it, gasped and nodded.

I took the stolen disc and my gear out of my pockets and went to work on my computer, replacing my hard disc with the stolen one. Then I set about copying the entire stolen hard disc to a CD-R disc, rather relieved to find it would all fit on one disc.

I wanted to get this over with as quickly as possible.

I don't drink much tea. I'm pretty much a coffee, Coke and whisky man. But, for some inexplicable reason, I felt the sudden urge for a cup of tea to help pass the time while the disc copied. Maybe it was the domestic image seeing Maria seemed to invoke.

‘Want a cup of tea?’ I asked.

‘Do we have any milk?’

‘No.’

She grimaced. ‘No, thanks. I can't stand black tea.’

I put the electric jug on and went to the tea canister.

‘Probably just as well,’ I said. ‘Christ knows how old these tea bags are.’

I started shuffling through the tea bags—most of them souvenirs from one or other motel or hotel—looking for one that might be a more appealing variety. Then I spotted some that seemed to have lost their labels. I picked one up and found its envelope was non-porous and transparent and seemed to contain a white powder. I took all the bags out and examined them. There were five unlabelled, all the same as the first. I

palmed them all and took off for the bathroom, where I started flushing them down the toilet. So, that was how they were going to take care of us.

Maria had followed me. ‘What is it?’ she asked. ‘Heroin?’

‘Or Coke or speed. What does it matter?’

‘Who planted them?’

‘Good question. Schwaner has been occupied on the stake-out—unless, of course, it was called off or they got what they wanted. Then again, he could have made a phone call and got some crony to do it. But when? How long were you out?’

‘Twenty minutes.’

‘Just barely long enough, I guess, but cutting things pretty fine...McKenzie and his crew were here for a long time.’

‘You don't suspect him?’

‘I don't know. I'm beginning to suspect everyone—even you.’

She looked startled and hurt. ‘I'd be in it as much as you,’ she pointed out.

I reached for her but she moved back. ‘Is that why you

didn't tell me what you were up to when you went out?’

‘No...Look, I didn't really mean it...It's just that every time I turn my back you seem to disappear.’

‘So, you're not the only ghost...Shouldn't we be looking to see if there's any more stuff hidden?’

‘Yes.’

We searched the flat. I hesitated about waking Mary but Maria said she'd search the room quietly and I left her to it while I searched the rest of the flat. We didn't find any more drugs but there was a fair quantity of money in new notes sitting in a drawer of my desk.

‘Want to take these and chuck them in someone's garbo?’ I asked Maria.

She looked at me in surprise.

‘They'll be marked or their numbers noted,’ I explained.

‘I know. It's just that you usually seem so paranoid about me leaving the premises.’

‘No choice at the moment. I've got to finish this.’ I indicated the disc copying procedure. ‘Whoever's springing the trap might arrive at any moment.’

She had only just gone before the screen flashed up a message that the copying had successfully completed. I took the disc out of the copier, went to my CD collection, took out a disc at random, replaced it with the drive copy disc and put the audio disc in the CD player.

I had barely finished doing this when there was a peremptory loud knocking on the door. I opened it. Not unexpectedly, Sergeant Schwaner stood there.

‘Jeez, you work long hours, Sarge,’ I said. ‘You must be bucking for promotion.’

He scowled but otherwise ignored the crack.

‘I have reason to believe you are in possession of prohibited drugs,’ he said. ‘I intend to search your premises.’

‘I guess I can't stop you.’

‘I'd be very happy if you tried.’

He walked straight to the tea canister and tipped its contents out.

‘Bastard!’ he said.

He next walked to the draw of my desk where the money had been, pulled it open and dumped the contents on the desk.

‘Fuck!’ he said.

He walked over very close to me and shoved his face almost into mine.

‘All right, smartarse,’ he snarled, ‘you win this time. But I’ll get you.’

Then he spotted my hard disc still sitting on the desk.

‘Well, what do we have here?’ he exulted. ‘I should have known it was you swiped my disc.’

He picked it up and stuffed it in a pocket.

‘This time I’ll wipe it properly,’ he said, more to himself than to me.

Another thought came to him.

‘Seems I’ve got you after all, you cunt,’ he snarled. ‘Breaking into a police station and stealing a hard disc may not be a major crime but it’ll get you into jail and who knows what might happen to you there?’

‘Sure, sure. You’re going to produce that disc in court, aren’t you?’ I sneered at him.

‘After I get rid of the stuff I don’t want on it.’

‘The only way you can do that is to format the disc and, after you've done that, there won't be any way to prove where it came from.’

He looked dubious for a moment but seemed to eventually decide I probably knew what I was talking about.

‘I'll get you,’ he snarled and was about to walk out when another uniformed policeman pushed Maria ahead of him into the room.

‘Look what I found outside,’ he said.

‘Ah, the girlfriend,’ exulted Schwaner. ‘Time for a strip search, I reckon.’

‘We can't do that here,’ objected the younger cop, ‘there'd be hell to pay.’

‘It can wait till the station. I can just feel my fingers up her twot and her arse now.’ He was looking from Maria to me, watching for the reaction, perhaps waiting for me to lose my temper and strike at him.

‘Unless you're arresting her, she's staying right here,’ I said.

‘I've always wondered what pros carry in their purses,’ he

said.

He snatched Maria's handbag and emptied the contents on my desk. I was relieved to see the money was not there. Neither, as far as I could see, was her police ID. But then I saw the Beretta and my heart sank. Why hadn't she done what I said and got rid of it?

‘Well, what have we got here?’ Schwaner said. ‘Can you produce a licence for this little toy?’

Maria said nothing.

‘I think I might just have to arrest you for having an unlicensed weapon in your possession,’ said Schwaner. ‘Say goodbye to lover boy. You're coming with us.’

I instinctively moved to wrench her from his clutches but stopped myself. That would achieve nothing. Much as I hated to do so, I would just have to let them take her.

CHAPTER 9

As soon as they had gone, I tried to ring McKenzie. I wasn't completely sure now that I could trust him but he was the only one I could think of who might be able to help. After all, he was the one who had given the gun to her. Remembering that only increased the gnawing suspicion that he might not be as honest as I had supposed, but I went ahead and dialled. All I got was a suggestion that I leave a message. I did so—a rather desperate and not altogether complimentary message—and hoped it would not be long before he got round to hearing it.

Next I rang my solicitor, not altogether confident that he'd be much use either. After all, his specialties are copyright, defamation and tax planning. God knows when he's last had anything to do with a criminal case. He asked which station they were taking her to and I had to confess I didn't know. He said he'd track her down and get round to wherever she was and look after her. I felt somewhat better but only somewhat.

I sat. I paced. I smoked. I talked to myself and swore. I walked into the bedroom and saw her things there and marvelled again at how quickly and thoroughly she had become a major part of my life. I walked back into the lounge and, for an instant, saw her sitting in my chair. Get a grip, I told myself,

but it seemed the very scent of her filled the air like a wraith.

The phone rang and I raced to grab it. It was my lawyer. He'd been on to every station they could possibly have been taking her to but she hadn't been brought in to any of them. He'd keep trying.

I tried to think but my brain was filled with visions of her face as it looked when it smiled, as it looked when it frowned, as it looked when she suddenly went fast asleep. Perhaps her narcolepsy could even help her, I tried to reassure myself. If they stressed her too much, all they'd have would be a sleeping beauty. But perhaps that would only make the Sergeant even angrier.

He was certainly angry when I opened the door to his pounding on it. He grabbed me by the throat and pushed me inside.

'Okay, you fuckin' smartarse,' he shouted at me. 'Where's my fuckin' disc?'

I brought my clasped hands up in a rapid, vigorous thrust and broke his grip on my throat, though it felt like his huge fist almost broke my jaw in the process. I stepped back. He threw a punch but I parried it with the heel of my palm.

‘Calm down, dickhead,’ I said. ‘You can have your fuckin’ disc as soon as I have Maria.’

He laughed. ‘You really think you can bargain with me, you poor misguided shit,’ he sneered. ‘Your precious Maria’s having the time of her life. She’s gonna be a star.’

What the hell was he talking about?

‘What have you done with her?’ I asked.

‘You’ll find out...when you’ve given me the disc.’

I decided I’d have to accept the compromise. It was abundantly clear that I had little choice.

‘It’s in the computer,’ I told him.

‘Show me.’

I turned the computer on and showed him a directory of the disc’s contents.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Now take it out and put it on the desk.’

I did so.

‘Thanks a lot,’ he said. ‘Thanks heaps for bringing Mary down too; saves me a trip.’

He produced a syringe.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘you are going to give her this.’

‘Like hell I am. What is it—a fatal dose of heroin?’

‘Possibly.’

He lay the syringe on the desk and took out his revolver.

‘Pick it up,’ he said, ‘or I’ll shoot you right now.’

‘Get stuffed. I’m not going to kill her and get myself life just to save your skin. You won’t shoot. That’d shoot as big a hole in your story as it would in me.’

‘I can shoot you, then inject her and say I caught you injecting her and shot you but too late to save her.’

‘Even if it happened like that, if you immediately rang an ambulance, she could be saved.’

He was becoming angrier and angrier and I was sure that, at any moment, he’d completely lose it and shoot me anyway. Even so, I was determined not to do his dirty work for him.

Suddenly, the still partly open door was flung wide and McKenzie and his partner entered.

‘Okay, you worm, what have you done with Maria?’
McKenzie demanded of Schwaner.

Schwaner turned towards him and pointed the gun at him.

‘You butt out of this,’ he said.

‘Don't be a prick. Put the gun down,’ McKenzie ordered
and took a step towards him.

‘Make one more move and you're dead,’ Schwaner warned
him.

He had been too intent on McKenzie to notice me edging
closer to him but now he must have spotted my movement and
started to turn the gun back toward me. I quickly covered the
remaining distance, grabbed his gun hand and forced it down.
There was an ear-shattering bang as the gun went off but it was
almost drowned out by his scream as my left hand crashed into
the back of his elbow and, with the right hand still pushing
down, overextended it so that the joint dislocated and ligaments
tore. He dropped the gun and stood moaning.

‘Shit!’ exclaimed McKenzie. ‘Anytime you want a job, I'd
be glad to have you as my partner...Sorry, John, not that you
aren't a good partner.’

Schwaner was trying to place his wounded arm in a

position that didn't hurt and failing. 'Get me a doctor,' he demanded.

'You'll get a doctor when we have Maria,' McKenzie replied. 'Get moving...or would you like me to massage your arm a little?'

The two detectives ushered Schwaner into the car. I locked the door and followed close behind.

'You can't come,' McKenzie told me. 'This is official police business.'

'Bullshit,' I snapped back. 'You just try to stop me...Anyway, someone just might point a gun at you.'

'Don't get too clever,' McKenzie warned. 'I owe you, but I do things by the book.'

'Yeah.'

By this time, we were at the police car. McKenzie hustled Schwaner in the back and got in after him. Abell moved into the driver's seat. I got into the front passenger seat.

'You can't...', McKenzie said. 'Oh, shit! We're wasting time. Let's get going.'

It was a fair drive. Schwaner grudgingly gave directions

but refused to answer any of McKenzie's other questions or respond to any of his jibes about his lack of morals and decency.

We arrived at last at a nondescript looking building in an industrial estate at Acacia Ridge. I saw no signs to indicate what it was or what it contained. Except for a wisp of light under a door, it could well have been vacant. Then McKenzie opened the door and we were engulfed in light.

It was obviously a makeshift studio. In the spotlight was a bed and on the bed was Maria. On top of her was a well-built male and his hands were at her throat. In an instant, I lost any veneer of civilisation and all my most primitive instincts flared to searing heat. I rushed towards them, thrusting props out of my way. My hand fell on a whip and closed around its handle. It seemed to fit like it had been designed just for me. I swung it with all my force and landed the lash across the back of the man on top of Maria. He screamed and rapidly got off her, turning to face me with a look of astonished terror on his face.

‘Hey, that's not in the script,’ he yelled.

I flicked the whip again and it caught his huge, still swollen penis. He screamed again.

‘This is great. This is great,’ said the cameraman. ‘Who

came up with this great idea?’

The whip flashed out again and tore the camera from his grasp. He looked at his bleeding fingers in incredulous horror then turned to me with terror in his eyes.

‘Please, please, no more,’ he begged, but I had already dropped the whip and moved to Maria.

For a moment, I thought she was dead and it was like Mike Tyson had punched me in the stomach while King Kong held me tight around the chest.

‘Is she all right?’ McKenzie asked.

‘I don't know if she's unconscious or just having one of her sleeps.’

‘I'll call an ambulance.’

He did so and also called for two back-up squad cars. Meanwhile, Abell had handcuffed the male porn star and the cameraman.

I sat with Maria, holding her hand and looking desperately for any sign that she was okay. She stirred ever so slightly. She wouldn't do that if she were comatose, I told myself. Suddenly, it occurred to me that she was naked. Of course, I'd seen before

that she was nude but I guess I'd thrust it into the back of my mind till I was sure she was okay.

I found her clothes. They were torn. I looked through the props and found some things I thought might fit her—a very frilly pair of knickers and a little girl style dress obviously designed to make a young woman look like she was about fourteen. With considerable difficulty, I put the knickers on her. As I lifted her buttocks to pull the pants over those beloved protuberances, she opened her eyes, said 'so sleepy' and closed them again.

Tears sprung to my eyes in my relief. I draped the dress over her and briefly lay my head on her breast.

'This the patient?' asked a voice in my ear.

I stood up to let the ambulance men examine her, then load her on a stretcher.

'You want to ride with her?' one of them asked me.

I looked at McKenzie.

'Go on,' he said. 'We'll clean up here. I'll call round to see you later.'

I followed along to the ambulance and watched them put

her in.

‘Hop in,’ said the ambulance man and I was about to do so when a hand descended heavily on my shoulder.

‘Leave it,’ a voice said in my ear. ‘You've got more important things to do.’

I swung round to face the speaker but his face was in shadow.

‘Come over here,’ he said.

We both moved a few feet away.

‘I've got Mary. You've got Schwaner's disc. Let's trade,’ he said.

‘Hey, you coming or not?’ the ambulance man queried impatiently.

‘Sorry. I can't. Something important's come up.’

The ambulance man shrugged and got aboard. The ambulance drove off. I turned back to the man, who I now thought I recognised.

‘You're Dempster, Schwaner's partner in crime?’

‘If you want to put it that way. Do we have a deal?’

‘Where is she?’

‘Give me the disc and you'll find out.’

‘I want to see her first. Strangely enough, I don't trust you.’

‘All right. Let's go.’

I could understand his rush to get away. The place would be crawling with even more cops very shortly. It was a wonder the other two squad cars hadn't arrived already. What if we ran into them on the way out?

He'd obviously thought of that. He lead me down a path beside the building, then onto a rough track that ran alongside a drainage channel. We splashed through a couple of inches of water across the channel, picked up a path on the other side and followed it to a deserted street, where stood a single, apparently empty, car.

Dempster opened the boot and I saw that it was not entirely empty. Mary was curled in the boot, gagged and with her feet and hands tied. Her eyes were wide with terror but she seemed unharmed.

Dempster slammed the boot lid shut and handed me the car

keys.

‘You're driving,’ he said. ‘I'll be sitting right behind you with this,’ as he removed a gun from his pocket, ‘pointed straight at the back of your head. So don't try anything funny. I don't want you brains splattered all over my car.’

Normally, I'm an advocate of the theory that, if someone plans to kill you eventually—and I could see no way that Dempster could let either Mary or me live to accuse him of kidnapping—it's best to take your chances right at the beginning without allowing him to subject you to more torture beforehand. What I mean to say is, if someone tells me to get in a car boot, I'm going to tell them to get stuffed and kill me now—while doing whatever I can to prevent that outcome.

This didn't seem to be one of those situations; perhaps my chance would come.

It didn't. I drove to my flat without a single bright idea of possibly thwarting Dempster's plans occurring to me.

I parked, stopped the car, got out and opened the boot without asking Dempster's permission. I took the gag off Mary and untied the ropes that bound her hands and feet and lifted her gently out. I tried to stand her on her feet but she slid down and would have fallen if I wasn't holding her. Her legs would

take a while to function after being forced into a cramped, curled-up position for so long. I lifted her again and headed for my flat, with Dempster following close behind.

At the door to my flat, I told Dempster ‘key’s in my right hand pants pocket’. He fished them out and opened the door. I took Mary in, placed her gently on the spare bed and looked at her. She seemed very groggy and barely registering what was happening to her.

‘What have you given her?’ I demanded of Dempster.

‘Only Rohypnol. She’ll be fine when it wears off in a few hours....Okay, you’ve got your end of the bargain. Where’s mine?’

‘Out there.’

We went back out to my computer desk. To my horror, the disc was not on the desk where I had last seen it.

‘It’s gone,’ I said.

He raised the gun and pointed it at my head.

‘Don’t get smart, dickhead,’ he snapped. He was so angry he had difficulty keeping his hand steady. ‘If I don’t have it in my hand in thirty seconds, you’ll be a real ghost.’

Then my head exploded in blinding pain that briefly
flashed like the sun before leaving me in darkest oblivion.

CHAPTER 10

I came to with an incredible throbbing in my head and an ache in the back of it that defied description. I automatically went to rub it but could not move my hand. I went to lift my head, which seemed to be bent down at a most uncomfortable angle. An urgent whisper said, ‘Don't move.’

But the faint movement I had made was enough to make me realise I had a cord around my neck which was now digging in even more than before.

‘It goes round my neck too,’ whispered the voice, which I now recognised as Mary's.

So, that was it; if either of us moved, we could easily choke both of us. I could now feel that I was lying stretched out on top of her and she was bearing all my weight. She must be in even worse shape than I was. If I didn't get off her soon, she'd likely die of asphyxiation anyway. But how could I move without choking us both?

Very cautiously, I tried to move my hands but quickly found that they were securely bound and that even my minute movement seemed to tighten the cord around our necks a fraction more. Two of my fingers seemed to be in a very warm,

soft place. It took me some time to realise where—inside Mary's vagina. Perhaps she could push them out and give me some freedom of movement. As quickly as the idea came to me I abandoned it. It was too risky.

‘Your hands are tied too?’ I asked.

‘Can't you feel them?’ she asked and squeezed very slightly.

It was only then that I realised they were clasped around my very erect member. They must have given me a good strong dose of Caverject or something similar for me to have, and keep, an erection like that.

‘Maybe when my erection goes you'll be able to move your hands enough to do something,’ I suggested. It was not a suggestion I wanted to bet my life on.

There was no reply and I realised she was too short of breath to answer. We had to do something to get my weight off her.

‘We've got to try to roll over,’ I said. ‘Otherwise, you'll die anyway. I'll count to three and then, very slowly, we'll try to roll to your right without moving a muscle in our necks. Okay.’

I counted to three and we commenced the manoeuvre. I

promptly passed out as the cord cut deeper into my neck.

CHAPTER 11

My head still throbbed, my eyes felt like they were popping out of their sockets and my neck and throat were on fire but I could breathe. I realised, with deepest gratitude and relief, that the cord was no longer around my neck. Still I hesitated to move, till Mary's weak whisper said, 'you can move now; I'm free'.

But when I tried to move a gruff voice said, 'stay still or you'll lose something, laddie'.

I recognised McKenzie's voice. Once again he'd saved me. Now he and his partner were trying to sever the bonds that still tied Mary and I together in a very intimate fashion. It was difficult because our hands were squeezed between our bodies, but at last they managed it without doing further damage to either of us. All the time, they passed admiring comments between themselves about the ingenuity of the set-up. Certainly, if we'd been found dead, it would have been hard to prove it wasn't accidental death as a result of kinky sex.

When we were parted, McKenzie swept a quick glance over Mary to check her for damage, then sent his partner to get her a gown and to ring for an ambulance. Then he looked at me

and whistled at the erection I was trying to cover with my hands in my embarrassment.

‘How long have you had that, laddie?’ he asked. ‘They must have given you a damned good shot of something. We’ll have to get you to treatment for that pretty soon too or it could be the last one you ever have.’

‘Yes,’ I agreed. I knew about priapism.

With difficulty, I dressed myself, although the detective tried to persuade me I’d be better off just putting on a gown. Then the ambulance arrived. McKenzie explained the situation to the ambulance men and we were put aboard.

‘We’re going to stay and have a look around,’ McKenzie said. ‘With any luck, it will all be on tape. We’ll catch up with you in the hospital. They’ll keep you in for observation for the day at least.’

Somehow the thought of a quiet hospital bed was rather appealing.

CHAPTER 12

True to his word, some hours later McKenzie and his partner arrived at the ward where I was being kept for observation. McKenzie sat down heavily on the chair beside the bed.

‘How's it going?’ he asked.

‘All right, I think. They hit me with terbutaline, put an ice pack on it and told me to lie here and shut up. It should be okay if I don't get frost bite. Otherwise, my neck and throat's still sore and my head still feels like shit but I'll live. How's Mary?’

‘Still too groggy to get any sense out of and pretty traumatised but I think she'll be okay.’

‘And Maria?’

‘Still dropping off as soon as she opens her eyes. I don't know if it's medical or post-traumatic stress...God, I'm sorry I got her into this.’

‘So am I...but if you hadn't, I probably would never have met her.’

‘Can you tell me how you and Mary got into that mess?’

‘Up to the point where I got slugged. I was all set to ride with Maria in the ambulance when Dempster grabbed me. He told me he had Mary and would swap her for the disc I stole from Schwaner’s computer. He took me by a back route to his car and showed me Mary trussed up in the boot of his car. He made me drive to my flat. I had to carry Mary in. I put her on the spare bed and checked her over. She was very groggy and the cords had cut into her a bit but she seemed otherwise unharmed. I took Dempster out to my computer desk to where I had left the disc when we went off to find Maria. I’d taken it out just before Schwaner had arrived. Oh, I should have mentioned that Dempster had a gun at my head all the time from when he opened the boot and showed me Mary. I knew bloody well there was no chance he was going to let Mary and I live to see him charged with kidnapping but I didn’t have much chance to do anything. I was hoping I might be able to make some sort of move when I gave him the disc. Well, the bloody disc wasn’t there. I thought he was going to blow my head off when I told him it had gone. I think he may well have but just then someone must have given me one hell of a tap on the skull from behind. That’s all I knew about anything till I sort of came to on top of Mary. Thank God you blokes had your surveillance going and got there pretty quickly.’

McKenzie scowled. ‘It wasn’t the surveillance; that wasn’t

linked up yet anyway. It was just plain dumb luck. After we got Schwaner and his mates squared away, we went to see Maria in the hospital and found out you hadn't come in with her. We eventually tracked down the ambulance guys and one of them told us you hadn't come in with them but had gone off with some other guy. We decided to rip round to your flat to find out what the hell you were up to. When you didn't answer, I decided to make an unauthorised visit anyway. Just as well I did.'

'Yeah...Here I was thinking thank God you blokes set up the surveillance the way you did and how it was worth losing a bit of privacy but I guess it takes longer than I thought. At least you should have it all on film or tape.'

McKenzie glowered. 'I don't know what the fuck's going on with the surveillance,' he growled. 'Not a frame shot, not a single syllable recorded. There wasn't even any bloody tape in any of the fuckin' cameras.' He was becoming quite agitated. 'I've never known Q to stuff up like that. Maybe he thought we were going to do all the recording at our listening post when we got it live.'

'Or maybe he thought he'd give his mates time to do what they had to do.'

‘You reckon Q could be a mole? I don't know. He's worked with us on lots of cases and always done a great job. Never given me any cause to suspect he wasn't straight down the middle.’

‘I don't suppose you've caught up with him to hear his side of the story?’

‘Nobody seems to know where he is at the moment—but I wouldn't jump to conclusions because of that; a lot of what he does is very hush hush.’

‘Whatever is on this disc must be real dynamite if they're prepared to kidnap and kill for it. Any ideas?’

‘Maybe Michael really did have some good solid evidence on the disc he brought in. Maybe Schwaner got hold of it and copied it on to his hard disc.’

‘Why would he do that?’

‘Blackmail maybe—if not for cash, maybe to keep someone in line. Or maybe just as insurance in case things screwed up and he looked like being for the jump.’

‘What would there be to stop them knocking him off or, failing that, knocking the disc off?’

‘Not knowing how many copies he had.’

The mention of copies reminded me of the copy of Schwaner's disc I had—or hoped I still had—but I merely mumbled a non-committal ‘guess so’. I wasn't going to hand that copy over to anyone until I knew who it implicated. Another thought came to me.

‘What could have happened to the original disc?’ I asked.

‘My guess is that the one in the official files is the original but that it's been modified considerably.’

‘That's easy to tell—just compare creation dates, modification dates and accession dates. If you find files created before, and modified after, the date Michael brought the disc in, you can be sure there's been dirty work afoot.’

‘It's that easy?’

‘For anyone who knows anything at all about computers, it is. Did a computer expert examine the disc Michael brought in?’

‘I don't know.’

‘Who would have had access to it to modify it if it was modified?’

He shrugged. ‘Lord knows. In theory, it should have been kept securely and access pretty severely restricted but some things like that end up with half the bloody force having a gig.’

‘Whoever it was would have had to have been pretty high up in the chain or else someone would have woken up. Who would have had it first?’

‘The chief, I guess.’

‘Afraid that seems to make him the villain. He surely would have had a look before he passed it on to anyone else, wouldn't he?’

‘Yeah...No he wouldn't.’ There was more than a tinge of excitement in his voice. ‘He would have given it straight to Q for virus checking before he did anything else with it.’

Q again, I thought. Maybe we had stumbled on to something.

‘I think it's time we had a wee talk with Q,’ McKenzie said to his partner, rising. ‘Someone must know where the bastard is.’

CHAPTER 13

I opened my eyes slowly but the impact of the light still raised the throbbing in my eyes and skull and neck several notches. I moaned softly to myself. A soft hand stroked tenderly over my hair. I winced.

‘Sorry,’ a soft, tender voice said and the hand withdrew.

I struggled to focus but the voice had already told me all I needed to know.

‘Maria,’ I said, and the most insensitive person on earth would have heard the relief and concern in my voice. Maria certainly did.

‘It’s all right, darling,’ she said. ‘I’m here.’

‘Fine bloody minder you are. We nearly both got killed.’

‘Were they really going to kill me? I don’t remember much of it. I kept going to sleep. That beast tore my clothes and I think he had sex with me but I don’t really remember much. Perhaps once in my life my narcolepsy was a blessing.’

‘Perhaps it was...Do you remember anything else?’

‘I remember they put me in the police car and I thought

they were taking me to the station. I was thinking that I would just have to tell them that McKenzie gave me the gun and he would confirm it and then everything would be all right. I knew you had his phone number and I thought by the time I got to the station he could even be there and sort everything out. I thought you wouldn't have just let them take me if you didn't think everything was going to be all right.'

I groaned a little, thinking how stupid I had been to think Schwaner would act within the law. Maria looked worriedly at me but I shook my head, which did even worse things to my brain though I managed to tell her to go on.

'Then,' she continued, 'Schwaner had a phone call on his mobile. I couldn't make anything out of the conversation. Schwaner said very little except "okay". When he'd finished, he looked at me and laughed in a very nasty way. Then he said to his partner something about it being a long night and they should both be off duty by now and why didn't he drop his partner off at home on the way past and he'd take me in and book me and hand me over to someone else in there to interrogate. Their reports could wait till after they'd had a sleep. His partner looked surprised but said okay but hadn't he better put handcuffs on me. Schwaner said "yeah" and did so. After his partner got out, Schwaner took over driving. Then he gave

me the shock of my life. He said: “That was Marco on the blower. He wants you.” I’m not too sure what happened then. My brain was whirling. I guess I had one of my sleeps. Sometimes, I think I’m like one of the Victorian heroines who’d swoon whenever things got unpleasant. I only have a blur of a memory of him trying to get me out of the car and to walk and having my clothes torn off me and being thrown on a bed. I still don’t really know what it was all about but I’m awfully sore down there...’ She pointed to her crotch. ‘So I imagine someone had some sort of sex with me.’

She looked at me with a puzzled expression.

‘I’ll kiss it all better when I get you home,’ I promised. The vision produced a satisfying stirring in my loins. The treatment had reduced my penis to normal dimensions but I had had the nagging doubt whether it would ever become erect again.

‘But what was it all for?’ she asked. ‘And what did Marco have to do with it? He wasn’t there.’

‘It seems you were to be the star of a porn movie—actually, a snuff movie.’

She looked at me wonderingly, uncomprehending.

‘One where the victim is killed—usually at the moment of

climax.’

‘They were going to kill me? Why? And what did Marco have to do with it?’

‘Maybe he found out you're not his niece.’

‘But why would Schwaner take orders from Marco?’

‘That, my girl, is the sixty-four thousand dollar question. Maybe I'll go ask him.’

‘Schwaner? He's not going to tell you anything.’

‘Marco. After all, I'm working for him. I'm entitled to ask a few questions.’

‘I was working for him too...Now tell me what happened to you.’

I hesitated to do so—not only because it was acutely embarrassing but also because, even though it was all completely involuntary, it seemed almost like confessing infidelity. Besides which, I didn't want to alarm her any more than absolutely necessary.

Yet, I couldn't refuse to tell her. I proceeded to do so, attempting to gloss over details as much as I could but eventually being forced to lay bare the whole saga. As I came

to the part where we attempted to roll over and the cord cut off our breathing, she paled and slumped forward onto the bed. I caught her and held her.

‘Ah, there you are,’ broke in a voice from the door. ‘When you weren’t in your bed, I guessed—I hoped—this is where you would be. You should still be in bed instead of smooching here.’

‘She’s not smooching,’ I told McKenzie. ‘I was telling her what happened to me and she collapsed.’

‘Aye.’ It was a drawn-out expression of understanding. ‘I’ve been thinking about that,’ he said. ‘There was Dempster there. And someone else obviously hit you from behind. That’s two. I’ve been trying to decide if two would have been enough to set you pair up the way they did. I’m not at all sure that they wouldn’t have needed more.’

‘If you’re suggesting we try it again and see, forget it.’

Maria stirred and slowly sat up. ‘Sorry,’ she said.

‘We’ll take you back to your bed,’ McKenzie said. ‘We’ll talk to you when you’re feeling better.’

The two detectives escorted Maria away and I lay back in bed, trying desperately to make some sense of it all. All the

effort got me was an even bigger headache.

CHAPTER 14

I had a brain scan later in the day and they decided I didn't have any permanent damage and it was safe to release me. My first thought was to go and see Maria but I discovered she was also having a scan. They had decided to do some tests on her to make sure her collapses weren't due to something other than narcolepsy. I prepared myself for a lengthy wait but they told me it could be hours, so I decided maybe I should do something more useful—like going to see Marco.

Marco greeted me without any evident surprise or hostility.

‘How's it going?’ he asked. ‘Found out who killed my son yet?’

‘Fuck that!’ I retorted. ‘Why did you order Schwaner to kill Maria?’

‘I didn't.’

‘Like hell you didn't. Schwaner took your call in the car. He told Maria you wanted her.’

‘He didn't bring her to me.’

No, he didn't, I thought. Did that mean Schwaner had lied to Maria? Why bother implicating Marco if he intended to have Maria killed? No-one else would ever know.

‘But you did order her taken to that place?’

‘Yes. She talked my best girl out of leaving just when I had a big contract on. I thought it was only fair she fill in. Okay, she's family, but that just makes it all the worse, what she did.’

‘What would your brother say about that?’

‘He'd understand. You've got to have discipline and respect.’

‘How did she talk your girl out of leaving?’

‘I gather she got her a job—sent her to a model agency who snapped her up.’

So that explained Maria's disappearances.

‘How did Maria come to meet this girl in the first place?’

‘At my house. Daphne used to come here to give me sex. I'm not an old man. I still need sex and I haven't got a wife. Maria somehow found out about it all and talked to her and promised her a job if she left me.’

‘So you arranged Maria's kidnapping and rape, if not her murder. Nice!’

He looked daggers at me but said nothing.

‘What I really want to know is why Schwaner should take orders from you. I thought you wanted to clean out all the scum. You're a load of bullshit. I bet you set up Michael Gigante with the stuff you let him copy. I bet your son died from overdosing on heroin you'd brought in too. You can take your job and shove it up your arse. I'll transfer the fifty grand back as soon as I can get on to my bank.’

His eyes flashed. ‘My son was murdered and I'm going to prove it with or without you. And I didn't set up Gigante. What I gave him was real. Someone in there must have tampered with it.’

‘Who?’

He shook his head. ‘Please find out.’

‘Perhaps I have.’

His head swung up and he looked piercingly at me, as though trying to see the answer in my eyes. ‘Who?’

I shook my head. ‘I'm not sure yet...How did Schwaner

come to have a copy of the stuff you gave Gigante?’

‘He must have been the one who stole my computer.’

‘And yet you deal with him?’

‘I have no choice. He knows I came here illegally. He could get me deported any time he wanted to.’

‘But he takes orders from you.’

‘When it suits him...If I were the Mafia boss you think I am, I would have had him killed long ago.’

‘How did you know he had Maria?’

‘Someone phoned me and told me what had happened.’

‘Who?’

‘I don't know. He wouldn't give his name.’

I could think of only one person other than myself who would have known—Schwaner's partner. But would he have had a chance to phone Marco? I doubted it. Of course, someone could have been watching the flat.

The whole thing was still quite bewildering. Something else that kept puzzling me came back to me.

‘Why did Schwaner want the disc so much?’ I asked.

Marco thought for a while. ‘Maybe he was using it to blackmail others in the department.’

‘Wasn't he on it?’

‘No. If I implicated him, he'd tell them about me being an illegal alien.’

‘Why was he suddenly so anxious to get rid of it?’

He thought about it for some time and finally shrugged.

‘I guess he just got nervous with you sniffing around,’ he said.

‘Why did you pay Michael Gigante eight hundred bucks to be a handyman?’

‘He was much more than a handyman. He set up computer systems for me. He set up surveillance systems...’

‘Can we have a look at them?’ I asked.

He took me into what was obviously his private office and showed me a single television screen, on which flashed sequential images of various of all parts of the house. Fair enough, I thought, though a little primitive. Marco could surely

afford to pay for better.

‘Do the cameras record?’ I asked.

‘Continuous tape. Twelve hours recording.’

‘Do you ever look at the tapes?’

‘No.’

‘I bet you look at the porn films they make out there though. How often do you go out there?’

‘I don't?’

‘So you don't really know what goes on out there? I guess that's the way you want it, eh? What you don't know you can kid yourself doesn't exist.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Whips, torture instruments, little girl knickers and dresses, assorted vegetables, a donkey outside... and, who knows how many rape and snuff movies have been filmed there?’

He paled. ‘I don't allow any of that,’ he protested.

‘I don't think you know half of what goes on in your business. And not just in the porn; if someone in your lot isn't

handling drugs, I'm Mother Teresa. Who does really run the show?'

'Everyone answers to me.'

'Sure, but do you ask the right questions? Who's your legman who does all the running around, organising everything?'

'Mario Galilei.'

'Where do I find him?'

'75 Mill Street, Hawthorne.'

I drove straight there, wondering whether Marco would tell him I was coming and whether it would be better or worse if he did. I wasn't too sure what I hoped to get out of Mario Galilei but I wanted at least to meet him and see what I might be up against.

His house was another pretty substantial affair right on the river and with a deep anchorage for a decent sized fast boat. I walked up to the front door and was about to ring the doorbell when the door opened and I was almost bowled over—in more ways than one—by Mary coming out. She seemed to look right

through me without seeing me and I quickly decided I might not be meant to recognise her either and managed to convey that I was merely somewhat flustered by having a beautiful woman crashing into my arms. I quickly released her and she mumbled an apology and went on her way.

A man had been following her out and now stood with the doorknob in his hand looking at me.

‘Mario Galilei?’ I asked him.

‘Yes.’

‘I wonder if you could spare a few minutes. I’m doing a spot of ghostwriting for Marco Ballesteri and he suggested I should talk to you.’

He looked quite bemused.

‘Ghostwriting?’ he said, disbelievingly. ‘Don’t tell me he’s writing his autobiography?’

‘Sort of.’

He shook his head. ‘How the hell can he do that without putting himself in the can?’

‘And his employees perhaps.’

He scowled. ‘Yeah. Why did he send you to me?’

‘Did I say he sent me to you? Sorry, that's not quite true. I asked him who his right hand man was and he told me. I told it might be a good idea to talk to you to see what you thought about it.’

‘I think it's the stupidest idea Marco ever came up with—and that's saying something. I can't believe he'd think it was okay for you to come round here and tell me you were writing his true confessions. What could he have to say that wouldn't put us all in the can?’

‘I think he's hoping I'll prove somehow that someone murdered his son. I think, if it came to the point, he'd even be prepared to go to jail himself to put his son's killer behind bars.’

‘That's all bullshit. Enrico gave himself an overdose, pure and simple. The drug was pure and he was simple.’

‘Where'd he get the H?’

‘How would I know? It's not too hard to get hold of these days, from what I hear.’

‘Your lot didn't bring it in?’

‘Marco won't touch drugs.’

I was about to suggest that maybe *he* would but decided that might be pushing things a bit too far. Maybe I'd stirred the pot enough already.

‘Well, thanks for your time,’ I said. ‘I think you're right and Marco's blowing it all out of his arse. I'll tell him what he can do with his fifty grand for the job.’

CHAPTER 15

I went back to the hospital to see what was happening with Maria, was told she was sleeping peacefully and went home.

I went through the flat, checking for signs of any foreign presence—past or present. All I found were constant reminders of Maria—till I got to the bedroom. I almost choked again at the memory of the close escape Mary and I had had. The bed, which had previously seemed a haven and, in recent days since Maria had arrived, almost a shrine of love, now seemed indelibly sullied. I wondered if I could ever sleep in it peacefully again. I pondered again on how many men it would have taken to arrange the diabolical scheme for our demise but could not decide.

I moved on to the spare bedroom. There was a stirring as I snapped on the light. Mary lay on the bed, still fully clothed except for her shoes.

‘Are you okay?’ I asked.

‘Yes.’ It was barely a whisper.

‘What the hell were you doing at Mario's?’

She struggled into a sitting position. ‘Got a cigarette?’ she

asked.

I shook my head. ‘Only smoke a pipe. I didn't know you smoked.’

‘I don't, but I need something.’

‘You're welcome to have a puff of my pipe but you might find it a bit strong.’

‘Please.’

I stoked my pipe, lit it and handed it to her. She took a greedy drag and immediately coughed uncontrollably, shaking ash all over the bed. I took the pipe from her.

‘I warned you,’ I said.

I went and sat on the bed near her.

‘You still haven't told me what you were doing at Mario's,’ I reminded her.

‘The same as you—trying to find out what he knew.’

‘And did you?’

‘No, but I got something far more interesting. Go have a look at your computer.’

Puzzled, I did what she said, while she padded along behind, still in her socks. Not knowing what to expect, I turned the computer on. To my surprise, it actually started up and, after the usual rigmarole, a desktop appeared. Even more remarkably, it showed just the icons I usually had on my desktop. I clicked on the 'My Documents' folder and was amazed to find that they were my documents. Obviously, my hard disc, that Schwaner had taken, was back in my computer. How? Mary?

‘You did this?’ I asked her.

‘Yes. I’ve at least learned enough about computers from Michael to be able to install a hard disc.’

‘But where did you get it? From Mario?’

‘Yes.’

‘How?’

‘He gave it to me to give to you.’

‘Why would he do that? It just ties him in with the whole thing. He must have got it from Schwaner... Anyway, why didn't you give it to me when we banged into each other on the doorstep instead of carrying on that charade of not knowing me?’

She blushed. 'I wanted to see what's on it,' she admitted.

'Anything interesting?'

'A lot of interesting stuff of yours but nothing relevant to this case. I was disappointed to find you hadn't even made any notes about it.'

'Jeez, I haven't had much of a chance, have I?... Why didn't Mario say something about it to me?'

'The way you ask questions, he probably didn't get a chance.'

There was a knock at the door. It was McKenzie and Abell. I showed them in.

'Ah, Mary,' said McKenzie, 'glad to find you here. I looked for you in the hospital but you'd gone. You okay?'

'Yes.'

'Why did you go to see Mario?'

'I thought I recognised him as one of the men who did that to us but I wasn't sure. I went to find out.'

'How did you plan to do that? Ask him?'

‘The guy I saw had a fresh, bleeding scratch on his right hand. I thought, if Mario had a scratch like that, it must have been him.’

‘And was it?’

‘He had a bandaid in the right place.’

‘I guess it would be no big surprise if he were tied up in it, but you'd need to be a lot surer about it than that in court.’

‘I'm sure.’

McKenzie turned to me. ‘And why did you go to see Mario?’ he asked.

‘I went to see Marco, who, by the way, confessed that he'd ordered Schwaner to take Maria to that porn place...but he swears he didn't tell him to kill her. The story he told me was that Maria had talked his best female porn star—and also Marco's favourite lay—into leaving, so he was making her fill in...for the porn bit, not for the rest...He still thinks she's family. Anyway, I gathered the impression that Marco mightn't know as much as he thinks he does about how his business is run, so I asked him who his legman was, he told me and I went to see Mario. I'm not sure what I really hoped to get out of him but it seemed a good idea at the time.’

‘And did you get anything?’

‘No. I guess I stirred the possum a bit maybe but that's about all. Mary got something though.’ I indicated towards the computer. ‘He gave her my hard disc that Schwaner picked up from here thinking it was his, to give back to me.’

McKenzie looked as puzzled as I still felt.

‘Why in the hell would he do that?’ he asked. ‘That just tells us that he and Schwaner are thick as thieves.’

‘Nothing on the disc that wasn't there before?’ asked Abell.

‘Doesn't seem to be. I haven't spotted any new files or programs. I haven't had time to check that no files have been changed.’

‘How long would that take? There must be thousands of files there.’

‘Over ten thousand. But I don't have to check them all— just check which ones have been modified since it was taken. If I go into DOS, I can see which ones have been accessed recently too.’

Then a thought came to me.

‘How many files did you look at, Mary?’ I asked.

She blushed again. ‘A few.’

‘A few few or a fair few?...Never mind, the time stamp will tell me.’

I went through all the files as rapidly as I could, checking them all for creation, modification or accession dates within the time frame from when I had removed the disc from the computer to present. There were no creation or modification dates corresponding to this period, but I noted down about twenty files that had been accessed—all within the last couple of hours. Mary had been pretty busy.

I showed her the list, gave her a pen and asked her to tick off any she recognised as ones she had looked at. She ticked all but five.

‘I'm not sure about these,’ she said.

I went back into Windows and opened each file in turn. As I did so, Mary indicated that she recognised each one. It looked as though they hadn't even bothered to look at my disc while they had it. Of course, they wouldn't have had much time but I would have thought Mario would have been curious enough to examine it before he handed it back. Maybe he didn't know how to install a hard disc or maybe he just couldn't be bothered.

I had another look down the list, my curiosity piqued by what Mary had chosen to look at. She'd looked at my Bio; fair enough. She'd peeked at a few chapters of various 'autobiographies' of notables I'd ghostwritten; okay, she wasn't likely to blab all over town who actually wrote them. She'd opened a few files with names that could have suggested they were related to the present case; understandable enough but grounds for suspicion if one were inclined that way. And she'd looked at sex1.doc, sex2.doc, sex3.doc, couple1.jpg, couple2.jpg, couple3.jpg, couple4.jpg and couple5.jpg; okay, so now she knew I'd ghostwritten a sex manual.

'Enjoy the photos?' I asked and she blushed furiously. That blush, and the modesty it implied, stopped me assuring her she would soon be enjoying being in such a position with her Michael.

'All present and correct,' I reported to the detectives.

'Pity we didn't have Schwaner's disc,' said McKenzie. 'Whatever's on it must be hot. I wonder where it is now.'

'Probably destroyed,' I said. 'It's too late for them to try doctoring it and sneaking it back into Schwaner's computer.'

'Could they doctor it?' queried McKenzie. 'I thought that was the whole point, that they couldn't permanently erase those

files.’

‘The only way to do it would be to copy the disc to another disc, format the original disc, then copy back the files they wanted on and leave off the ones they didn’t.’

‘It seems our only chance is to get Schwaner to talk. We should have swung on his busted arm when we had the chance.’

I got up, went to my CD collection and found the case I’d put my copy of Schwaner’s disc in.

‘Christ, what’s this—music to think by?’ McKenzie grumbled.

I didn’t answer; merely took out the disc, brought it back to the desk and put it in the CD burner. Then I went to the computer and started the process of transferring the information onto my hard disc. Everyone was watching me closely. I decided not to keep them in suspense any longer.

‘A copy of Schwaner’s disc,’ I said, as nonchalantly as I could manage.

They all looked at me in stunned disbelief. McKenzie recovered first.

‘You mean to say you've had a copy all this time and haven't told us,’ he grumbled.

‘To be honest, I wasn't sure who I could trust. I wanted to have a look at it first, in case it did somehow or other list all the rogues. Then at least I'd know who not to give it to and, hopefully, who it might be safe to.’

‘How long will that take?’

‘About half an hour. There isn't that much on it. Want a drink while we're waiting? I can't offer you much—coffee, tea, whisky, cognac...oh, and no milk for the coffee or tea.’

We all had black coffee. I sat at the computer desk, watching the copying process. It seemed to be taking an eternity and I began to worry that something had gone wrong with the program and that it hadn't copied correctly originally or wouldn't be able to copy back. After all, I hadn't had a chance to check the copy when I made it and these things do have a habit of going wrong sometimes.

‘Anyone have any idea where we're at with all this?’ I asked, as much to distract myself from my morbid thoughts as for any other reason though, as I posed the question, I thought it was indeed about time we sat down to see if we could pull some sort of picture together. No-one answered.

‘Let's start with Marco,’ I suggested. ‘He's a crook. He's kept operating by paying off certain people in the force. There are probably things about his business he doesn't know—maybe like drugs. He seems to leave a lot to Mario, who may well be doing things Marco doesn't know about—again, maybe including drugs. He's closely tied up with Schwaner, though exactly how I'm not sure. Schwaner seems to take orders from him when he wants to and disregard him when he doesn't. He's convinced that someone murdered his son—probably someone in the force or with close contact with someone in the force—though he doesn't seem to have any evidence of that. That seems to be the real job I was hired for—to prove his son was murdered and to find out who did it. Why he thought I'd be able to do that, I really don't know. He hired Michael and Mary under somewhat suspicious circumstances and it appears likely that he actually set things up to make it easy for Michael to copy his computer records. Whether he knew Michael and Mary were cops when he hired them I'm not sure. It seems incredible that he would have let Michael copy anything that could incriminate him but, without knowing exactly what was on the disc Michael made, we can't know how damaging it was. He had Maria abducted and raped to teach her a lesson. Apparently, he still thinks she is his niece and, therefore, subject to family discipline and not likely to inform the police. I think I believe him that she was not meant to be killed or to

have anything worse than sexual abuse—which, I grant, is bad enough—happen to her. I don't really see him as the old-fashioned Mafia boss who'd have no qualms about killing anyone who crossed him or got in his way. I don't think the offence was bad enough for that anyway.'

McKenzie broke in. 'You say he admitted to you that he ordered Schwaner to abduct Maria and take her to that place? I'm surprised he's still alive—he is, isn't he?'

'He's alive. I must admit I felt like killing him but we haven't got enough of the truth out of him yet.'

Abell was looking at me shrewdly.

'You didn't by any chance tape this conversation, did you?' he asked.

I took what looked like a somewhat outsize pen from my top pocket and lay it on the table.

'Funny you should ask. It's all on there,' I said.

Abell came across, picked it up and looked at it.

'Neat. How do you work it?'

I showed him how to turn it on and off, how to rewind, record and play. He spun it back a bit, put it on play and we

heard again Marco's unmistakable rasp.

‘Looks like we've got Marco to rights,’ he said to McKenzie.

McKenzie nodded. ‘Aye, it will certainly help. What else is on there?’

‘Just about everything—or on another of the same. I've got six of them. Carry one everywhere with me. You never know when you might want to record something.’

‘You beauty! Why haven't you told us about this before?’

‘Frankly, because I still wasn't sure whether to trust you or not.’

‘You do now?’

‘Maybe; I'll tell you after I see what's on this disc. Perhaps.’

‘That bloody copying seems to be taking forever. You sure it's going okay?’

I looked at the indicators on the screen. ‘Seems to be,’ I said, but anxiety gnawed at my guts.

‘Okay,’ said McKenzie. ‘I guess I accept your analysis of

Marco, though there's still plenty of unanswered questions. What about Mario?’

‘I don't know. I got bugger all out of him. I think he basically runs the Marco enterprises. Sure, Marco gives the orders but I'm not sure Mario always carries them out. I could be wrong, of course. He's also obviously linked to Schwaner. Why he gave me back my disc and made this clear to us I really can't imagine. Anyone come up with any ideas yet?’

No-one had.

‘Schwaner is obviously a key player,’ I went on. ‘He works with, or for, both Marco and Mario. I'm not sure if he's the ringleader, an employee, a go-between, an independent operator or what. He seems to take orders from Marco sometimes but seems to do his own thing other times.’

‘Aye,’ agreed McKenzie, ‘he really is a wee puzzle.’

‘Seems odd that a mere Sergeant seems to have so much freedom to do what he wants.’

‘He's in charge of the station and he's big in the Police Union.’

‘What do we know about his partner—the guy who was taking Maria to the station with him?’

‘I guess that'd be young Anthony Smith, the constable at the station. I don't know much about him but he seems straight from what I do know.’

‘Yes,’ I agreed. ‘He stopped Schwaner doing a strip search on Maria here and it seems Schwaner had to get rid of him before he took Maria out to the porn studio.’

The screen finally indicated that the copying was complete.

‘Maybe we'll find out something now,’ I said.

The detectives crowded around. Mary still sat slumped in her chair, apparently completely indifferent. I checked through the files one by one. They all seemed rather boring routine police doings. The detectives seemed quite crushed.

‘Who'd kill for that?’ McKenzie queried.

‘You're forgetting the files Schwaner wiped. I'll bring them back.’

McKenzie looked dubious.

‘How can you do that, laddie?’ he asked. ‘I know you can't delete things permanently from a disc with the usual delete but they wouldn't have copied, would they?’

‘With the program I used, they would. Everything on the

disc would have copied. That must be why it took so long to copy it back onto my hard drive; these hidden files must be pretty big ones.'

I got up, went to a draw where I stored program discs and selected the one I needed. I put it into my A drive and waited for the program to come up on the screen. I told it I wanted to retrieve lost files and it began producing a list. I told it to retrieve them all to a directory I created and labelled 'Schwaner'.

There were quite a pile of them. Most of them were only abandoned drafts or files that had since been modified and renamed but eventually I hit the mother lode.

'Yes,' I exulted. 'We've hit paydirt.'

We all looked, almost in disbelief, at the screen. Even Mary came across to see.

13/6/2000 Inspector Francis Farley	\$2,000
Sergeant Thomas Kelso	\$1,000
Detective Karen Wilson	\$500
Detective Susan Horan	\$500

Detective John McFarland	\$500
19/6/2000 Inspector Devlin	\$2,000
Sergeant Gilden	\$1,000
Detective Mahalingam	\$500
Detective Dueland	\$500
Detective Cohrs	\$500

The same names were repeated on various dates but with similar amounts of money against them.

‘You wouldn't know if these are the same names as were on the official version, would you?’ I asked McKenzie.

He shrugged helplessly. ‘I've never seen it, but I've never heard any of these names mentioned as being on it. The ones who were cited as having been impossible for them to receive payments on the days they were supposed to have taken place were Inspector Joseph Saif, Sergeant Lina Cordle and Detective Christopher Candler. They sure aren't on the list.’

‘So, if this is the original, the other one was definitely tampered with.’

‘But how do we know it is the original?’

I closed the file and checked its properties.

‘Created Thursday, twenty-sixth of April two thousand and one at 9:22:30. Modified Thursday twenty-sixth of April two thousand and one at 9:22:32,’ I read off. ‘Which means it hasn't been modified since creation. You wouldn't know when Michael handed in his disc, would you?’ I asked McKenzie.

‘Not off hand, but I could check...So, this was probably copied from the original disc—whether from Michael's copy or from the disc out of Marco's stolen computer. If we could ever find Michael's copy disc, we could soon check if it had been tampered with.’

‘But it's vanished?’

‘It seems so.’

‘Who's responsible for keeping things like that?’

‘Records usually, but they haven't got any record of having received it. The DPP's office must have sighted it at some stage but all they could produce was the transcript. Internal Affairs would have handled it at some stage. God knows where it ended up. My guess would be that someone who knows about these things realised it could easily be determined that it had

been tampered with, got hold of it and destroyed it.’

‘Someone like Q perhaps? Did you ever catch up with him?’

‘Not yet...Look, I still can't see why Schwaner and Dempster would be so desperate to get this back that they'd kidnap and kill to do so. There's nothing on it to implicate either of them. Okay, Schwaner would have some explaining to do about how he came to get hold of it but he's a very plausible laddie; he'd probably come up with something. At the worst, he'd be implicated in a burglary.’

He was right; it still didn't make sense—though the supposition that Schwaner had kept the files for purposes of blackmail or control seemed perhaps to be borne out. I pointed this out to McKenzie.

‘Aye,’ he agreed, ‘but that doesn't explain why he was so desperate to get them back. After all, he'd tried to wipe them out.’

‘Maybe I'm missing something.’

I laboriously checked through all the recovered files again but there was nothing else relevant. I was stumped. And then the thought that had been nagging me since not long after I

started the copy process came to the forefront of my consciousness. Perhaps, I thought, the reason the copying took so long was that there was a hidden drive. Convinced that I might be on to something, I checked with 'Tweak' and was greatly disappointed to find all drives ticked.

Still not persuaded, I went to DOS and tried switching to every drive letter from A to Z. Nothing new appeared. I was about to give up when another possibility occurred to me—maybe not a hidden drive, but a hidden partition with no drive name allocated. I had a program already installed which would hide and unhide partitions, so that I could keep my darkest secrets away from prying eyes. I started it up and was gratified to see three new hidden partitions. With this program, it's only safe to unhide one partition at a time. With nothing to choose between them, I picked the first on the list and rebooted the computer.

I went straight to the newly revealed partition and opened the single file it contained. And there it was: a complete (presumably) record of Marco Enterprises—or, at least, I guessed that was what it was. It was all contained in Quick Books, a standard simple accounting program I use myself.

As I went through the accounts, with the detectives looking with considerable interest over my shoulders, I realised why

Marco wasn't too worried about revealing his business secrets. To anyone who didn't know Marco, it all appeared like a legitimate business, with not a whisper of criminal activity. His income was apparently derived entirely from things like rent, lease payments, royalties, copyright payments, licence fees and the sale of perfectly legal items. His expenses were those of a completely respectable business.

I couldn't help laughing.

‘Marco might do some strange things but he's certainly no idiot,’ I said. I must admit to a degree of admiration of the way it was all set out.

‘Probably some smart accountant,’ Abell said.

‘I'd like to find out who,’ I said. ‘Could probably save me a heap of tax.’

McKenzie was looking glum.

‘This might all be of interest to the Tax Department,’ he said, ‘but it doesn't do us much good. We could hunt down all these companies and people he deals with but I bet they'll all look as perfectly legitimate. And it still doesn't explain why Schwaner and Dempster would be so desperate to get it back.’

‘Maybe this will,’ I said.

I went back to the partitioning program, unhid the next unaccounted-for partition and rebooted. This partition also consisted of a single file, which I opened. It made interesting, if rather cryptic, reading.

20/01/01 3:57 M rang. Tell M. raid 9.25. Suggest 1G return.

01/02/01 1:08 M.. rang. 300 g H arrived. Distribute tomorrow. Rang M Hammer Bernard drop 02/02/01 2:09 15 g

14/02/01 3:57 M rang. Wants 6 girls for party 15/02/01. Rang M. and set up.

26/02/01 1:06 M rang. Thinks M..shortchanged us. Visit M..Get 1G + 40g.

01/03/01 1:08 M rang. Rang M. Meet 3.50 discuss fee schedule.

08/03/01 3:44 M. rang. Agrees to terms. Suggested party to celebrate. Arranged for 10/03/01. Rang M Agrees.

12/03/01 1:06 M rang. Meeting with M, Q, D, V discuss MG/MH.

‘Looks like a diary,’ I said. ‘Schwaner's, at a guess. But why in the hell would he keep it?’

‘Maybe to make sure if he went down everyone else did?’ Abell suggested.

‘Maybe,’ I agreed. ‘He might have thought it was some sort of insurance if M decided to put him in the can.’

‘Whoever M is,’ said McKenzie wearily. ‘He sure was busy.’

‘I don't think it's all the same M,’ I said. ‘Look how some are just M, some have a full stop after the M and a couple have two full stops.’

‘Aye. So...what does that tell us?’

‘M with a dot—or two dots—could be an initial. M without one could be something else. Remember Q? It seems he is in it up to his neck, by the way. Anyway, Q is the gadget whiz in James Bond, isn't he? If my memory serves me right, Bond's big boss was M, wasn't he?’

‘Aye, I think you're right. So, M without a dot is the big boss.’ He read through the messages again. ‘Seems to fit all right. And M. is probably Marco. And M..could be Mario. You could be right and Marco could be controlling the gambling

and prostitution but know nothing about the drugs.’

‘You didn't by any chance have anything to do with the raid on Bernard, did you?’

‘We were in it, yes. Why do you ask?’

‘Schwaner or M or someone seems to have a bit of imagination and sense of humour. Your McKenzie, right. Mc. Make the capitals MC. Suggests MC Hammer, the hero in the old detective novels if you've got a bit of imagination.’

Abell laughed and McKenzie glared at him and then relaxed and laughed too.

‘The Hammer of Queensland,’ he said. ‘Helped over the line by farts from Schwaner and co. No wonder we always knew exactly when and where to go.’

He was understandably bitter at how he had been used.

‘Who set up the raids?’

‘My boss, Inspector Vincent.’

‘So, he's probably V. But, if he is, he can't be M.’

‘No.’

Mary had been listening intently. Now, she came over and stood in front of us, demanding her attention. We three males all looked at her a little guiltily; we'd almost forgotten about her.

‘I bet I know who M is,’ she said. ‘Assistant Commissioner Ian Hummel. I could never understand why he was so keen on placing me on the witness protection program when I had no real evidence against anyone anyway.’

It seemed to make sense. ‘Possible?’ I asked McKenzie.

He considered. ‘I don't know. He appeared at the Fitzgerald Inquiry but came out smelling like roses. It was because he was one of the few senior officers left standing and apparently completely trustworthy that he became Assistant Commissioner in charge of Internal Affairs.’

‘A perfect position from which to protect rogue cops and get rid of good ones,’ I observed.

‘MG/MH would have to be Michael and me,’ Mary said. ‘They were planning what to do with us back then.’

‘They weren't too smart with the phone calls,’ Abell said. ‘We can get a log of all the outside calls.’

‘Aye,’ agreed McKenzie. ‘Phone calls between Schwaner

and Marco and Mario certainly look suspicious but there's no way to know what was said and Schwaner would come up with a good story as usual. It would have been good if M had made the outside calls but he always went through Schwaner.'

Abell looked crestfallen. Then he had another idea.

'These parties with the girls seem like sex romps with some of Marco's pros. We could show a photo of Hummel around the pros and see if any of them was at the party and remembers him.'

'And is willing to talk,' added McKenzie. 'I guess it's worth a try if we don't come up with anything else.'

I suddenly remembered the other hidden partition. It occurred to me that it must be a big one. All the hidden files I'd recovered so far would only account for a small fraction of the extra time the copying had taken.

'There's still one hidden partition to go,' I reminded them. 'Let's have a look.'

I did the necessary operations and was, for a moment, excited by the large number of files this partition contained. It was only for a moment, however. They were all picture files or html files downloaded from various internet sites. They were

the most disgusting porn I had ever seen but probably all still within the law—which maybe shows what a sick society we are. I guess I should have been conscientious and checked every file to make sure they were all the same but I gave up after about the ninth one.

‘If any of you want to keep checking this filth, you’re welcome,’ I said. ‘I’ve had as much as I can take.’

I got up and moved to get myself a drink of water. No-one moved to take my place. I went back to my seat and put my feet up on the desk. I felt incredibly weary.

‘Okay,’ I said, ‘let’s see what we’ve got. Schwaner’s certainly tied up for kidnapping or restraint of liberty or some such and I guess there’s a pretty fair case for involvement in an attempted murder and accessory to rape if there is such a thing. Dempster is definitely up for kidnapping and we should be able to pin attempted murder on him. The porn star guy should go for rape and attempted murder. I’m not sure about the cameraman. You must be able to charge Marco with something for ordering Maria’s kidnapping and rape. Except for that diary from Schwaner’s computer, Mario seems to be in the clear. Whether a jury would accept our interpretation of that or not, I’m not sure. I’m not too sure if the CJC or anyone else would mount official corruption charges on the basis of that and

Marco's list. And our conclusions about Vincent and Hummel could all be dismissed as sheer speculation. Fair summary?’

‘Aye,’ said McKenzie. ‘We need more evidence.’

‘Reckon Schwaner or Dempster's likely to talk?’

‘Can't see it. Maybe if Schwaner was offered immunity.’

‘Fuck that. The bastard's going to pay big time... So, what do we do with all this. Who can you trust to give it to? Someone in the CJC or Crime Commission maybe? Know anyone you can trust?’

‘I'm like you now; don't know if I can trust anyone. I should give it to Vincent but I can hardly do that. I might just have to go to the CJC.’

‘What about those two blokes from the Crime Commission who came to see me? What were their names? Pastega and Jurkovich, I think it was. It'll be on tape—or electronic recording to be technically accurate—anyway.’

‘Let's listen to those recordings. They might give us some clues we've overlooked.’

I took a couple more of the pen recorders out of my desk, selected one and sat it on the desk in the middle of us.

‘This would be the first one,’ I said and started it playing.

My voice and then Mario's came on as we discussed his proposal. It seemed so unreal, so long ago. When the conversation had finished, I paused the playback.

‘Two things significant there, I think,’ I said. ‘Firstly, Marco said he *gave* stuff to a cop, which suggests he knew Michael was a cop. When he realised Michael was a cop is an interesting question. The second thing that came across strongly to me—and still does—is that he was definitely genuine in thinking his son had been murdered and in being prepared to do anything to bring his killer or killers to justice. Of course, he could be mistaken about this but he certainly seemed to believe it. Everyone agree with me? Anyone else get anything else out of it?’

‘There was a PI Laterre fell under a train at Central earlier in the year. Maybe he was pushed. I thought at the time it was pretty likely; he's made a lot of enemies in his time. I was a bit surprised our homicide crew didn't follow it up more but there really didn't seem to be anything concrete to suggest it was foul play.’

‘They didn't search his records to see what case he was working on?’

‘If they did, they didn't find anything; or maybe they didn't want to find anything.’

‘Well, I don't know if you can do anything from that angle now, but it's something to keep in mind, I guess.’

I restarted the playback. Hearing Maria's voice brought tears welling in my eyes. I needed desperately to know she was, and would be, all right. I looked at my watch and decided it was too late to phone the hospital. I'd have to survive without knowing till morning.

The others seemed similarly affected. They sat, with very sober faces, listening as Maria and I talked, though there was a hint of a smile from them all at some of our banter and puzzled looks from the men and a knowing look from Mary at the exchange between us when she said she'd asked for it and I said no she hadn't she'd taken it. She looked even more knowing at the sounds that followed a gap before I went on to query Maria who had represented her brother in court. When this bit finished, I paused the recorder.

‘Quite a girl, our Maria,’ said McKenzie. ‘You got fair stuck into me there, laddie, and I deserved it. I'll never use anyone like that again.’

I believed him. I think McKenzie was sort of in love with

Maria himself—not in the same way I was; more in a fatherly sort of way. Not really that either, but I don't know how else to put it. He certainly admired her.

I sighed. ‘She certainly is some kind of a woman,’ I agreed.

I restarted the recorder and played the conversation with the "Courier's" chief crime reporter. Everyone found it interesting that he had thought Michael Gigante's trial had been a bit fishy.

When we listened to the recording of my interview with Madsen, their suspicions of the adequacy of Michael's defence grew.

‘Maybe I'm just the nasty suspicious type,’ I said, ‘but it seemed to me he almost admitted he hadn't tried too hard.’

‘Aye,’ McKenzie agreed. ‘It would be interesting to know if he phoned Schwaner after you talked to him.’

‘Yes indeed.’

We went on to my conversation with McKenzie and Abell when they came looking for Maria. McKenzie winced when he heard again my comments on his scheme for using Maria.

‘How did you know Maria was with me and that I'd been to

see Marco?’ I asked McKenzie. ‘Maria?’

He nodded.

‘That should be all on that one,’ I said and picked up and turned on the second recorder.

There was a long silence and then my conversation with Madsen about proceedings at the jail.

‘He seemed pretty adamant about being with me when I interviewed Michael,’ I said. ‘I had to resort to pencil and paper at the end.’

McKenzie started to say something but the recording started again—this time of Michael and me—and he kept quiet to listen. I watched their reactions. All looked shocked when they first heard Michael's flat, lifeless voice. Mary looked particularly distressed, especially when Michael said she'd done other things for Marco.

‘Michael told you how to get into the computer system?’ McKenzie asked when it had finished.

‘Yes, he wrote it down.’

‘He seems to know a lot more about computers than I ever knew he did.’

‘Yeah, he seems pretty cluey.’

Another long silence and then it was back to Madsen and me. McKenzie pricked up his ears at Madsen's confession.

‘We should certainly be able to put some pressure on him when we've got Schwaner and Dempster wrapped up,’ he said when the recorded conversation finished.

Then my interrogation by Pastega and Jurkovich came on.

‘Thanks, guys,’ I said to McKenzie and Abell when it had finished. ‘You probably saved my life getting those two guys to look out for me.’

‘They're good lads,’ McKenzie said. ‘We owe them.’

‘What did they mean about knowing a lot about me? I'm not on police files, am I?’

‘Of course you are. You don't think you could do the job you did for Lenny without being on file, do you? There's other things too.’

I shrugged. ‘Maybe cops aren't as dumb as I thought. I always fondly imagined no-one but me and my client knew anything about anything I'd done. I'll have to do an FOI search one day. What do they say about me?’

‘Cuts corners. Can get blood out of a stone. Technically, should probably be in jail but does a good job for society as well as his clients. Scrupulously honest and rather moralistic. Loves his "ghost" tag. Probably sees himself as a real-life Phantom.’

‘Could be worse, I guess. So, you obviously checked me out.’

‘Of course. You don't think we'd entrust Maria to just anyone, do you?’

‘I think you probably had as much choice in it as I did...Okay, enough of that. What's far more interesting is still why Mary was made a protected witness.’ I looked at Mary. ‘Unless you're not telling us something, I still can't see what evidence you've got against Marco or anyone else that would warrant it.’

‘I couldn't see it either but Hummel persuaded me my life was in danger. He didn't say who from. Since he's Internal Affairs, I imagined it must actually be crooked coppers—I guess the ones on Marco's payoff list. But I didn't really know anything about that.’

‘I guess I might just have to go and talk to Hummel some time.’

‘Good luck.’

‘He'll have to come up with some sort of explanation.’

‘If he'll even see you.’

‘Yeah.’

‘That's about it for that one,’ I said.

I reached for the third recorder and started it. We reviewed the conversation after I had come back to my flat and found it being wired for sound and vision.

‘Fat lot of good all that did,’ I said when that bit of the recording had finished and I'd paused the recorder.

‘How were we to know Q's a crook?’ McKenzie defended himself. Another thought came to him. ‘I guess it must have been Q showed Schwaner how to do that hidden partitions stuff. Schwaner must be pretty clueless if he didn't know you can't permanently erase files by deleting them.’

‘Guess so,’ I agreed, and restarted the recording.

I was grateful that I hadn't recorded any of the private conversation between Maria and myself after they had gone. The next bit was of Schwaner and Dempster after I had dived under the desk.

‘Good stuff!’ McKenzie said when it had finished. ‘That’s pretty incriminating stuff.’

We moved on to my conversations with Mary when I persuaded her to leave her ‘safe house’ and later in the car.

‘That’s something I’d forgotten about,’ I said when they had finished and I’d once more paused the recorder. ‘The two cops supposedly guarding her—why did they suddenly take off? Maybe Hummel hauled them out of there so that someone could come and deal with Mary.’

‘Possible,’ agreed McKenzie. ‘If we manage to track down who they were, we might find out one day.’

Next was Schwaner’s raid. The conversation didn’t really do much to prove the raid was a set-up but it could at least, perhaps, be used to support such a claim if it came to the point. The thing that hammered at me was the conviction that I should never have let him take Maria. I said so.

‘If you’d tried to stop him, Schwaner probably would have shot you and got away with it,’ McKenzie assured me. ‘You were right; I should never have given her that gun.’

We moved on. There was Schwaner’s venomous voice demanding back his disc and then threatening to shoot me if I

didn't inject Mary with a lethal dose of heroin.

‘You've got guts, laddie,’ McKenzie said as he listened to this part.

I was flattered but said nothing.

‘There's certainly proof of a couple of serious felonies in there,’ said Abell.

‘Thank you,’ Mary said simply and leant over to kiss me.

It took me several seconds to refocus on the conversation. When I did, McKenzie's angry voice was demanding his girl. The subduing of Schwaner, the trip to, and raid on, the porn studio were all recorded. We all listened in grave silence—we three men all with, I think, feelings of guilt in contributing in one way or another to Maria's ordeal; Mary, I would say, with female empathy.

Then Dempster's voice came on. McKenzie listened intently but I don't think there was much I hadn't told him—until there was the sound of a thud, which I guessed was me hitting the floor after I'd been hit from behind. I hadn't had a chance to listen to this recording before and, very stupidly, it hadn't occurred to me that the recorder would keep running. A tree may or may not fall if there is no-one there to hear it but a

recorder (unless damaged) keeps recording until it comes to an end or someone turns it off.

‘Christ, Q, where did you spring from?’ Dempster's startled voice said.

‘I've been here all the fucking time, you stupid, moronic fucking idiot. What kind of fucking imbecile would come up with that fucking brainless bloody idea of kidnapping her to persuade him to give you the fucking disc? I just walked in and took the fucking thing. Christ, haven't you got a brain in your fucking head? It was absolutely fucking obvious where the fucking thing was. Now we're left with having to dispose of this pair of cunts—or did you plan to let them go and have you charged with kidnapping? Shit!’

‘We had to get the disc back,’ Dempster weakly defended himself.

‘I got the fucking disc back, didn't I—without all your crap. You've been watching too many crap movies, you flea-brained piece of shit.’

‘Sorry,’ Dempster said, even more weakly. ‘What do we do now?’

‘What the fuck do you think we're going to do? Kill them,

of course.’

‘How?’

There was a pause while Q apparently considered.

‘We could just shoot them and hope there's nothing to link us. Pretty dodgy. Maybe we could make it look like a murder suicide. Hard to be sure it would wash. A double act OD wouldn't seem all that plausible. I know.’ You could almost hear the smirk in his voice. ‘Get down to the chemist down the road and get me...aw, fuck, I'll write it down; you'll fuck up otherwise.’

‘They'll be shut.’

‘Of course they'll be fucking shut, you moron. You need a script for these and I didn't bring my script pad. Just fucking get in there and fucking get them. Pick a fucking chemist without a fucking alarm, will ya, or turn the fucking thing off first.’

Then there was the sound of the little beeps you get when you're dialling a phone. Then Q's voice again: ‘Vincenzo, old buddy, I need you here pronto. Bring a length of good cord with you. That stuff about a quarter inch thick you use on your boat would be great...I can't explain over the phone; just get your fat arse over here...Fuck the barbie. You're a cop. Everyone

expects cops to get called any hour. Just get your rear into gear. We haven't got much time. Unit 1, 97 Love Street, Clayfield. Got that? ...Okay, get moving.'

There was the sound of a phone being replaced in its cradle. Good. I paused the recorder.

'By the sound of it, he used my phone. That means we can get a log on it and find out who he called,' I said.

McKenzie and Abell nodded. I released the pause. For a while, there was nothing but indecipherable noises. Then there was a voice—probably Q's—saying 'Okay, get his gear off' and then there was nothing. We listened till the end of the recording but heard only silence.

'Well', I said, 'that's a bonus extra. I didn't even know I had that. Pretty well pins Dempster and Q and Vincenzo, whoever he is.'

'If you're right about the call being on your phone, we'll find out when we get the phone log,' McKenzie said. 'I don't know every cop in the force but I've never heard of a Vincenzo. He's not going to be a young constable if he's got a boat.'

'Unless he's doing pretty well on the game,' said Abell. 'Couldn't be just a nickname for Vincent?'

‘Could well be. We’ll find out.’

I picked up the recorder with my last conversation (confrontation) with Marco on it, set it back to the beginning and started play. After we’d listened to it and I’d paused the recorder, McKenzie said, ‘Marco’s pretty well hung himself there.’ He looked at Mary. ‘And maybe helped exonerate Michael.’

‘And proved he’s not an old-style Mafia boss or you wouldn’t still be with us, boyo,’ Abell said.

For the first time, I thought about it. I had to agree he was probably right. I started the recording again. Next was my brief conversation with Mario, which told us nothing.

‘The thing I don’t understand about Mario is why he gave you my disc to give back to me, Mary, and why he didn’t say anything to me about it. And why did you pretend not to know me when we met on the doorstep? He obviously knew we knew each other if he gave it to you to give back to me,’ I said.

Mary looked flustered, confused. ‘I...I...wasn’t really thinking,’ she stammered.

‘You sure you didn’t miss something new or something that had been changed in your files?’ queried McKenzie. ‘You

went through those ten thousand odd files pretty quickly.'

I sighed wearily. 'Okay, I'll go through them again.'

'No need,' Mary's weary voice said. 'There's nothing there that wasn't there before.'

'You checked?'

'*I know.* That's what I was supposed to do after I reinstalled your disc. It took me longer than I thought and then I got sidetracked looking at your files and then I heard you arrive home and I had to give it up.'

She took a floppy from her purse and threw it to me.

'What's on it?' I asked, even as I was putting it into the drive.

'I don't know. I didn't ask.'

'Why, Mary?'

She pushed up her sleeve and we all stared at the injection marks.

'The price of a hit,' she said. 'I didn't acknowledge you at Mario's because I didn't really see you. I was floating.'

‘You always got your hits from Mario?’

‘Yes.’

‘How did you pay him?’

‘With sex and information and looking the other way and odd little jobs.’

‘Such as?’

‘Stopping the camera on the boat dock at Marco's when he brought a load in.’

‘Why didn't he use his own dock at his own house?’

‘It was slipping into the river. He had to spend a fortune getting it fixed.’

‘How long have you been an addict?’

‘Years.’

‘And you've managed to keep it hidden all this time and function as a cop? If you've still got enough discipline to do that, you should be able to kick it.’

‘I don't know that I want to.’

‘Even when you have to sell yourself and betray your

friends and your profession to get the stuff?’

‘Yes. Disgusting, isn't it?’

‘What about Michael?’

‘Michael?’ There was tenderness in her voice but also more than a trace of scorn. ‘Poor, sweet, simple Michael. How can you love, or even feel that much for, someone who can live in your pocket for so long and yet not realise something is amiss?’

I had no answer.

‘Let's see what's on this f...this floppy,’ I said.

It was full of the grossest, vilest child pornography. I ejected it as though it had polluted my computer and threw it to McKenzie.

‘You can give it to the porn squad if it's any good to them,’ I said.

‘I wouldn't be surprised if they came round to get it,’ he said, ‘or at least to seize your computer. I guess that was Mario's idea. Whether he has friends in the porn squad or will just phone in an anonymous tip, I don't know but I reckon sooner or later that's what will happen.’

Almost as if in answer, there was a knock on the door. I let them in. Two detectives flashed IDs at me but, before they had a chance to say anything, McKenzie and Abell flashed theirs back.

‘If you blokes are looking for porn, you’re out of luck,’ McKenzie said. ‘We’ve just checked every file on the bloody computer and there’s no porn there.’

‘Shit!’ one of the newcomers said. ‘Seemed like a red hot tip. Guy reckoned he’d repaired the computer and found heaps of child porn on it.’

‘You couldn’t have checked out your informant too carefully,’ McKenzie said. ‘This guy’s been assisting us with inquiries for some days and nobody but him and us has been near the computer and, like I said, we’ve been through every file on the computer and there ain’t no child porn there.’

‘Aren’t you guys drug squad? What are you doing checking for porn?’

‘Did I say we were checking for porn?’

‘Er, no. Come on, David, let’s go. Obviously a hoax call. You’d have thought the chief would have been more careful before he got the warrant and sent us here.’

‘Your chief sent you here? Who gave him the tip?’

‘No idea but whoever it is could be due for a blast. Come on, Dave.’

They left.

‘Does that mean their chief’s in it too?’ I queried.

‘Maybe,’ said McKenzie. ‘It could just be that he got the tip from Vincent or Hummel or someone.’

‘Just someone else you’ll need to ask a question or two.’

‘Aye.’ McKenzie looked at the floppy. ‘Maybe I’ll give him this when I do...Maybe.’

McKenzie’s phone rang. ‘McKenzie,’ he answered it.

There was silence as he listened, then ‘Yeah! Be right there’ and he terminated the call.

‘Sounds like there’s murder and mayhem at Mario’s,’ he told me. ‘Maybe your stirring has done something. We’ve got watches on Marco and on Mario. Marco went out in his car with a couple of his hoods. Our blokes saw them going in to Mario’s and then they heard shots. They called for backup and then rang me.’ He turned to his partner. ‘Let’s get going. You can drive. I’ll get onto the Southport mob and get them to pick

up Dempster while we're on our way. Should have done it before.'

They raced off, leaving me with Mary. Concern, disgust, pity all mingled in my feelings for her as I looked at her slumped in a chair. She raised her head and looked at me. That look seemed to me filled with both artfulness and artlessness. Maybe it was a case of conscience versus craving because she suddenly blurted out: 'I know why Hummel put me into protective custody.'

'What! Why?' The confession stopped me cold. I'm certain my heart stopped beating momentarily. My brain certainly cleared of any other thought.

'I saw Mario carrying Enrico, Marco's son, out of his house. I went there for a hit and saw Enrico go in. Naturally, I couldn't go in while he was there so I hung around outside, hidden but where I could see him come out again. I waited what seemed like ages but probably wasn't more than thirty minutes at the most. Then Mario came out with Enrico slung over his shoulder like a fireman carries someone. He went to the garage and then the car went out. I couldn't help it; I waited till Mario came back—without Enrico—over an hour later. He wasn't too pleased to see me and I thought for a while he was going to send me away. He asked me how long I'd been there

and I said about half an hour. He seemed to calm down a bit then. He gave me a hit and I went.'

'You always went to Mario for a hit?'

'Since I started getting it from him, yes.'

'Pretty unusual, isn't it? Did he do this for everyone?'

'Just a few specials, I think.'

'Why you?'

'Mario gave me my first hit—at a party, long before I even joined the police force. I saw him from time to time after that and sometimes we had H and sometimes sex and sometimes both. But I never really became addicted. Then I met Michael and he was a cop and I became a cop and stopped using. Ironically enough, we both ended up in the drug squad. And then the pair of us got into the Marco sting operation. We were the ones who got stung. Michael—well, you know what happened to Michael. Me? Well, Marco used me as a messenger boy between him and Mario sometimes. I couldn't refuse to go, could I? The very first time, he put the hard word on me—not for drugs but for sex. I was a fool and I gave in. Why? I could try to justify myself by saying because I thought I might learn something or because I was scared not to

or...whatever...but the truth is because I knew he was a great screw. What about Michael? Well, to be honest, Michael's a square and stodgy lover—no imagination and little understanding of what a girl really wants. Anyway, after the sex, he said let's shoot up and we did.'

'He did too?'

She frowned. 'He certainly injected himself with something but he didn't really act like he was on a high. Whether he did or not, he never did again on other occasions.'

'Enrico was another special customer?'

'It looks that way but I don't know. I never saw him at Mario's any other time but that once.'

'So, he could have been a regular or a first timer and it could have been voluntary or involuntary, accidental overdosage or deliberate murder. What do you think?'

She shook her head. 'I don't know. When I had my hit that night, Mario gave me a smaller dose than usual. He said something about being careful it was very pure. So maybe Enrico was a regular and Mario gave him an accidental OD. Maybe.'

'And you told Hummel all this?'

‘No, but he was sure I knew something I wasn't telling. He spotted that I'm an addict and apparently thought if he held me without heroin long enough I'd crack and tell him everything.’

‘You didn't?’

‘No, but I couldn't have held out much longer.’

I thought about it for a couple of minutes. Finally, I said, as much to myself as to her, ‘he could have been trying to get this info for legitimate police purposes; or, if he's a baddy, he could have been trying to find out how much you know to see how much of a threat you are. No way of knowing really. But, if he was on the level and really a good guy, that means he can't be M. So, who could be?’

Mary said nothing. I had another thought.

‘Why did you jump in and suggest it could be Hummel? Is there something else you haven't told me?’

Mary sighed. ‘No. I just wanted to make sure you didn't think about sending me back to him so that I could stay loose and see Mario for my fix.’

‘I still can't think of any other good reason for him getting your guards out of the way when he did except to clear the way for Schwaner or someone to come and dispose of you. Can

you?’

‘No.’ Her reply sounded peculiarly empty of conviction and I wondered if she had thought of some other explanation and was just happy for me to believe the worst of Hummel but I couldn’t think of any other explanation or why she might want to hide it from me.

Another sudden inspiration hit me.

‘You rang Marco and told him about Schwaner taking Maria to the station, didn’t you?’ I demanded.

‘No.’

Her denial was unconvincing. I didn’t believe her. I told her so.

‘I did not phone Marco,’ she said slowly and emphatically.

No, I thought, she couldn’t have; he said a male had phoned him. But who? I still had the strong sense that Mary was somehow involved. A possible explanation came to me.

‘Who *did* you phone?’ I asked.

She looked at the floor and whispered ‘Mario.’

‘You rang Mario? Why?’

‘To buy a hit, of course.’

‘You told him all about Maria? How she was a plant and wasn't a relation at all?’

‘Yes.’

‘And Mario then rang Marco...But Marco said he didn't know who'd phoned him...Of course, he could have been lying.’

‘Mario's pretty good at imitating accents. He can even do a good plummy Pommy one.’

‘So that story Marco told me was bullshit. He meant to have Maria killed. I'll kill him.’

‘Maybe you won't get the chance—that murder and mayhem at Mario's place...’

‘Maybe they did us all a favour and shot each other...but then we might never know the truth.’

We sat and waited for some news. I tried to think what I should be doing but I looked at the woman sitting slumped in the chair and saw a vision of her phoning Mario and telling him the secret that would send Maria to her death and a rage flared and blazed inside me so intense I had to restrain myself from

getting up and strangling her then and there. Then I saw how crushed and defeated she looked and my anger passed into contempt and finally into pity.

‘You have to get help, Mary,’ I softly said. ‘You can kick it if anyone can. If remembering what you did to Maria isn’t enough incentive...’ I let it hang. Her sobbing was so pathetic I almost moved to comfort her but I steeled myself—a good guilt trip might be just the medicine she needed.

We sat there in silence, both immersed in our thoughts, for God knows how long. I wanted to dash off to the hospital and see Maria and find out the results of her tests and I wanted to know what was going on at Mario’s and I didn’t dare leave Mary alone and I wanted desperately to clean up the whole mess and leave it all behind me. My thoughts tumbled over each other and made nonsense of whatever intelligence I have.

There was a knock at the door and I jumped up startled. I let McKenzie and Abell in.

‘Mario was dead when we got there,’ McKenzie said. ‘Marco was about on his last gasp. One of his bodyguards was shot but should be okay. I left it to Homicide to sort out. But I did hear Marco say “Mary mad”. What in the hell did he mean by that?’ he demanded of Mary.

She looked her puzzlement. I thought about it. Why should he mention her name at all? Of course, McKenzie could have simply misheard.

‘You sure he didn't say “Mario?”’ I queried.

McKenzie pondered. ‘I guess it could have been Mario,’ he finally admitted, ‘but it sure sounded like Mary to me.’

A thought struck me. It seemed so unlikely that I almost dismissed it out of hand but it stuck with me and compelled me to voice it: ‘You didn't by any chance phone Marco and tell him about Mario and Enrico did you, Mary?’

She paled and, in a voice so small I almost asked her to repeat it, whispered ‘yes’.

‘Why?’ I asked in astonishment. ‘Now you've lost your source of supply.’

Tears flooded from her eyes as she looked up. ‘That's what I was hoping,’ she said. ‘I knew I'd never be free of my habit while he was alive. I blamed him for everything—even betraying Maria.’ She dabbed at her tears. ‘We addicts tend to blame someone else for everything,’ she ended bitterly.

Another thought came to me. ‘But why would he say you were mad—unless it was all just another of your stories?’ I

queried.

She faced me squarely. ‘It was the truth,’ she said emphatically.

I thought about it. ‘Did he actually say it just like that?’ I asked McKenzie.

‘What do you mean? Oh, I see. Well, the poor bastard was dying. It took him enough effort to get anything out. There was gasps and groans and gaps between each syllable.’

‘So, it's possible the two words weren't related?’

McKenzie looked puzzled. ‘I guess so,’ he agreed. ‘What are you getting at?’

‘That he wasn't necessarily saying that Mary's mad.’

McKenzie shrugged. ‘I guess that's true, but why should he be saying anything about Mary?’ He looked at Mary as he spoke, then added lamely, ‘if he was.’

I too looked at Mary. I could tell she was struggling with her conscience or her sense of duty or whatever makes one confess. She looked at me as they she were waiting for me to speak. I said nothing. Finally, she turned to McKenzie.

‘Perhaps I can tell you,’ she said. ‘I told Marco Mario

killed his son, Enrico.'

McKenzie looked disbelievingly at her. 'You have proof of this.'

'Not really, but I saw Enrico go into Mario's house and I saw Mario carry Enrico's body out.'

'Why didn't you tell anyone this?'

'Because if Mario was arrested I'd lose my source of supply.'

McKenzie looked incomprehendingly at her. 'Supply of what?'

She rolled up her sleeve and showed him her arm.

'Heroin,' she said.

Both detectives looked stunned. 'Did Hummel know you knew this?' McKenzie asked.

'No, but he knew I knew something. That's why he was holding me. He thought if he kept me cold turkey long enough I'd crack.'

'And did you?'

'No, but if my knight in shining armour hadn't rescued me,

I probably would have before much longer.’

McKenzie thought about this. ‘So, Hummel may not be M,’ he said. ‘He might have just been doing his job. Why did you jump in and tell us you were sure he was M?’

‘To make sure you wouldn't send me back to him. I had to get to Mario to get a hit.’

‘So that's what you were doing at Mario's. He actually injected you?’

‘Yes.’

‘That was taking a risk, wasn't it? Makes it sound like he wasn't in on the plot to kill you though, doesn't it... Why did you tell Marco?’

‘I hoped Marco would kill him. I hated Mario for what he made me do—or that's the way I saw it at the time.’

‘And what did Marco say when you told him.’

‘He said he should have known and,’ looking at me, ‘that you were right that he didn't know half of what went on in his business. Then he told me he'd pay me the other fifty thousand you were supposed to get for finding his son's murderer. I told him I didn't want any blood money. He said I deserved it and

someone would ring me to tell me the arrangements. But no-one's rung.'

'Did whoever was ringing know where to ring?' I asked.

'Marco knew I was staying with you.'

We all digested this latest piece of information for some time till McKenzie broke the silence: 'I still don't see why he would mention your name when he was dying.'

'Maybe he was trying to get you to give Mary a message,' I suggested.

'To tell her she's mad?'

'No. To give her the name of the person who has handling the money transaction.'

They all looked at me as though I was crazy and I knew they'd all thought of the same name at the same time.

'Madsen?' McKenzie queried disbelievingly.

I shrugged. 'I know it sounds stupid but maybe he's not as big a loser as he makes out. He is a legal man. He may well know all the lurks of laundering money.'

The others still all looked dubious. To be honest, I wasn't

at all sure I wasn't barking up the wrong tree.

‘It could be worthwhile getting Pastega and Jurkovich to run a check,’ McKenzie finally grudgingly said.

‘There could be a quicker way to find out,’ I said. ‘It would be interesting to see his reaction if Mary were to ring him and tell him Marco said to contact him.’

Abell nodded slightly. McKenzie caught his reaction and checked his own gesture of dismissal. He looked at Mary. ‘Could you do it, lass?’ he asked her.

Mary paled but seemed to steel herself. ‘Yes,’ she said.

I found the number, dialled it for her and handed her the phone. We heard her ask for Mr Madsen then there was silence while she apparently listened. Then she signalled for a pen and paper, down a number, said ‘Thanks very much’ and replaced the receiver.

We all looked at her expectantly.

‘As soon as he came on the phone,’ she said, ‘he said, “I hear you're off for a holiday in Bermuda, Mary. You'll need plenty of money there. There's an account in your name at the Prudential Bank. If you've got a pen and paper, I'll give you the number.” Then he gave me the number and said, “Are you still

with Petersen? I'll send your tickets and itinerary there.””

‘Bingo!’ said Abell.

‘Some inspired guesswork there, laddie,’ McKenzie said.

I had to agree.

‘I wouldn't mind betting your itinerary will include a casino or two where you'll have a remarkable run of luck and walk out with fifty grand—or maybe a bit less with airfares and other trip expenses deducted.’

‘Aye, you're probably right,’ McKenzie agreed. ‘But then she might just disappear somewhere too. I'm not sure if I wouldn't stay home if I were you, girl. Then again, the money might all end up being seized as proceeds of crime anyway.’

‘I don't want the money,’ Mary said. She was close to tears again. ‘All I want is my life back. There must be someone who can help me.’

‘I'm sure there is,’ I assured her. ‘And you need protection until all these crooks are behind bars. I haven't done too good a job of it, have I? Maybe I should have left you where you were.’

‘But they were going to kill me!’

‘Yes, I still believe they were—whether with Hummel's connivance or not.’ I turned to McKenzie. ‘It would be interesting,’ I said, ‘to know if Schwaner made any phone calls to Madsen.’

‘Quite likely, I'd say. Schwaner was Union and Madsen was a union barrister.’

‘Damn, that's right.’

McKenzie looked at me quizzically.

‘So any phone calls between them could be innocent Police Union matters.’

McKenzie still didn't comprehend.

‘Look, we all settled on Hummel as being M. Okay, he's in the right place. But most of that was based simply on Mary's suggestion and because we thought he'd made her a protected witness for no real reason except, perhaps, to keep her out of the way. But we know now he did have a good reason. And, like you said, he came through the Fitzgerald Inquiry smelling of roses. The only thing I can think of about him that is suspicious is the convenient disappearance of the two cops who were guarding Mary. I guess you haven't had a chance to track them down yet?’

McKenzie shook his head. ‘You’re not really suggesting Madsen could be M, are you?’, he queried, absolute disbelief in his voice.

‘I don’t know. It seems we’ve completely underestimated him. Maybe we’ve underestimated him much more than that. He could be far shrewder than any of us imagined.’

McKenzie considered. ‘I suppose it’s just possible. But I thought we agreed it had to be someone pretty high up in the hierarchy?’

‘It did seem that way and maybe it is that way but Vincent would have quite enough authority to set up the raids,’ I pointed out.

McKenzie sighed. ‘You have thrown a spanner into the works, lad. All I can say is that, if Madsen is M, he’s been damned clever about it. I still can’t believe it. Anyway, I’ll give Pastega and Jurkovich the tip on the money laundering.’

He thought some more. ‘Schwaner’s diary gives times as well as dates for his phone calls to and from M. If we could get hold of his phone log, that would at least tell us if he spoke to Madsen at those times. The trouble is that Hummel is the only one who can do that and, if your first deduction was right...’

‘Yes,’ I agreed, ‘We seem to be between a rock and a very hard place but I can't think of any other way of proving...well, not proving—maybe disproving or suggesting...that Madsen might be M. Can you?’

No-one could. We wrestled with the problem for quite some time. In the end, the decision was taken out of our hands.

CHAPTER 16

The door quite literally burst open. It's not a very strong door or a very strong lock. I'm not one who thinks you can keep undesirables out by having castle style doors and locks to suit. Anyway, the guy who had put the shoulder to the door almost ended up sprawled on the floor or through the opposite wall. Two more well-built men followed him.

I recognised Assistant Commissioner Hummel. 'Didn't your mother teach you to knock?' I said.

He stormed over to me. 'Don't get smart,' he snarled. 'Interfering with a protected witness is a serious offence.'

'One or more of your colleagues was intent on killing her.' I defended myself. 'Which reminds me: why did you pull your guards out just at the time someone was planning a hit?'

'What the hell are you talking about?'

'According to Mary, your two guys you had in the downstairs flat guarding her took off in a rush just before I arrived.'

He looked at Mary. 'You're sure of that? Both of them?'

She nodded.

He looked completely nonplussed. ‘They told me they never left the place. I’ll look into it.’

‘I’m afraid I didn’t do a much better job of protecting her,’ I admitted. ‘They nearly killed both of us.’

‘Who’s they?’

‘Dempster, the private eye; Q; Inspector Vincent; maybe others.’

‘You have proof of this?’

‘For Dempster and Q, yes. For Vincent, it’s just a good guess at the moment but a phone log on my phone would soon tell us.’

Hummel turned to McKenzie. ‘This right? It would stick in court?’

‘These days, who knows? But there’s certainly a case there.’

‘Enough to arrest them?’

‘I’d say so.’

‘Okay,’ Hummel said. ‘I’m sticking my neck out on your say-so, but...’ He turned to the two detectives who had accompanied him. ‘See that Dempster and Q are picked up. Let us know when we’ve got them. They’ll be charged with attempted murder. You two,’ turning to McKenzie and Abell, ‘will do at least the initial interrogation.’ He turned back to the other two detectives. ‘Get me the transcript of the phone tap on here as soon as you can.’ He looked at me. ‘I had a tap put on you as soon as you met up with Marco....Anything else?’

‘Plenty, but I reckon that will keep them busy for a while.’

‘Okay, you pair, get going...Right, why don’t I take a seat and someone can tell me all about it.’

We all seated ourselves.

‘Anyone want anything to drink?’ I asked. ‘I could do with another black coffee.’

‘Make one for me too then,’ Hummel said.

‘Anyone else?’ I asked. The others all declined.

‘So, who’s telling the story?’ Hummel asked.

‘Well, I guess I’m the storyteller, so I might as well tell the story,’ I said. ‘I guess I probably know more of it first-hand

than anyone else anyway. If you don't mind, I'll use some props. And if anyone wants to add anything, they can.'

Hummel looked a bit bewildered at the mention of props but didn't say anything.

I began with Marco's call to me to say he had a proposition for me to do some ghostwriting. When it came to my meeting, I played my recording of the conversation.

And so it went on through my story, telling it just as I remembered it and punctuating it with the actual conversations where recorded. When it came to the part we examined Schwaner's disc copy, I showed him those files on my computer.

Mary gasped a little when we neared the end of the story and realised that I had even recorded our conversation when we were recently alone in the flat.

When I had finished, Hummel looked at us and said, 'You sure have been busy the last few days, haven't you? I think you've found out more in three days than I have in three years. Let me recap. The Board of Directors, if you like, was S, D, Q, V and M. S is undoubtedly Schwaner. He seems to have been the Operations Manager. You've got him in custody. I guess there'll be an application for bail soon but we should be able to

keep him and, with any luck, get abduction and attempted murder charges to stick, not to mention official corruption. Dempster seems to have been a bit of an odd jobs man. We should soon have him and he'll go down for kidnapping and attempted murder and probably other things. Q was the man on the inside who could access just about everything. We'll get him and he'll go down too. V could be Vincent but the only link we've got is the guess that Vincenzo is slang for Vincent. Your phone tap should tell us and put him in the hot seat but we'll need to do more digging. I won't move on that till I've got the transcript from the tape and consulted the CJC. And M?' Here his face took on an expression of deep hurt. 'I've been going to ask you why you didn't bring me into the picture earlier but now I know why. You thought I might be the kingpin of the whole rotten deal, this mysterious M, right?'

He shook his head sadly. 'I've been a straight cop for thirty-seven years through times when all around me was rotten. I'm not going to change now.'

'Sorry, sir,' McKenzie said.

'Me too,' I said, but secretly I was still keeping my options open. A large tape-to-tape recorder was humming away under my desk. 'What do you think of my second guess?'

‘Madsen? I certainly would never have thought of him but I guess it's possible. We'll get Pastega and Jurkovich and the others at the Crime Commission on to the money trail. With any luck, we'll at least get him for money laundering. But as for proving he's M—if he is...Any ideas?’

‘Maybe one of the others will squeal?’ I suggested.

‘I wouldn't bet on it,’ McKenzie said. ‘I should have swung on Schwaner's busted arm when I had the chance.’

There was a lengthy silence while we all considered the options. Finally, I said: ‘Look, I know this is going to sound kinda screwy but it's the best I can come up with.’

I went on to explain my scheme while the others all looked at me with various degrees of doubt and incredulity. In the end, they agreed it seemed to be all we had and agreed to let me go through with it.

CHAPTER 17

I went to the phone and rang Madsen's number. There was the usual delay as I went through his secretary and then his snarling voice came on the line. 'What the hell do you want? I'm busy.' It was not exactly the mild and meek, rather bumbling character he had presented before.

'I guess you are...or you soon will be with all those guys to defend...that is, if they want you to defend them with your record.'

'What guys?'

'Schwaner, Dempster, Q, Vincent, a dozen or so lesser lights.'

'What do you know about all this?'

'Quite a lot. More than most. Actually, I'm the only one who knows you're the mysterious M. Everyone else thinks it's Hummel. Can you imagine that?'

'No, I can't. Why do they think that?'

'I guess because I convinced them.'

'Why did you do that?'

‘I thought maybe you and I could do a little deal.’

‘What sort of deal?’

‘I was thinking maybe fifty grand. After all, it doesn't look like I'll be getting my last fifty grand from Marco.’

‘Why not?’

‘Oh, haven't you heard? Both Marco and Mario are dead...slight disagreement between them apparently. Marco apparently got a wee bit upset when he found out it was Mario killed his son.’

‘You didn't tell him, did you?’

‘No, as you know, Mary Holmes did.’

‘How do you know I know that?’

‘She told me.’

‘So you don't deserve the fifty grand.’

‘Maybe not but surely keeping quite about you being M is worth fifty grand.’

‘I really don't know what you're talking about.’

‘I'm sure you do. You see I've got a recording of Schwaner

calling you M and of you giving Schwaner orders to intercept us on the way back from the jail.’

‘So? Michael Gigante is Police Union business; after all, the Police Union is paying for his defence. I happened to know Schwaner would be up that way and I thought it would save time for us to meet on the road and I could give him any news about Michael. He also wanted to talk to you about an unprovoked assault on him and Dempster.’

‘Talk? With his fists, no doubt.’

‘Oh, no, I’m sure he wanted to assure you that he was sure it was all a misunderstanding and that you thought they were a pair of baddies planing to roll you.’

‘Yeah, right.’

‘Well, thanks for ringing but I do have work to do. I’ll put you back to my secretary and you can give her your details so she can send you an account.’

There was a click and a short silence and then the secretary's voice politely asking for my full name. I hung up in her ear.

Everyone looked at me expectantly. I shook my head.

‘He didn't give a bloody thing away,’ I said. ‘But I'm more than ever convinced. He's certainly not the nervous, bumbling type he made me think he was. He's as cool, calculating and canny as anyone I've ever met.’

To the best of my memory, I relayed the conversation to the detectives. They looked as glum as I felt.

‘If your memory's any good, you're right. He didn't admit to a damned thing. I guess we'd better check the tap just to make sure you didn't miss anything.’

He sent his partner off to do just that and we all waited, me cursing myself for having achieved nothing except to alert Madsen that we were on to him.

My mobile rang. I answered it.

‘Right,’ said Madsen. ‘Play me this recording you say you have.’

‘I don't carry it around me with. It's in a safe place.’

‘How long will it take you to get it?’

‘An hour or so.’

‘I'll give you two. Be in my office with it in two hours from now.’

‘Okay.’

‘Just two more things. Firstly, how did you get this recording you say you have?’

‘I planted a bug when I was in your office. It went to a recorder in a convenient spot outside, from which I retrieved it.’

‘So, all quite illegal, making anything possibly incriminating on the recording inadmissible evidence and laying you open to charges. The second thing is: if you had an incriminating recording and I were to pay you some incredible sum of money for it, how could I be sure you wouldn't have copies galore to do with what mischief you thought fit?’

‘This recorder is a special unit that can't be recorded from or the recording tampered with in any way.’

‘Well, I'd certainly like to see that. I look forward to meeting you again.’

He ended the call and I sat scowling at the phone. McKenzie sensed something was wrong.

‘Trouble?’ he asked.

‘Madsen wants me to bring the recording to his office.’

‘And?’

‘And I don't have a recording.’

‘You do have a wee problem, laddie. What are you going to do?’

‘Take him a recording.’

‘What recording? The Lord's prayer as sung by the Luton Girls' Choir?’

I put on a jacket and grabbed my car keys, my wallet, two of my little recorders with recordings of Madsen and of Schwaner, and a fresh one with no current recording.

‘Where are you going?’ McKenzie asked.

‘To get a recorder and recording and then on to see Madsen.’

McKenzie looked at me with a total lack of comprehension.

‘You can come along if you like,’ I said. ‘As far as the electronics wizardry bit anyway. You'll stay well away when I go on to Madsen.’

‘You can't take those recorders,’ McKenzie said. ‘They're

police evidence.’

I shrugged. ‘Tough. I need them.’

McKenzie and Abell followed me as I drove to a little electronics shop in New Farm. As usual, there was no-one in the shop. The man who appeared from out the back in answer to my summons groaned when he saw me.

‘Oh, Lord, what earth-shattering new device do I have to knock up in half an hour now?’ he asked.

‘A tamper-proof recorder and a recording to go with it...but you've got an hour.’

‘What do you mean tamper-proof?’

‘So that the recording can't be altered once recorded and so that recordings can't be made from it...or, at least, something that will look enough like such a device to fool a clever, but probably not too knowledgeable about electronics, person.’

He thought for a moment. ‘I guess I probably could design something like that that all worked electronically but it would take more than an hour to design and build and your bunny might take some persuading it did what you said it did. What would be simpler and probably more convincing would be a simple tape drive sealed in a plastic container, a start/stop

record switch and a play button. Play would be through a permanently connected earphone. That should do what you want or at least close enough to convince your patsy.'

'Sounds good. And you can knock that up in about half an hour?'

'You said an hour.'

'That's including the recording. It's between two characters I've got on tape but separately and saying the wrong things. I'll write a script and you'll have to do the analysis/synthesis bit.'

'Knocking up the gadget will keep me going for the hour. You'll have to do that part. You've watched me do it often enough.'

'Okay. I'll give it a go.'

We went on with our work while McKenzie and Abell watched with goggle-eyed interest. When I had done my bit—analysing Madsen's and then Schwaner's voice with the machine, recording the dialog I wanted and then transforming my voice to Madsen's or Schwaner's speech patterns as appropriate—I played the finished product to McKenzie and Abell and asked their opinion.

'Sure sounds like them,' McKenzie said. 'Sounds like

about what they would have said to each other too. But it's bound to be rather different from what they really did say and, if Madsen remembers the actual conversation in detail, you could be in trouble.'

'I know but it's the best I can do. I guess I was pretty naive thinking Madsen would admit to anything over the phone.'

The supposed conversation was recorded on a tiny tape, which was then sealed in the little gadget my friend had constructed.

'You know, you've just totally destroyed my faith in the value of recordings as evidence,'

McKenzie said. 'With this technique, you could frame anyone for anything. Let's hope some of our cops don't get onto it.'

'Yeah. Maybe we should just take this recording to court...Just joking. The other side of the coin is, of course, that you'd have no chance of ever getting a conviction on the basis of a recording if everyone knew about it. Which would stuff us up pretty severely...Speaking of recordings, you'd better take custody of these.' I handed him the two of my 'pen' recorders that featured Schwaner and Madsen. 'Must be off. Wish me luck.'

CHAPTER 18

Madsen was waiting for me. He showed me into a different office from the one I had seen him in before.

‘My associate's,’ he explained. ‘Just in case you still have an active bug in there. You can show me where it is when we've finished here. Then again, you'd probably only plant another one. I'll get the electronic security firm I use to check. They'll undoubtedly be interested in this remarkable recorder of yours too. Where is it?’

I was beginning to think I'd really screwed up with my subterfuge. Well, if it ended up with him admitting he was M, nothing else would matter. I took the gadget out of my pocket and put it on the desk. He picked it up and inspected it carefully.

‘So,’ he asked, ‘what makes it tamper proof?’

‘No erase head. You can record over the top of something but all you'll get is a gabble.’

‘And the fact that you can only listen to it through a permanently installed headphone is supposed to stop you copying. Why can't you just turn it up loud and stick a sensitive

microphone near it?’

‘There's no volume control, so you can't turn it up. And if you try to record from the headphone output, you get no end of distortion. You and Schwaner talking would soon like a chinaman conversing with a pilot whale underwater while someone was dropping depth charges nearby.’

‘Okay, how do I play it?’

I showed him and he stuck the headphone in his ear, pressed the right button and sat back to listen. I could tell by his frown that something was not quite right. When he had finished listening, he took the earphone from his ear, put the recorder on the desk and then, to my amazement, burst out laughing. That laughter was the sound of doom to my ears and it seemed to go on for ever. Finally he stopped and looked at me, a huge grin on his face and with tears in his eyes from laughing.

‘Oh why, oh why couldn't we be on the same side?’ he said. ‘With your imagination and cunning matched up with my talents, we could do anything. It's a brilliant con and it would have succeeded except for one small thing. The voices could well be ours and the conversation, amazingly enough, is just about as I remember it but you slipped up on one small detail. Schwaner is a foul-mouthed son of a bitch but he doesn't use

that sort of language with me; I just won't stand for it. I certainly would have remembered if he had—and done something about it.'

I stalled for time. 'What are you talking about?'

Madsen laughed again. 'Come on, don't be coy. It's a brilliant job—but not worth fifty grand.'

'Want to try your luck with it before a jury? I don't reckon they'd think much of your deduction.'

Madsen scowled. Then, before I could do anything to stop him, he picked up the recorder and threw it hard at the floor. Not satisfied with the effect, he stomped down hard on it with the heel of his shoe until it lay in several pieces. Then he grabbed the tape, put it in the ashtray and applied a match.

'Lucky my associate's a smoker,' he said. 'I guess I'll have to stop hounding him about it now.'

I rose to go. 'I'll show myself out,' I said.

'Sit down,' he said. 'Look, I wasn't joking when I said I wished we were on the same side. I could use someone like you. I know what you're thinking—Marco's dead, Mario's dead, Schwaner, Dempster, Q and Vincent are all stitched up and all the bit players soon will be too. Okay, true, but there'll be

others to take their places and I've got plenty of other irons in the fire anyway. I could offer you a very profitable consultancy.'

'Aren't you forgetting Schwaner? If he thinks it will help save his skin or help him at all, he'll be telling everyone who M really is.'

'Schwaner won't ever come to trial. He's quite suicidal already, I hear.'

I pretended to think about it. What I was really considering was whether he had sufficiently incriminated himself or not. I wasn't sure.

Unfortunately, the break in proceedings also provided Madsen with thinking time.

'Wait a minute,' he said. 'You didn't even have this fake recording when you rang me, did you? That's why you needed two hours to get it—not because it was secreted away somewhere that took time to get to but because you have to make the bloody thing. So, if you didn't even have a fake to threaten me with, why did you ring me? You're not stupid enough to think I'd agree to put a check in the post without even seeing the goods. The only reason I can think of is that you thought I'd be stupid enough to admit everything over the

phone and you were recording the conversation. What were you going to do with that recording—try to sell it to me or give it to the cops?’

Before I could say anything, he reached into a drawer and pulled out an automatic, which he pointed at me.

‘If I know you at all, you’ve been recording this conversation. Empty out your pockets.’

I did so. He looked at the various objects on the desk. My recorder caught his interest. He obviously wasn’t too sure what it was. He reached toward it with his left hand. I slapped the gun out of his right. He went to retrieve it.

‘Leave it,’ I said, ‘unless you want to end up like Schwaner...or worse.’

He subsided into his chair.

‘I knew you were trouble,’ he said. ‘That’s why I took a small precaution. Your beloved Maria is in my office with Inspector Vincent. Give me that recorder and you and Maria can both walk out of here. Don’t and she’ll take a drive in the country. It’s very silly for a narcoleptic to drive; they can so easily nod off and crash.’

‘Who’s car is she going to be driving—yours, a police

car...?’

‘Yours actually.’

‘Don't be stupid. You'll never get away with it. Half the police force knows I came here to see you. Maria doesn't even have a licence and she knows better than to drive. If you think anyone will swallow that crap, you're crazy.’

I stood up and started replacing my possessions in my pockets. Madsen dived for the gun still on the floor and came up with it in his hand, pointed at me. This time he copped a full-blooded twist punch on the jaw, that snapped his head back and sent him sprawling. I picked up the gun and put it in my pocket.

‘Little boys shouldn't play with guns,’ I said. ‘Especially little boys who don't know enough about them to know you have to release the safety catch before you can fire.’

Madsen wasn't saying anything. I frankly didn't care if he was alive or dead. I reached across for the phone and dialled McKenzie's mobile. All I got was a burring noise. I tried again, putting a zero before the number. Success; the phone rang.

‘McKenzie.’

‘Come and get us,’ I said.

‘At his offices?’

‘Yes.’

‘Got everything?’

‘Enough for starters.’

‘Be there in five. Try to stay out of trouble till then.’

I looked at Madsen. He still seemed out to it. I gave him a not too gentle prod with the toe of my shoe and got no response. I left him and went out to the reception.

‘A couple more guys are joining our discussions,’ I told the receptionist (who, I guessed, doubled as Madsen's secretary). ‘They should be along any minute. I'll wait for them here and see them in.’

She looked at me suspiciously. I went to sit down. Then I caught a glimpse of a movement. I spied Madsen stumbling towards his office.

‘On second thoughts, show them into Madsen's office,’ I said over my shoulder as I took off after Madsen.

I caught up with him just as he was about to close the door to his office behind him. I caught the door, pushed him in and shut the door behind me.

‘Go and sit down,’ I said.

He did.

‘Inspector Vincent has given you the good news about Michael?’ I asked Maria.

She tried to speak, then gave it up and nodded. Finally, she found her voice. ‘Is it really true?’ she asked.

‘Oh, yes,’ I assured her. ‘We have more than enough evidence to clear Michael and get him out of jail.’

Vincent and Madsen were watching me warily, calculatingly. Then Vincent looked at Madsen. ‘Has he?’ he asked him.

‘Probably. He's got evidence of a lot else too that concerns us. I think you should maybe take him down and get an official statement from him. It would be a good idea to take Miss Gigante too.’

‘I agree, but I think you should come too. You can drive.’

I laughed. ‘Don't be bloody stupid.’

Vincent's hand moved under his coat. I brought Madsen's gun out of my pocket and released the safety catch.

‘Just keep your hands where I can see them,’ I said.

‘I’ll throw the book at you,’ Vincent threatened.

‘It’ll bounce back and bury you. Ask your boss.’

‘The Commissioner? What’s he got to do with it?’

‘Nothing. I meant your boss over there.’

‘Him?’ He sneered. ‘Typical smartarse dickhead lawyer thinks he knows better than anyone else. I warned him your deal with Marco was trouble. “Bust Marco and get rid of the spook” I said but oh, no, “don’t worry about it” says he.’ He looked at Madsen. ‘Dickhead,’ he spat at him. He stopped his tirade and calmed down somewhat. ‘What the hell,’ he said. ‘You’ll never get a jury to believe it.’

‘He’s got a recorder,’ Madsen said wearily. ‘When they hear that tirade, they’ll believe anything.’

Vincent looked at me and seemed to crumple before my eyes.

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘there goes your career, your social standing, your superannuation, maybe your wife. Not really worth it, was it?’

Before he had a chance to answer—if, indeed, he was

capable of answering—the door opened and McKenzie and Abell came in.

‘Arrest them,’ I said.

‘You sure you've got enough evidence?’ McKenzie asked.

He was anxious. I didn't blame him. It's not every day you arrest a superior officer and a barrister. He had every right to be cautious.

‘Perhaps you'd like to disarm the inspector and then we'll listen to the recording and you can decide for yourself.’

He did and we did.

When it had ended, McKenzie turned to Vincent and said: ‘David Colin Vincent, I arrest you for the attempted murder of Phillip Petersen and Mary Holmes. I must ask you to accompany me to Central Police Headquarters where you will be formally charged. There may be additional or substituted charges. I must warn you that anything you say may be taken down and used in evidence against you.’

He took out his handcuffs and Vincent meekly held out his arms.

‘Stand up and put your hands behind your back,’

McKenzie ordered.

Vincent looked surprised but did as he was told. McKenzie fastened the handcuffs to his arms. He then turned to Madsen and said: ‘Norman Madsen, I arrest you for receiving corrupt payments. I must ask you to accompany me to Central Police Headquarters where you will be formally charged. There may be additional or substituted charges. I must warn you that anything you say may be taken down and used in evidence against you.’

Madsen shrugged, stood, put his hands behind his back and allowed himself to be handcuffed. McKenzie and Abell led the handcuffed pair away. Maria and I were left alone. I went and knelt before her and took her hands in mine.

‘Are you okay?’ I asked. I was rather surprised she hadn’t had a sleep attack by now.

‘Yes.’

‘Everything’s going to be all right,’ I assured her. ‘Your brother, Michael, will soon be out of jail and back where he belongs.’

She looked at me as though she still didn’t really dare to believe it. Then, ‘Thank you,’ she said.

‘Thank the good coppers,’ I replied, ‘and one crook—Marco—for starting all this.’

‘None of it would have happened without you.’

‘Perhaps...Now, give me some good news. Tell me they found out what causes your narcolepsy and they can cure it.’

She sighed. ‘They couldn't find any reason for it, but they told me they rarely do. At least I haven't got a brain tumour or anything like that.’ My heart skipped a beat at the mere mention of my secret fear. ‘They put me on some different medication they think might be better for me. I guess the fact that I didn't drop off before might mean that they're right.’

‘Great!’ I said. ‘But I'll love you whether it does or not. While I'm in this ridiculous position, I'd like to ask you a question.’ Her eyes told me she already knew what the question would be but gave no hint of her likely answer. ‘Will you marry me?’

She studied me, looking for I knew not what. Finally, she voiced her doubts. ‘I was thinking whether you'd asked me now because I've just told you the medication may control, if not cure, my narcolepsy, and I wasn't sure if I liked that. But then I had another thought. What if it was because of my narcolepsy that you loved me? What if it was what you saw as my

helplessness that attracted you? Would you still feel the same if I didn't need you to look after me that way? I'm not sure.'

I was rather stunned but I quickly began to see her point. I was almost immediately attracted to her but it wasn't until I realised her predicament that deep love feelings began to creep into my psyche. I pictured myself living with an independent Maria and some of my romantic visions vanished before my eyes. But then I pictured myself without Maria and my whole mental world collapsed.

'No problem,' I said. 'We can have lots of helpless little people for me to exercise my caring urges on.'

She laughed and rose to her feet, lifting me with her. 'Let's go home,' she said.

CHAPTER 19

I'm no longer a ghost. Sure, I still provide material for people and help them write their own, but now I demand an acknowledgment—not so much for my ego (though I admit that is a factor) but because I acquired a conscience somewhere along the line and now see deceiving the public in such a way as dishonest. I do a lot more writing under my own name too.

More important, I no longer move through life like a ghost. The trials of the assorted miscreants (they were all eventually found guilty of numerous charges and received appropriate sentences) and a subsequent inquiry (which resulted in some procedural changes but basically reassured the public) brought me some degree of public attention and even adulation in some quarters—but bitter accusations of shady dealings from others. At first, I deplored all this and tried to evade it but in time I learned to use it and enjoy it.

It was, of course, Maria who most gave my spirit some substance. The new medication did do most of what was promised. She can still drop off in very emotional scenes in movies, if I lose my temper (real? defence mechanism? stratagem? Who knows? Who cares?), and sometimes in sex. I must admit to a degree of relief that I do love her as much now

she is pretty well disability free and independent as when I had to watch over her. Narcoleptic or not narcoleptic, she is a wonderful woman. And I do have a helpless little person to watch over. And another one on the way.

Oh, I did get to keep the fifty grand from Marco. It went a fair bit of the way towards the house we built in a semi-rural part of Rochedale. I'm always a bit ambivalent in my thoughts about Marco. If Mario hadn't killed him, sooner or later I think I would have—or tried to—for what he did to Maria. And yet...I don't know; I can't entirely hate him. Maybe that's Maria's influence; she appears to hold no grudge against anyone.

On the other hand, the fifty grand Marco gave Mary Holmes is still in limbo. I don't know if she'll ever get it or not. I hope so; she deserves it for more reasons than one. I suspect, though, that seeing her partner released, reinstated and recompensed is all the reward she desires. Last I heard, her rehab was going well and she hadn't used for over a year. I hope she makes it.

I'd like to think there won't be any more Marcos or Marios or Schwaners or Vincents or the rest of the rotten crew but I'm sure there will be. Let's hope there will always be enough McKenzies, Hummels and the like to deal with them.

