



# The Curly Situation

*It's a blog novel (or "blovell" if must blestroy the blingo). It's also an experiment.  
I write, you read, and we all get a laugh along the way. Our hero is Curly  
Gibson, an Aussie cricketer whose talent for accidental sporting success is  
surpassed only by his talent for getting shot at.*

Chapters 1-5

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## Chapter 1.1 - Curly as car wreck

The day my life imploded, so completely did things head south that I later reasoned it must have been a horrific thing of beauty to behold. Like a fire in a fireworks factory. Or Britney Spears. From where I stood, however, caught in the crossfire of my own personal shitfight, it struck me as a tad less than amusing.

Another thing that struck me was a pair of flippers, followed by my unused guitar, although I managed to sidestep the suitcase that followed close behind and thereby avoid serious brain injury. I watched as the case hit the concrete beside me and burst, spraying a geyser of underwear and dirty shirts across the carpark. At the window two stories above me, was my (former) live-in girlfriend and trainee banshee. Live-in girlfriend, or was I now a live-out boyfriend? While she was frisbeeing my crockery out into the carpark, I'd walked upstairs and tried my front door. Locked. Possibly barricaded. So you could say she currently held the position of power in the relationship.

We'll call the banshee Karen, because that's her name. Her head bobbed out of the livingroom window. "The beauty of this is you'll get a nice taste of sleeping around too – in your fucking car! Shitwit!" That Karen. A real way with words. That bright Friday morning began with me capering around like the fifth Wiggle, scraping semi-soiled sporting gear into a bag. My name is Ashley Lawrence Gibson, but everybody calls me Curly, given that I've been semi-bald since my mid-twenties. As nicknames go, it's a million miles from hilarious, but you don't get a choice in these things, it seems.

At 35, I still call myself a professional cricketer, although, if asked the same question three weeks ago, the phrase "trainee hobo" may have figured in my reply. My career had been reduced to club cricket on the weekends interspersed by serious sessions of thumbing through the Saturday job ads and wondering why I'd used my high school careers guidebook as kindling on camping trips. Financially, things were looking dire. My savings were just about kaput, with the few hundred my club slung me every week hardly enough to finance the lifestyle I was after, like one that included living in a room. And eating.

## Chapter 1.2 - Kat's call

They say all good things come to those who are consistently there. As luck would have it, the 2007 World Cup had spirited the cream of Australia's cricketing crop off to the Caribbean, leaving a New South Wales Pura Cup squad minus many of its big names. Three days ago, I got the call. It was a Thursday night and I was already shrugging on my lucky green shirt to hit the bright lights of Balmain when the phone rang. It was Blues captain Simon Katich. I would have shown more enthusiasm, but I was on the toilet at the time, and the porcelain was experiencing its own Pearl Harbor after the previous night's rhogan ghosht.

"Curly, it's Kat. How are you feeling!"

"Quite well, thanks, Si. Why do you ask?"

"No - what I mean is ... congratulations."

"What the fuck for, mate?"

"Haven't management been onto you yet?"

"Mate... hang on a sec."

I covered the phone and opened the bomb bay doors to rain another noisy volley down on the toilet duck. "I haven't heard shit till now. This a call-up call?" "I s'pose it is, yeah. Stewie MacGill did his knee at training the other night. Ripped it apart, by the looks. Then Pete Forrest had some sort of mowing accident. He slashed up his foot pretty badly, apparently. We really need you, mate." I had no idea who Pete Forrest was, but that didn't hinder the celebrations. I leaped up, punched the air with a fistful of paper (clean) and mouthed a stream of silent celebration (dirty).

I pulled the phone off my chest and got it together. "Geez, that's a tough one for them. When's the next game?" As Kat launched into a monologue on "the step up" to State cricket, the demands the all-rounder faced in 2007, and my (wholly undeserved) reputation for tardiness and dangerous driving, I'd made my peace with the porcelain and was tapping my foot by the front door. True to form, I was itching to beat the feet to the pub before Karen got back and slipped her red talons of taxation into my wallet. Meanwhile, the pep talk continued.

Kat reminded me that a win would see us head into the Pura Cup final the following week, and – a loss, well, Victoria would no doubt mug us and sneak into the big game and don't expect a guernsey on the post-season trip. The talk was all very earnest. I interrupted. "Mate, I know I've been knocking it around in grade cricket, but it's only been – what – two seasons since I wore the baby blue."

But we were playing a different game now, apparently. I wondered if I'd need new equipment. Like a racquet. Or a puck. In any case, as New South Wales's third-best offspinner-batsman, I was as proud as punch to step into the breach.

## Chapter 1.3 - The dead zone

The body was fully rigoured when they brought it in. But they usually were by the time someone went to all the trouble of pronouncing them and doing all the paperwork. “They don’t call them stiffs for nothing,” Tom Crombie once joked to anyone who would listen. The line had forced out a few polite grunts early on, when he was new to the job and his colleagues were new to him, but he was usually manhandling a dead person at the time, which further quashed the hilarity. Now he knew better than to waste his golden gags on the drones around him. These days he might have to utter 100 words a shift, just to get by, and he couldn’t remember the last time anyone had come into the morgue for conversation.

Now, anyone who needed him or had business with his “tenants” (they’re very quiet and look at the tiny rooms they put up with!) tended to linger at the doorway to the cold, shadowless room and he’d have to put aside what he was doing and go out to see what they wanted. Early on, Crombie chalked it up to the creepiness of the surrounds. Sometimes, when he gave it any thought at all, he was even chuffed that his fellow nurses considered it his domain and thought it necessary to asking for permission to enter.

But after five years at Westmead Hospital, and the last three running the dead zone, the truth was that his colleagues had had enough time to get to know him, and decide that they didn’t care to. Deep down Tom knew this but would rather be in residence in one of his refrigerated drawers than admit it to anyone, least of all himself. Still, let them avoid eye contact when they passed him on the ward and go silent when he threw caution to the tainted wind and lingered around the loading dock smoking crew.

Fuck ’em. Fuck ’em all.

That visit, the trolley had hardly come to a stop before the petite nurse behind it stamped on its brake, and busied herself with passing the buck. She said something, but it was no match for the power of classic rock that was bouncing off the shiny walls (“If it roooocked the ’70s, ’80s and ’90s it’ll rock your woooooorld again on 95.9 TNT!”). It suited her to leave quickly anyway. She held the clipboard next to the black bodybag’s clear plastic pocket and matched the relevant details.

During his degree, Crombie had wondered at the constant barrage of “Doublecheck the details!” he’d copped during his nursing field placements. Heaven forbid that they should call a dead person by the wrong name. But now that he was the one to be strafed with the ire of the grieving relative who discovered the body on view wasn’t dear old dad – it had happened twice – he understood the mantra. But this particular nurse was following the procedure to the letter. Stuck-up bitch. As she dropped the clipboard on the bag and squeaked away, he watched her arse sway out of the room and tried to remember her name. He’d made a point of asking someone what it was before he first hinted that they should “catch up for a coffee”. Seven further attempts later, there was no need to remember it.

Time to get to work.

## Chapter 1.4 - Cheese

Crombie turned down the boom-box, fetched a small stepladder from the corner and a disposable camera from his bag. He placed the stepladder next to one of his stainless steel drawers, hit the handle and pulled out its dead passenger. There was no need to rush it – he would now hear the squeak of approaching feet in the hall in plenty of time to tidy up.

He ran his hand along the sparse stubble on his pate and hefted himself halfway up the stepladder, unzipped the bag and checked the paperwork for the eighth time. Then he was still. All quiet. He tried to calm his breathing. He peeled the bag back down and behind the body – like a human banana – and tucked a white sheet from his bag between the body and the black vinyl under it. This was the hardest part. It required a lot of wrenching, tucking and smoothing, and he was up and down the footstool several times tugging at the sheet from all angles and checking the look from above.

Eventually, though, he had his man sorted. Satisfied, he tidied up the ends of the sheet by stuffing them into the rails under the drawer. Then he climbed back up onto the stepladder, pried open the man's eyelids and continued up until he could throw a leg over and kneel on the drawer, straddling the corpse's midriff. He pulled out the camera and squared it.

“Say cheese.”

No flash, just the camera's electronic ratchet-noise, over and over. He half-filled the camera's memory with shots, all virtually the same. Soon, with everything back as it should be, Crombie felt his heart-rate slow. He tried to roll his shoulders loose and mopped at a bead of sweat tracking into his eye. He turned the boom box back up – Foreigner wanted to know what love was. They wanted someone to show them. He pulled a slip of paper from his wallet and reached for the phone.

Shielding the receiver from the music, he dialed the number. “In my life ... there's been heartache and hmmm...” As usual, the fuckers were too lazy to pick up... “Can't stop now ... I've travelled so far ... to hmmm this lonely...”

Finally. “It's me. No. Crombie.” Joy. He could tell Dimmick had been drinking. Still, you'd rush out for a lottery ticket if you caught him sober. “Yep. No – that's why I'm calling ... yeah. Yes, perfect.”

He wasn't getting it. Tom took his glasses off, wiped his eyes again and wondered how to say it without saying it. Finally, realisation hit the tinny voice in his ear. “Exactly.” he snickered, rolling the cadaver drawer closed. “Looks like we got a live one.”

## Chapter 1.5 - Breathing fire

Dodging commemorative glassware flung at your head is not the ideal preparation for sporting excellence.

I like to learn a life lesson every day. Chalk up another one. One day I'll scrape all these pearls of perception into a pile and release one of those tiny self-help tomes with one sentence to a page and make a motsa. *Ashley Gibson's Steaming Pile of Wisdom*, I'll call it. There'll be a classy pic of me on the cover looking learned in smoking jacket and slippers ensconced in an overstuffed armchair next to a fire, with a pipe and snifter of cognac at hand. It'll be tops. The day that started it all actually kicked off well. I was chirpy enough, scraping my gear together for day two of the Pura Cup game against the Queensland Bulls, thankful I hadn't disgraced myself on day one.

I'd made sure I was up at sparrow-fart, so I had plenty of time to conjure up a fortifying feed of bacon and eggs for possibly the most important day of my career. Standing orders are to roll up at the ground two hours before the first delivery, and being barely a part-time professional cricketer, with a mere seven hours of recent state cricket under my belt, I was a keen bean. This shiny, born-again member of the Blues would be the first to the dressing room and a permanent fixture in the good books.

As usual my kitbag sat in the middle of the lounge room floor with rat's nests of jocks, socks, shirts, strides and essentials flung across the remainder of the flat. Maybe if I left them long enough they'd finally make liars of mums worldwide, grow legs and walk themselves away. Whistling a dodgy version of the old *Wide World of Sports* themesong (my only pre-game ritual) clad only from the waist down, I put the finishing touches on the sizzling fry-up before me – a breakfast smiley face.

The perfect recipe for performance. Eggs for eyes, a strip of bacon for a mouth on a slice of multigrain head. As I watched the ends of the bacon curl into a smile I popped a yolk and engineered a wink. This was going to be my day. I could just freaking feel it. Then, a key in the lock. A slam.

My spatula paused in mid-flip. Enter the Dragon. "Ashley!" The remaining egg eye shivered in its glutinous skin. "Time for a chat." There they were – well-documented as the most ominous four words to enter a male's ear, aside from "Had that testicle checked?"

## Chapter 1.6 - Slinky seductress

For months my domestic situation had been an express elevator waving a white hanky as it plummeted past rock bottom down to the seventh level of hell. The eye-catching but acerbic Karen and I were leading largely separate lives under the same roof, our genitals passing like ships in the night, so her latest bout of shrieking and its promise of serious confrontation had germinated a small kernel of hope within me.

She hadn't come home the previous night but alarm bells weren't ringing just yet. She'd made a habit of all-nighters in the nine months since she'd moved in to Casa de Curly and relations had deteriorated to such a point that it felt like a night off when I didn't see her. Now though, there was a chat in the offing. Maybe some other poor sap had found paradise by her dashboard light. Surely there were other suckers out there as shit-all stupid as I, too dumbstruck by the blonde hair and gym-toned physique to notice the forked tongue and eftpos eyes. I'd heard rumours of her putting it about in various Sydney nightclubs, a sports-star-seeking missile in a little black dress and matching little black heart.

A few friends had informed me of second- and third-hand sightings of her nightclubbing her way through the evenings she'd told me she'd spent "at book club with the girls". I mean, all guys know "book club" is a euphemism for "tragic red wine drinking and character assassination" but this was in a different ballpark, if you believed the reports. The word was that she'd been waving her boo-tay like she was using it to flag down a bus and had been encouraging enterprising menfolk to inspect it at some length.

And yet I was still too gutless to kick her out. In my defence, the sex helped increase my relationship inertia. Jesus H. Christ in a motorbike sidecar! From what I recall, it was beyond mindblowing. There was wild abandon and screaming and clawing and gnashing and thrashing about like a wounded armadillo. Man, did she love it when I did that, and usually responded accordingly.

But a few months ago, as she came to the realisation that the only place her current bandwagon was headed was down a bumpy road straight to dry gulch, all the sexual hi-jinx had dried up. Cut off. Finito. I'd gone cold turkey, especially in the groinular region. But Karen was like that mangled slinky that got tied in a knot when you were 10. You wouldn't believe it was broken, so you desperately tried to fix it, to bend it back to your will. You remembered how much fun it used to be and you wanted to play with it again. It was twisted and ruined, and you knew it would never be the same, but you couldn't quite bring yourself to chuck it in the bin. Or push it down the stairs.



## Chapter 1.7 - A fair fist of things

The Sydney Cricket Ground was awaiting and the clock a-ticking. Whatever Karen's chat was to be, I was hoping it would be fast. Furious sounded like it was pretty much guaranteed. "Tardy habits" and "lackadaisical attitude" were two phrases that had dogged me throughout my so-called career. Never mind that the "relaxed approach" was the way it was done when I was coming up through the grades. These days young players (and administrators alike) couldn't give a frog's fat fiddlestick for the traditions of the game. Like belting a quick-fire half-century and then getting in the pub pronto to belt down a dozen cans. Or sweating out a bottle of vodka while dodging a barrage of short stuff in the nets. Ah, the good old daze.

You just couldn't get away with that malarkey any more. At my age, with my prospects, I had to keep my nose clean, and that meant punctuality. So as Karen stiletto-stalked into the kitchen, I knew I had to keep moving. I got my weight forward onto my toes and kept shoveling forkfuls of fry-up into my maw at a rate of knots and maneuvered to avoid getting cornered against the kitchen bench.

"You haven't done it have you," she hissed. Think of a happy place, think of a happy place...

"Not as such, but you'll recall something came up, dearheart." For emphasis I wagged a sky-blue leg.

She was referring to my "five-year plan", about which the harpie had been harping even before we started living in very little sin. When we met, she had been aghast to discover I wasn't plotting my meteoric rise to a baggy green cap and seven-figure national contract, and had been keen to rectify the situation immediately. That was almost a year ago.

"At the moment all I've got is a five-hour plan. Like, getting to the ground and getting to lunchtime without breaking something." At 35 it was all I could do to get my creaky carcass through a 10-over spell of my deviously direct offspin.

"Fuck it, Ash. I've told you I can't be with a man going nowhere." This had obviously been percolating all night. Where said percolation had taken place was another question entirely. Not that I would be tweaking the ring-pull on that little can of worms just now. "I wouldn't call the middle of the SCG nowhere, Kaz."

"And that's nothing less than you deserve, it really is." She sidled up behind me and slipped her arms around my waist, her velvety fingers sliding beneath the elasticised waistband of the venerable blue pyjamas. I hadn't been this close to someone since, in a moment of weakness, Mark Waugh had loaned me his box.



## Chapter 1.8 - The cat with the fat strikes back

Karen leaned close enough to whisper. “This comeback’s only really a stepping stone, though. Right, Ash?” And there it was. All current data to the contrary, including a now-vice-like grip on my personal situation, this girl didn’t want me. She wanted one of these young pups with a Porsche in the garage and his own clothing label on the drawing board at Myer. And who was I to stand in her way? All I had to do was extricate my south-of-the-border troops from her feminine pincer movement.

Sadly, they were ignoring the chain of command and mounting a movement of their own, assessing the situation and conspiring to pitch a tent for the night. I attempted to swivel with the pretense of facing her to continue our “discussion”, but her grip only tightened, locking me in place against the kitchen bench. I was sandwiched against the sink, staring down at the congealing remnants of my breakfast.

“What’s the hurry, Ash?” Oh, good Christ! “A small matter... of a game of cricket.” “Promise me.” Little Curly was still turgid, but not in a good way. Such was the strength of her grip, I was almost glad of the tears in my eyes, lest I take a peek downstairs and spy something resembling a black pudding in my pants.

“Kaz, if I don’t hit the road now I’m fucked.” She squeezed.

“Move and you’ll never fuck again. Now promise me.”

The three-ducks wall clock in the dining room was about to quack half-past-eight, and I was about to quack up if I didn’t get on the road in the next five minutes. I was trapped, virtually emasculated and facing a swift end to my stuttering career, not to mention untold weeks, months and years squirming under the stillettoed jackboot of the fascist fashionista.

In desperation, I turned to one of man’s few unshakeable allies in times of need – the sausage. Or, more specifically, the semi-congealed pig fat my snag had leaked during the cooking process.

I grabbed the frying pan from the sink and deftly poured its cooling contents over my shoulder, aiming for a direct hit down the front of the little black dress. Take it from me, a fashion attack was guaranteed to pack more of a punch than a pan to the head. A shriek. A momentary loosening of penile constriction. Success. My back had been slathered with friendly fire, but it was a miniscule price to pay for a chance at freedom. I wrenched two-handed at her wrist and managed to wrench my nether-regions from her clutches, lunge free and skate out of the kitchen on a film of warm lard on lino.

## Chapter 1.9 - Stayin' alive

The most I could hope for was a few seconds of grace. Scuttling through the living room I bent to snag my shirt and scrape shoes, socks, keys and wallet into the kitbag on the couch. The rest of my major kit – pads, bats and Hector protector – were safely stashed in the bowels of the SCG. I watched my hand reach for the front door handle, then watched something heavy explode next to it.

“Fuck, Kaz! Not the beer glasses. They were a prize!” Then there was shrieking. “I know what the fuck they are! It’s this small-time shit that’s holding you back!” This was nuts. I was frozen there six feet from the front door and 10 from the kitbag, measuring distance, trajectory and throwing arm muscle tone. Phil Jaques would be already halfway through his warm-up. The parameters were clear-cut. Larry Emdur could have fronted the game show..

Larry: “So, Curly, do you grab the bag, kneeslide to the door, then up and grab the handle, or just go hell for leather and use the bag as a shield?”

Me: “Well, Larry ... are any of these spokesmodels single?”

A flash of movement pulled me back into reality. The glass exploding behind me helped too. Shards rained down onto the skin that my hair used to grow out of. Karen had another glass, with arm cocked and ready to launch “When do we have an Ashley planning meeting?” “What’s wrong with after the game. Tonight?” “That’s what I’m talking about – life comes second with you. After this game, the next game. All the games. It has to end, Ashley. How do you hold a bat and a Zimmer frame?” “What? Jesus, Karen ... the sooner I get my stuff and get...”

All the while she’d been advancing on the kitbag. Then she bent and, with flick of her wrist she’d ripped open the Velcro to the side pocket that ran the bag’s length and dragged out a bat. Actually, no, not a bat. *The* bat. My grandfather’s Ashes bat. Suddenly I had no blood in my head and a glass to the temple seemed like the least of my problems. “Nuh-uh. You do not fucking touch that, Karen McDonald. You know about that bat. You fuck with the bat, things here get ugly fast.” I started edging toward her. She turned the bat over in her hands. “This would go for a pretty penny on eBay, I’d say. Maybe even scare up a house deposit.” I giggled like a loon, holding out a quaking hand. “Maybe the Don’s baggy green, but not some also-ran’s musty old willow, babe. Just... just hand it back and we’ll go through the whole thing tonight.”

She was having none of it. She stepped back, raising the bat above her head like I was a precocious toddler. I crept forward, she shuffled away. I snatched at the bat. Missed. “Ashley, don’t be a dick. If we sold this piece of...” I sprang like a slipsman after a top edge, one hand up, eyes on the prize. My hand found the blade of the bat and my hips sandwiched her against a bookshelf.

Her in high heels, we were nose to nose, each with an arm outstretched like a pair of Saturday Night Feverish John Travoltas.

## Chapter 1.10 - Six of the best

I wrenched the bat free, spotted the glint of glass in her other hand and pushed off the wall. In training, we do drills for stopping, turning and accelerating off the mark, so I gave myself some chance to get out the door unscathed. Some chance.

On the fly, I snagged my bag, but missed the lock with the first grab. By the time I'd flung open the door two more of the six-beer-glass over had exploded around me, the shards picking at my skin. I dove through the doorway, legs akimbo, gear flying. I skidded on my groin across the concrete landing as another glass fizzing past my ear and over the railing. I kicked out at the door and caught it just right. It swung closed just as I looked back to see it sweep the bat along the ground and back inside the flat. It crashed shut, clipping off a shrill shriek of "Bastaaaaar..." from inside as another two glasses shattered against the wood. I paused for the crash that signaled the fall of the last soldier in my squad of six... a squad that had remained intact since the glorious summer of 1982-'83, when I was voted "Best Newcomer" at the ripe old age of 14 at the Balmain Cricket Club.

It would have been a solemn moment, had I not been busy filling the air with blue language and inspecting my bruised man-tackle. I thought I detected a curtain twitch next door at Mrs Cavanagh's flat, but a man's crotch comes first. I turned my back but continued my inspection. She might have been a blue-rinse busybody but that's expected when you're 80, and I didn't want her having a testicle-triggered heart attack.

I struggled to my feet in time to hear the lock on my front door snap shut, and no amount of pleading at the front door would budge Karen the uber-bitch. I switched to attack – and told her that I knew she was sleeping around. That didn't help. I relocated to the carpark where I screamed up at her as she jettisoned my possessions onto the concrete. That didn't help either. And I had run out of screaming time.

I dragged what gear I could to the solace of my powder-blue EH Holden. Naturally, my grandfather's bat was not among it, but if I hung around any longer, I could kiss state cricket goodbye.

Groin burning and stomach churning, I sat there. She wouldn't mess with the bat. Would she? Fuck it. I had to go. A quick gonad-count later, I searched the glovebox for something to conjure up a summer long ago when everything seemed to click. Heading over the ANZAC bridge into the city, *1982: Out of the Blue* melting the speakers, I put some quick kays between me and the source of my possibly ruined life.

When Flock of Seagulls promised it would all be OK when *I Ran*, I wanted to believe them. You can't argue with the Flock, after all.

## Chapter 2.1 - Ker-powwow

Cruising up Driver Avenue toward the SCG usually put me in a good mood. Today the gloss was taken off the usual bliss-out by the fact I was frighteningly late and had the EH frighteningly sideways around most of the corners, but I tried to soak it in anyway. I swung into the driveway of the adjacent footy stadium en route to the underground car park. This was the life, I thought, smirking at the parking cops and locals in knife fights for car parks.

Buses were already arriving and earlybird dads towed youngsters towards the gates, backpacks stuffed with banners to be unfurled after the first six or dad's first sixpack, whichever came first. A chattering redheaded family stopped short on the footpath, their faces bright with anticipation. Could the Blues do it without their big names? Or had they left the door ajar for the Bulls? I swelled at the thought that it was me they were here to see... along with 21 other players of passable talent, of course. I waved and tooted at the bloodnuts to pass by, garnering a look somewhere between recognition and bemusement from the youngest.

I stuck my dial out the window. "G'day, Tiger. Curly Gibson, remember?" I would have ruffled the tyke's hair, but he shrank back further out of reach. The tyke's blank look was more obscene than the hand gesture his father fired at me. So much for loyal fans. We'd had a good first day, with Si Katich and Dom Thornley both sitting pretty on triple figures and me hopefully sitting pretty with my feet up for much of the day, before another patented Gibson bash-and-crash mission, a declaration, an hour in the field and several more in the pub. It was a doddle, this Pura Cup business. I felt good, despite the morning's imbroglia with cyclone Karen.

I was trying not to think about what she might have done to my grandfather's bat. Under the Members Stand, the mood was upbeat. A security guard slapped me on the back, "Have a good one Dougie!", I bumped into a bubbling media manager, even the cleaners were chirping. By the time I was down within the reek zone of the locker rooms, I was walking tall, master of all I surveyed.

Well, at least they'd know my name here. Things were quieter than I expected, so I took it upon myself to get the party started. Just short of the doorway to the rooms, wound up for a grand entrance and flung my bag across the concrete floor, sending it into the room and crashing into the bench seats along the opposite wall.

I unleashed by best li'l Lleyton "Come on!", complete with reverse-duck hand gesture for good measure. Inside, the team meeting paused while the echo faded from the whitewashed walls. Eventually, all heads turned back to the whiteboard at the front of the room and coach Trev Bayliss on the end of a marker pen beside it. I faded cunningly into the crowd and sat down.

## Chapter 2.2 - Aye-aye, cap'n

Eventually, the coach finished his spiel and gave over to Si Katich at his right, who launched into a Tugger Waugh “heart and grit” special. You could have heard a mouse fart.

The time was now.  
This was it.  
Stay in the game.  
Nomatter what.

Copping chin music from the quicks? Duck, weave and counter-attack. Stuck out on the long on boundary under a hail of beer cups and tennis balls? Stay motivated, sharp, alert. Itchy scrot-rot sapping your concentration? Don't get caught playing with your balls on TV. The young 'uns were lapping it up.

When the pep talk ended in an orgy of backslapping and high fives I'm proud to say it was I the captain came to see. Did that make me part of the leadership group? Probably.

As a highly motivated elite sportsperson, I was already at my locker, ramming more mismatched gear into it and wondering where I was going to get another pair of blue pants - one without a hole ripped in the arse.

“OK, Curly?”

“No problems, Si.”

“You know about team policy? Punctuality-wise?”

“Yeah, sorry mate. Just a wee hitch at home. Nothing to worry about.”

He looked unconvinced. “Good. You know you're batting five, right? I need you on the ball mentally straight after warm-ups.”

“Sure thing, Cap. See you in the nets. We'll see if you can pick my doosra.” Generally the only thing about my “mystery ball” that Kat couldn't pick was whether or not to kill me with it as he smashed it back up the pitch.

He turned, hesitated and came back over, leaning in close. “You know, a bit of stability on the home front will do wonders for your game, mate.” I looked back as evenly as a man standing in Astroboy Y-fronts and Huey, Dewey and Louie socks can, and said: “Taken onboard, mate.”

## Chapter 2.3 - Morning gory

John Gacy woke up fully dressed and stinking of the previous night. It was nearly 11 before he twitched and groped around the nest of filthy sheets for the wristwatch on the window ledge above the bed, eyes still closed to the affront of the daylight. When he found it he tried to focus and passed out again until the sliver of sunlight playing across his chest tracked a few degrees and hit his face. Finally he rolled away from the light, up onto his elbows and cracked an eye to check he was in the right place. Every new movement gave birth to a new rhythmic thud at the back of his skull.

He swung his legs down and pushed down on his fat rolls to sit up, trying to remember the night before. He was sitting in this spot... a couple of JDs later, he remembered discovering the spirit of celebration and resolving to have a lash at the rest of the bottle. Then ... he had a chuckle at his “spirit of celebration” gag ... Fuck it was too hazy.

Maybe examining the bottle would shed some light on things. Gacy opened his other eye to a world that was a dull grey blur. *Fuck! I'm blinded!* He clawed at his face and peeled off the 8×10 photo stuck to his forehead, flipping it to reveal yesterday's happy couple in full flight. It was what he called an “action shot”: her bent over the sink, him behind her pulling that troll face of his and thrusting for all he was worth.

The others were a creased mess under him, but it was no biggie. They were damaged, but when it comes to cheating spouse photography the devil wasn't in the detail. It was all about impact – the big picture. These would do to get the message across.

He shook off the other pics like scales and wobbled to his 54-year-old feet, nearly kicking over a mug on the floor. He bent slowly, rescued it, swished and threw the dregs down the hatch. Only then did he pick his way to the bathroom, fingers beavering away at his arse-crack.

## Chapter 2.4 - Rat's nest

The offices of John Gacy Investigations consisted of a dingy studio flat furnished with drifting piles of loose paper and boxes, a scarred wooden school desk that took up almost a quarter of the room and a three-drawer filing cabinet. Everything looked like it'd been flung from the doorway and not touched since it landed. Gacy held his client meetings elsewhere. The thing was, it was a hovel, but he was used to the squalid little bedsit.

Once you made your peace with the constant layer of salmon-coloured grit that fell from a band of peeling paint where the walls met the roof, you were sorted. What sold him on the place seven years ago was the odd walk-in wardrobe with the heavy doors by the bathroom. Once he'd lightproofed the cracks and knocked a hole through to the bathroom sink for a water supply – hey presto-change-o – he had a top-notch darkroom. He'd had to relocate his extensive collection of St Vincent de Paul casualwear to make room, but now everything had gone digital his shirts had reclaimed their rightful home and the printer and computer on the desk did all the work. Which left more time for his liquid pursuits.

Seven years ago it had started as a temporary arrangement – just until he got himself sorted out. But there he was, still divorced, still drunk, and just slightly further from getting his shit in a pile than he was each day before.

During his 30-plus years of coddling evaporating bottles, John Phillip Gacy had embraced the modern culture of the blame-shift. These days he could attribute his wasted life to an addictive personality, his parents, his genes, the ex-wife... whatever. Gacy never bitched about the good old days like other older Australians; these days there was no need to take responsibility for anything. Kick back, good citizen – we are all victims.

A shower and BO spray later, Gacy sat on the edge of the bed and lit a cigarette. He was a happening proposition again and just about fresh enough to meet his girl. A hopeful ferret in the fridge produced nought but ice cubes and furry cheese, so he gave up, collected his smokes, keys and wallet and clicked the door shut behind him.



## Chapter 2.5 - Curly in the middle

Day two was poodling along nicely early on. The thwacking of leather on willow and the SCG crowd's rapturous applause was doing plenty to calm my nerves. With my guts now unclenched, I'd just relaxed and settled onto the throne to relieve myself of several bottles of Gatorade (hey, it was free!) when I heard a collective gasp from the crowd, and extended applause. Fuck it.

Someone bashed on the door. "Thornely's out, mate. You're up!" I was already shaking off, and managed to get from the cubicle down onto the player's race before the natives got too restless. Pads akimbo and shirt tail flying behind like a lit newspaper in my arse, I hit the turf at pace, straight into a wall of applause for the departing centurion.

I sucked in a few deep breaths and tried to tidy myself up as I approached the obligatory mid-pitch conference. Captain Katich stood there with a smirk on his face.

"Ready to rock and roll, Curl?"

"Ready and raring, el-Capitano. What's the plan, Stan?" I tried to look as professional as I could while doing up my fly. The bloke in front of me was on 145 not out after all. Kat sidled in close. "Mate, the deck is as flat as a tack, so play yourself in, then look for some quick runs. I might put them in just after lunch."

"So I can swing the bat?" "Don't go mental, but yeah. Don't die wondering."

Ah, music to a creaky man's ears. I was facing and tried to clear the crusties out of my eyes as that semi-bloodnut Ashley Noffke glared at me from the top of his mark. Probably keen to get his name in the papers by denting the old Gibson visage and sending me back into the cricketing wilderness.

Shite - he looked about my size, but younger and plenty fitter. I found myself hoping for a full-toss or leg-side wide. Given that I was nearing an age when I needed a 45-minute stretching session and linament rubdown to masturbate, I'd take anything loose I could get. No such luck. Noffke ran in and let fly with a rearing, searing half-pitcher straight at my throat

## Chapter 2.6 - Meet market

George Dimmick wasn't hard to find - up the back, sunnies on his head, nursing a beer. His was the only table that wasn't overrun, possibly because he was a bearded, mulleted, leather-clad six-and-a-half-foot ape covered in tats in a beer garden rammed with Euro surf-slackers. Across the road from one of the most pristine city beaches in the world, the Coogee Bay Hotel is backpacker central for 10 months of the year, and Tom Crombie was not in a beachy mood. The former nurse sat down, sweating in his leathers. "OK, let's get this done."

"Thomas, Thomas. Relax. Grab a beer."

"Mate, it took me over an hour to get here and I've got to be back at work at two. You know - on the other side of fucking town."

He shook his head, glaring at the tanned backpackers lolling around, pouring beer into themselves and trying to ask each other for sex in new and interesting ways. He glared at the sun, the noise, the serene seagulls drifting overhead.

Dimmick leaned forward, voice a low rumble. "Get a fucken' beer. It looks suss otherwise." "Fucking Poms." Crombie's voice had risen to a whine. He flapped some cool air into his jacket, got up and shouldered his way through a sea of golden brown twentysomethings, who scratched their bare bellies and barely rocked out of the way.

In 10 minutes he was back with two brimming plastic schooners. Dimmick nodded approval and slid his full cup into his empty. Crombie sat and peeled off his damp jacket, paunch settling. His mood had lifted slightly. "Hey, didn't Neddy Smith kill someone out the front of this place in the eighties?"

"Fucked if I know. He was a softcock anyway. In bed with the cops, wasn't he?" Crombie dropped his wallet into his own lap, plucked out a small blue Flash card and discretely slid it across the table under a coaster. There was no talking to the bloke. "So anyway, here are those pics. I still don't know why I can't just email 'em. This cloak and dagger shit..."

"I'm gonna go to the library and use their email account, am I? Where any 12-year-old could figure out how to trace it."

"It's one thing to be careful, but they're only pictures of ... people."

"Yeah, un-breathing ones. The less records the better, in case the shit hits the shingles."

"So I've gotta ride 30 kays out here ..."

"Yeah, well, I was in the fuckin' area." Dimmick sucked down half his beer. That rumble again. "You reckon you've got an easier way to make a grand, good luck to you. Nice day for a ride anyway, even on that Triumph shitbox of yours." He threw a McDonald's bag across the table. Crombie peeked inside at the wad of notes, but left them there. "Mmmm. Looks delicious."

## Chapter 2.7 - Pull yourself apart

Adrenaline does a lot to speed up the reflexes, as does a cricket ball at the windpipe. Noffke's bouncer was nearly on me before I swivelled and threw a pull shot at it, eyes heroically squeezed shut and braced for pain.

Somehow the explosion and grey-out of a helmet impact was replaced by a crisp "thock", so I opened my eyes and took a second to focus on the ball sailing up and away, with mid-on turning to chase. A good thing it made the boundary, because I'd forgotten to run. I didn't want Noffke to see me panting like a dog, so I kept my head down and tamped at the wicket a bit, adding a head wobble as an afterthought. Easy-peasy.

Next ball: same again, shorter, faster. Nothing for it but to drop the hands and collapse like an ironing board. My only option since I hadn't got my breath back yet. And so it went. The bowlers' plan was either to kill me or get me out hooking. It seemed I had a reputation? *Moi?*

Queensland tried some things – pulling a young off-spinner out of their bag of tricks and crowding the bat to build pressure, but there's nothing I love more than a pristine outfield unsullied by lurking fieldsmen. I was in my element.

Before I could take stock I was on 39 and 10 minutes away from lunchtime pats on the back. Si Katich was piling them on at the other end, and was looking pleased, cautioning me to shut up shop, ready for lunch. But then I got another short, straight one and my eyes lit up.

I got inside it and threw the bat again. I'd hook the thing into a meat pie somewhere in the O'Reilly Stand and by the time we had the ball back the umps would have signalled lunch.

The contact felt good, if a little top-edgy, and I leaned back, watching it fly away through the blue, dragging the faces in the crowd with it. Maybe I'd have a meat pie for lunch. It wasn't until I'd trotted a couple of steps, with my bat still over my shoulder in follow-through mode that it occurred it might not have the legs. The bat wilted in my hands as the pill fell out of the stratosphere, tracking straight for the boundary rope.

"Curly! Run! We've gotta cross."

I barely noticed Kat in my face, nearly tangoing with me in the crease. My eyes were fixed on the point where the ball, charging Bull and boundary rope would converge. It'd make it. No. Yeah... Then 9000-odd fans witnessed something that had the umpires, match referee and commentary team all scrambling for reference books and on-screen marker pens. Freeze it... there.

## Chapter 2.8 - Rick Disnick was soft

The electronic pen scribbles across the TV screen.

*Now. Keep in mind the Bulls' Chris Simpson has his eyes on the ball at this point. Clearly even if he manages to catch the ball – here – he'll have to step on the boundary rope – here – to do so. Now if we shuttle forward: he doesn't pull out... look at how he's still making very good ground and ... he's at full tilt and twisting to his right, his eyes have never left the ball... he sticks out his hands, opens his mouth and...*

I'm still mid-pitch, bat wilting, as the ball sticks. Simpson is a hero, but a hero that's out of control. I get up on my toes to watch as he sums up the situation and flings the ball back over his head just before he treads on the squishy boundary rope. Now, do I watch the ball or Simpson? I watch the kid turn his ankle and skid on the side of his foot, sliding in the splits position, headed straight for a knee-liquefying collision with the fence. The crowd holds its breath. Simpson doesn't disappoint.

To avoid shattering his ankle in the boundary gutter he leaps, but that only means the advertising hoarding catches him across the shins and helicopters him into the crowd. Next time you're having one of those spirited conversations down the pub over a coldie or seven, and someone questions the commitment of the modern sportsperson, how they're just grasping prima donnas chasing their next six-figure contract, two words: Chris Simpson. I guarantee every male shifts in his seat, winces and changes the subject.

The rest doesn't bear thinking about: Clinton Perron sprints in from mid-on, dives for Simpson's over-head throw and collects it inches from the grass. The crowd applauds. Celebrations begin, blah, blah, etc. If the replays were tedious at home, try being out in the middle. We must have stood around for 10 minutes watching replays on the big screen, unsure whether Simpson got rid of the ball in time or Perron got his paws under it before it touched turf. And was the whole farrago even legal anyway?

Eventually the stretcher left and red light came on - the third umpire, match referee, Pope, and Chancellor of the Exchequer all in agreement that I was a dead duck.

By that time we'd all gone over to tut and say nice things while the unconscious Simpson was scraped onto a stretcher. And all the while I'm thinking, *Thirty-nine is a solid effort, right?*

## Chapter 2.9 - The view finder

Gacy was sitting in his 1989 Holden Camira, deleting old pictures off his camera and wondering if digital SLRs needed servicing. He was a painfully lackadaisical man, but camera maintenance equipment was one of the few things he wouldn't let slide. A man who made the bulk of his money snapping intimate "caught-in-the-act" moments couldn't afford his shutter to freeze, or his autofocus to jam when Mrs Someone was paying to find out if Mr Someone was fucking Miss Someone-Else on their lunch break from Some Dull Desk Job Pty Ltd. Consequently, the contents of the padded backpack lying on the passenger seat was worth more than the car he sat in, with his furniture thrown in. It was grubby work but as Gacy was find of saying "grubby equals money".

Truth be told, he liked the work, and didn't want to do anything else. He was parked four doors down from a nondescript brick townhouse in one of Clovelly's less glamorous streets. A nice area, but yellow brick eighties architecture ruled here, with no multi-million dollar makeovers likely this many streets back from the beach. Gacy had been there for 20 minutes and his belly was starting to complain. He balanced his cigarette on the burn-scarred centre console and grabbed a Mars Bar, sliding lower in his seat to tear into it. He checked his watch and ate, careful to keep the chocolate off the cavities in his teeth. He made a mental note to ignore the pain and start brushing again. *Maybe tomorrow.*

As he tossed the wrapper into the drift of fast food detritus in the passenger-side footwell, he caught movement in his side mirror and instinctively reached for the Nikon. A shining new European stationwagon cruised by and edged into a spot on front of the house in question. Almost before the car had stopped, two of the car's four doors swung open and a child spilled out each side. Gacy heard a sliver of radio pop before the engine died and the driver climbed out – a slightly built 40-something in jeans and a T-shirt. She yelled instructions at the fleeing children and managed to stop the elder of the kids, a boy who would have been 12, in a dirt-streaked striped uniform, ball under one arm. As the Yanks would say, a true "soccer mom".

Gacy managed to freeze her, fingers through hair, mouth open, a look of weary accomplishment. The photograph get special treatment on his wall. The boy turned on a heel and slouched back through the shot to the car, grabbing a bag that would have held muddy boots to match the muddy knees, then raced back to the front door. Forty metres away, the camera's motor drive purred as his father took an extra shot of his own name marqueeed across the boy's back.

## Chapter 2.10 - Something wicked this way comes

At lunch, I was putting a brave face on things. At the long players' table in the Members' dining room there were two topics of conversation: the likely brevity of "Shattered" Simpson's cricket career, and my freak dismissal. I was in no mood to contribute to either. Instead, I sat inhaling tuna and salad sarnies among the other grazers and concentrating on putting a half-century gloss on my 39 my sheer cheery force of will.

Showing the compassion of a Nazi brownshirt, Jimmy Maher was sashaying down the memory lane of freak dismissals, arriving at the MCG in 1982/83 for the Fourth Ashes Test. You remember: Thommo edged one to Chris Tavaré who parried it to fellow slipper Geoff Miller, breaking a 70-run last-wicket stand to win the Test by four runs. Someone else brought up Mark Taylor's "Moscow circus" catch on his back right here against the Windies in '96.

I kept my head down and jaw working. Then the chat stopped abruptly; I glanced up to see all eyes on me. I re-fixed my grin, until I worked out the focus of attention was behind me. Karen. In the Members' Bar. In the Members' Pavilion. At the SCG. In a skimpy summer dress, caught between presenting her best side to the assembled talent and boring her dead stare into me.

My eyes were drawn down her bare legs to the duffel bag beside them, glands squirting electricity.

"Kaz... what's... How did you get in?"

"I got the security man at the back entrance to run an errand for me."

The poor bastard. Whatever this scene was, odds-on it wouldn't end well. The guy may as well trot off all the way to the dole office. A clock ticked. Two rows of staring cows chewed their cud around me. Askew on my chair, my grin was starting to hurt. "So. We'll be getting back out there soon."

Jimmy Maher piped up again, nodding at the clock. "Another 20 minutes, Curls."

"Cheers, mate. What are you, the talking clock?"

I turned back to the wolf in girlfriend clothing. "So, how are... things?" Karen flashed her vacuous smile. "I just came to return the rest of your stuff." She unzipped the bag at her feet and shook the contents into the carpet – jocks, toiletries, a few trophies, and it looked like my entire top shelf of '80s albums - CD and rare vinyl.

She flung the bag aside with a flourish and stabbing a toe at the shiny pile – *Did she even remember to flex her calf for the boys? Good God* – and added, "I knew you'd be suffering without your decade of drivel. When you can move on with your life, let me know. Since you're moving out, I've already changed the locks."

Delivered like a *Bold and the Beautiful* bit player. I looked at the pile, nearly hysterical. “First off, there is no Supertramp or Dexys Midnight Runners here. And by the way, I own the fucking unit!”

The chewing stopped. Behind the wide mahogany bar, a glass shattered; in front of it I thought I heard a distinguished-looking member lose a small fart of shock. All I could do was sit there, white with rage, and suck it up. In a room full of blokes, misty eyes, glossy lips and a smattering of wounded indignance was all she needed.



## Chapter 2.11 - The crotch of the matter

The rest of the day's play passed without incident, which was just as well because I was just about ready to expire, especially after being banished to the outfield to chase leather all afternoon. Pity that, at this rate, I'd be doing the evening's passing out in a park somewhere.

The game had turned into a bat-fest, us declaring with 600-odd on the board and the Queenslanders well on their way to a squillion of their own. After the game, I kept my head down in the locker room and skulked off for a shower, hiding under the hot water until my head looked like a walnut. By the time I emerged the place had cleared out a bit and there was no sign of Kat, which was the idea. Probably off doing the post-match media guff – something I'd always been barred from.

Across the room, I nodded at my mate Paul Honen, who was chilling out, gently picking at a big toenail the colour of bitumen. A talented left-arm medium-pacer, he was of a similar size and vintage to me, but had been a fixture in the Blues team for an age, even threatening a national call-up with good hit-outs in various Australia A sides. We'd met at Sydney Uni when he'd been a player from the Glen McGrath school of batting, and I'd offered to work with him on his skills with the willow.

From the ages of 17 to 21 it seemed like all we did was chase skirt, squander precious university resources – the Vice-Chancellor's words, not mine – and play cricket. For our clubs, for the university, for fun in general. Faced with a lack of any other real skills, apart from the ability to fit a fist in our mouths after half a dozen pre-mixed margaritas, we decided to try our luck as professional sportsmen.

The irony was, my coaching ended up being successful enough to see Honen leave me in his cricketing wake as he rose through the ranks, and we seemed to lose contact outside my stints in the state side. We'd still been tight when, at age 24, most of the follicles at the front of my pate decided to pogo out of my skull and set off in search of greener pastures in the shower plughole. He hadn't been the one to coin my chortlicious nickname, but he made sure it stuck.

In fact, as I sat there vigorously toweling my man-parts, I realised we hadn't spoken much for nearly five years. But good on him. It was fair to say he was always a bit more driven, and a lot more ruthless than I was, so good luck to him. When he'd finished examining his fetid foot he came over, kitbag in one hand, Hector protector in the other, towel round the middle. He dropped Hector and held out his hand.

“Curly. Nice innings for an old fella. We haven't had a proper catch-up up since you've been back.”

There was no option but to shake. “Er... Yeah, cheers, mate. Nice to middle a few. A bit unlucky, I thought.” I ran the hand across my own towel.

“Doesn’t matter, mate. The final beckons.” He was cheery, but seemed to be skirting around something, looking for an approach. I left the air dead. I suspected I knew what was coming, and wasn’t about to help him fill it with the point.

“Mate, that hoo-ha with your missus at lunch... Maybe we can help each other out.”

## Chapter 2.12 - Little cup of horrors

Honen lowered his voice. “What I mean is... are you really locked out of your own place?”

“It’s all not quite as bad as it looked,” I lied.

Brave face aside, if what she said was true, I was looking down the barrel of a cheap motel or a night on my brother’s couch. The situation was certainly way past an attempt at grovelling my way back inside.

Honen lowered his voice. I could feel his moist, pube-infested cup peering at me from the bench.

“Listen, mate, I’m not yelling this from the rooftops, but I’ve gotta nip over to the UK for a few days after the game and I haven’t been able to find anyone to mind the house and look after Spicy Joe. I know it’s last-minute...”

Spicy Joe was a strange hybrid of border collie, Muppet and musk rat that I’d seen riding shotgun in Honen’s car on occasion. I actually named him, sort of. During one of my stints for the Blues, in ’99, Honen was whining that he couldn’t decide on a moniker for the new puppy, so I suggested he just name it after the first sign he saw. Cruising past a greasy spoon called Spicy Joe’s Hot Chicken, a best friend was born.

I was still working hard to tune out the horrors of the protector. “It could work. Hang on, what are you doing O/S?”

“Gotta go and check out the setup for a county stint this year.”

“You got a county contract?”

“Shit, keep it down.” He scanned the room. “I’m doing the legwork myself. Trying to phase out the agent.”

“Yeah, I’ve got to put a rocket up mine,” I said, po-faced. “Parasites, the lot of them.”

“The day I woke up and discovered I could pick up the phone the same as he could...”

“Was the day you saved 15 per cent.” We laughed and bumped knuckles, a habit we’d picked up on a development tour to the Caribbean eons ago.

“So you’re checking out your digs over there?”

“Yeah, and doing contract stuff. Because there’s no agent involved, I think they need to make sure they’re dealing with the genuine article.”

I rubbed my bonce and mulled it over. “It’d give me time to source a pest fumigator and a battering ram,” I grinned.

“Two birds. One stone. And I wouldn’t mind getting in a last couple of nights with my lady before I go, so you could have my place to yourself tonight and tomorrow night, if you need it. I leave straight after the game on Sunday.”

“Sounds great.”

“I’m getting some dog food delivered tonight too. You and Joe will be set.”

I lowered my voice further still. “Mate, what’s management saying about this? You can’t just piss off, surely? We might have the final next weekend.”

He took me aside. “I’ll be back in time. They know about it, but we don’t want the press to get wind of it. Not good for team unity they reckon. So what do you say?”

“If I can’t bash my door down tonight, I might just give you a call.”

## Chapter 2.13 - Fort of hard Knox

Back at the ranch, the ranch may as well have been a prison. Front door locked, windows bolted - it was shut up tighter than a Scotsman's coin purse.

I bashed on the door until I set dogs barking and the curtains twitching at Mrs Cavanagh's place. An ear to my door revealed what may have been the faintest of sounds inside, maybe the scrape of a chair - but fuck, it could have come from anywhere. I stood there for a while, unsure of what else I could do. I scouted around the back of the block, among the washing lines and rubbish bins, craning my neck to catch any signs of life up in the bedroom windows, but the windows were dark and blinds drawn. It looked like Karen had even shut the bathroom window I sneakily left ajar for emergencies. You had to go and borrow a bloody long ladder to get up to it, but it'd saved me a couple of cold nights in the car.

Eventually the acrid taint of dogshit on the wind convinced me to give it up. Short of asking my blind and deaf 80-year-old neighbour if she'd seen or heard anything (And, by the way Mrs C, mind if I doss on your couch?), there was no way to tell if Karen was in there or likely to come back. And spending the night with my feet up at Honen's was preferable to destroying my front door or facing the old crone's disapproving stare. She already thought I was a bit of a slacker ladies' man. She was still the only person I'd seen look me in the eye and use the term "ne'er-do-well" in a sentence.

I slunk back to the car, dug out Honen's details on the scrap of paper he'd given me, and grabbed my mobile. No answer, so I told his voicemail I'd be taking him up on his offer, and selected the sweet sounds of Depeche Mode to calm me on the drive over.

The address led to a surprisingly substantial Art Deco house in North Randwick, one of Sydney's more recently gentrified Eastern Suburbs. He was renting back in '99, so he must have got in before the property boom, after which house prices got much shorter and ended in "m".

The house wasn't far from the SCG, just across the other side of Centennial Park. It occurred that I could have been here five minutes after the game had I not chosen the play a round of Storm Curly's Citadel. I doublechecked the number on the mailbox, locked the car and sauntered up the garden path. It was a dark brick house on a roomy quarter-acre block.

It was all sizeable front lawn bordered by underlit shrubbery against shining Federation woodwork. I pictured Paul in thongs and Stubbies proudly pushing his mower across the lawn in summer, then winced. That's probably what happened to Pete Forrest. I was as natural as a guy with a brick and crowbar, extricating the front door key from a gap in the brickwork where Honen said it'd be.

The door opened silently. "Hello?" No sign of Spicy Joe and Honen would have been at his mystery woman's by now. I made a mental note to ask what this one's name was. Time to feed the pooch, clean out the fridge and pass out on the couch in front of a movie. The least action you can have with your pants partially undone.

It was a beautifully restored place, and the more I moved around, the more I realized the bachelor in question had some hobbies that I was unaware of.

I followed the tasteful Persian rug down the 1930s-wide central hallway, pushing open doors, peering in rooms and generally mooching about. A bedroom in maroon and beige with all the Art Deco trimmings, another one in Federation green, the next themed in white, and onto a royal blue and white bathroom with leadlight windows and a claw-footed bath Cleopatra would have been proud to park herself in.

An open-plan living room and dining room, with the Great Wall of Electronics neatly packed into a monolithic entertainment unit. I skirted around a pair of leather couches to fiddle with the boys' toys. A huge flat screen TV was the centrepiece, flanked by more components than I could name. I prodded a few buttons to no effect. I tweaked a knob, flicked a switch, then noticed a note taped under the TV.

A grenade exploded next to me, followed by the frenzied screams of a panicking crowd. There was a disc rotating somewhere and I'd somehow set the surround sound at an ear-liquifying volume. Bowel-trembling bass was travelling from the floor up my legs, about to conjure the beginnings of a conniption fit. As choppers buzzed past my left ear I spun the biggest dial there was, hit every stop button I could see and tried to control my breathing. Then fast footsteps, and something hit me from behind.

## Chapter 2.14 - Open and mutt

I spun around to be hit in the groin by a blur of scrabbling claws and flying gobs of saliva. Spicy Joe. Joe's lineage was anyone's guess but he treated every human being like they were God on earth, and therein lay his charm. He was hairy, slobbery, too energetic, and gnawed his own arm for kicks but, with the day I'd had, I needed all the lovin' he could lay on me. We backpedalled into the living room and I plopped onto the couch, fending off the little bastard's efforts to lick my tonsils, and read the note.

*Mate,*

*Thanks for this. Joe's food and other stuff at the bottom of the pantry. Eat and drink whatever you like. If you need anything, just buy it and I'll fix you up when I get back. Don't forget the dog food coming tonight.*

*Cheers*

I had forgotten the dog food delivery – not to worry - it would slot into the to-do list between “guzzling beer” and “searching for porn”.

Joe followed me into the kitchen, and the full-length pantry, with giant cans of dog food and two bags of doggy biscuits jammed under the bottom shelf. As I poked around the furry fiend sat at the door, vibrating at the sight of his beloved louvred door open. Drops of drool fell from his tongue to form a slippery pool of expectation on the floor.

“Mate, hope you're ready to make a hellava dent in this. I'll just get my stuff first.” Joe swept to the floor with his wagging tail.

Out at the car, I grabbed my bags – one reeking cricket gear and reeking clothes, one CDs and dented trophies – and wrestled them back through the front gate. I found the largest bedroom and dumped my stuff at the foot of an impressive brass four-poster. The room was fractionally larger than the two others and next to the front door, but I still wasn't sure it was Honen's bedroom. There were very few personal effects in any of the rooms and not much on the bedside tables. I wondered at the practise of keeping a clean slate for the various ladyfriends. It was clearly better to hide everything away than have a picture of the wrong babe on the mantelpiece.

An hour later, I was arse-deep in hand-tooled leather and three longnecks to the good. The remnants of some kind of gourmet quiche from the fridge nestled in my lap, and Spicy Joe was staring me out, trying to Jedi mind-trick me into handing over the crusts. I'd plucked *Caddyshack* from the DVD library and had even managed to tame the surround sound. I recall flinching as Rodney Dangerfield's computerised golf bag ejected his clubs past my left ear.



Everything was in order. Chevy and Danny the caddy were teaming up for the big-money matchplay, Spicy Joe's eyes were drooping and, hopefully, Karen McDonald was wracked with guilt at her subterfuge...

I woke up with a jolt in a brass bed. It took a second to bring back where I was and how I got there, and another before I knew there was something wrong – a tremendous pressure on my face... My mind spun.

I can't breathe. I can move my hands. *Fuck, I can't see!*

Panic. Lungs burning, face crushed, then my flailing hands hit a pair of beefy forearms, lending some perspective. A pillow was being driven into my face by someone very big and fucking strong.

## Chapter 2.15 - Run and gun

*Calm and... try to breathe...*

OK. At least one holding the pillow on my face, another holding my arms and... now another bear-hugging my legs at the ankles. I struggled against them momentarily, but it was no go and would only kill my oxygen off faster. *Kill - not a great word to dwell on...*

I lay still for a moment and tried to suck air through the down of the pillow. *Not enough flow.* They'd crush my face first anyway. I was in the shit, and I'm not talking about the shallows. Then the sound of furniture being overturned and the house being wrecked? *Wha...* When I wrenched my head sideways to suck air, my ears were crushed. Turn my head back, I couldn't breathe. *Fuckaduckaduck.*

Whoever was on head duty was mumbling something and upping his efforts to squash my nose into my brain cavity. I felt the guy at my ankles readjust his grip.

*Now or never or into the fucking nevernever herewego...* I kicked out with my right leg, partially breaking free, but the other leg was still trapped and I was gathered in before I could do any damage. Something round and hard and gun-like pressed through the centre of the pillow and into an eye socket.

I went slack to concentrate on sucking air faster. Blackness was falling while a deep voice was rumbling something on the other side of the pillow, the tone suggesting sweet nothings were not involved. If he was giving me instructions, did he realise I was more likely to spring up and tap out the opening sequence to Lord of the Dance than decipher what the fuck he was mumbling about.

*Breathe. Think.*

Then: a gunshot, thud-crash, and was that a scream from somewhere? Yelling... maybe a light switched on ... The pressure on my arms lifted for a second, and I was back momentarily from the brink of a void. I swung a fist high and hard at Mumbles, and connected with something hard and hairy. There was heavy contact. *Promising ...* and the pressure on the pillow faded.

I wouldn't have sat up in bed faster if it'd been on fire. On the Titanic. *After* the iceberg.

The pillow catapulted off my face and my bare feet hit the floor pumping. The room was lit up but the dark grey haze of squashed eyeballs blocked most of my field of view. A man in leather clutched his face beside the bed and someone was grabbing at my arm, but I was already out of the blocks. My teammates often said I was quick over 10 metres. For an old fella. The blood was taking a while to find the Curlydome and my beeline for the door was more a dog's hind leg. Into one door jamb, onto the other and...

Charging into the pendulous beergut of a troll-like tattooed figure clumping in from the hallway, baseball bat in one hand and a DVD player under the other arm. He looked as scared as I was.

Barrel man didn't stand a chance. His eyes widened to saucers as I lifted a knee, dropped a shoulder and proceeded to establish my leg as one of his internal organs. He went down with the *whuuuuuf* of an inflatable clown, without popping back up for round two. The last I saw of him, he was sliding backwards along the hall, his weight gathering the hall runner behind him. Fresh air spelled an open front door and I could see it, but the receding carpet meant I was trip-running on the spot, Wile E. Coyote in boxer shorts.

*Here comes the bullet in the back. Here it comes... Bulletinthebackbulle...*

The carpet gripped. I sprang forward... *tinthebackfuckinbulletinthe...*

...thundered out of the front door and hurdled the front gate like Brett Lee on a hat-trick and...

*here it comes ripping into my...*

...disappeared into the night.

## Chapter 3.1 - How now brown couch

My brother's couch should have its own page in the *Guinness Book*. As far as share house brown couches went the fetid monstrosity took the biscuit, not to mention the car keys, loose change and the odd iced Vo-Vo. "Most Three-Dimensional Stains", "Most Buttockly Penetrative Springs" and "Stuffing Most Resembling The Great Mountain Ranges Of Europe" - a multiple record-holder.

I was discovering that robbery and attempted murder has a tendency to sap the will to sleep, so I spent what was left of my night alternating between not allowing Sean's couch to enter my "secret place", and pacing the hours away and muttering my problems at the muted infomercials on TV.

There was no sense to it. Thieves break into a house, hold some guy hostage and presumably make off with all the electronics, CDs and collectible spoons they can carry. Then they vamoose with their bags marked "swag" to pawn the stuff and search for the next well-tended house in the 'burbs. OK, I could live with all that.

But why not wait until there's no-one home, no car out the front. Why shoot up the place, scream and hoo-ha and wake the neighbours? And why does it take the entire line-up of ZZ Top to do it? I sat there in my baggy-arsed boxers and a threadbare KB Lager T-shirt I'd found in the laundry, itching, scratching, squirming, wondering. Not being a student of petty crime, perhaps the intricacies of the good old-fashioned break and enter were lost on me, but I would have thought the game was more about junkies smashing a window to help themselves to CDs and extra-strength cough syrup than mass organisation and a cast of thousands.

Neither my brother or his goth-punk flatmate had surfaced by seven - Sean was working strange security guard hours and me banging on the door at 3am all wild-eyed and demanding cab money hadn't helped - but it was time to beat the feet, even if I was wearing undies with low groinular security and a paint rag T-shirt.

Then another punch in the guts: *What do I tell Honen?*

## Chapter 3.2 - Burnt Squid

Squid was in a world of hurt - really suffering. Not surprising for someone lying across a couch with a foot that had strings of meat hanging where two toes should have been. Tom Crombie bent over the foot in question, which he'd propped up on the arm of the couch, replacing brown-stained bandages with fresh ones.

He shook his head again. "Musta been some mower..." Surely no-one expected him to buy the lawnmower misadventure bullshit - not least because he'd received a panicked call to "get his arse in" to the Mt Annan clubhouse at 4.30am. Not a prime mowing hour by any stretch. Did they realise he'd seen a few shotgun wounds in his time? The wounds' pockmarked margins are a dead (ha!) giveaway.

But no-one was filling in the blanks, and Crombie was left to shuffle about playing nurse, patching up the squealing Squid and keeping the painkillers up to him. Half a dozen gawkers stood around the main room. With no blood or plasma available, Crombie had been forced to get creative fast. He'd already done his frantic search for equipment, bandages, anything that would staunch the bloodflow. Once word had gotten around that he'd cauterised the wound with a soldering iron from the shed workshop, morbid curiosity had attracted an assortment of bottomfeeders in various states of morning dress. Now they hung on the periphery, stepping forward to wish Squid well before leaving, secretly disappointed that the gore was not more extensive, and visible. A satisfyingly cloying burnt smell still clung to the walls though.

As he stood there watching the bikie's eyes squeeze harder shut and his pained brow buckle and furrow, Crombie realising it was far better to stay ignorant. It was obvious there was something far nastier in the wind than Squids toasted toes, and he wanted no part in it. He was in deep enough as it was.

What he did know for sure was that, without proper medical care, Squid could easily lose more of his hoof than had already been shot off. "Squid, you up to a move? We need to get that hoof to a hospital pronto."

Dimmick slouched against a wall, chewing his thumbnail. "Nah, Crumbles - not happening." As club president - a title that basically amounted to resident hardarse - George Dimmick had to lead by nonchalant example. Bikie gangs were notorious for violent leadership challenges, anxiety generally played out as weakness. Not a good look. Not that Dimmick thought there was any threat from any of these chumps.

That was the problem.

## Chapter 3.3 - The chemical brothers

The Rogue Riders had been formed when their founder, an ex-member of the Coffin Cheaters MC, had fled Perth in 1999 to escape a life-threatening disagreement with other members. But associates of the Coffin Cheaters had spotted their ex-member in atmospheric “out and about” footage during the Sydney Olympics. He was tracked down and given a talking-to, and got out of hospital a fortnight later, walking with a limp for the rest of his life. He formed the club soon after - some said it was the ultimate “fuck-you” to the boys back in the west - and the fledgling club grew steadily until its president slid into the path of an on-coming semi-trailer on Good Friday 2004. All 19 of the club’s members were present at his funeral.

George Dimmick had spent seven years in Long Bay Jail on drug trafficking offenses, before being born again late in his sentence, and paroled in 2000. He had joined the God Squad, a Christian bike club, before hearing of the The Rogue Riders and joining two years before the death of their founder. He lobbied for the vacant role of president and, with the club on the wane, was voted in on a raft of grandiose promises of money and new facilities.

They needed a leader and he needed a flock. Without the glamorous bad-arse charisma of their founder to recruit new members, numbers were down to 11 - only half-a-dozen of which were there for more than the subversive thrill of parading around in club leathers, according to Dimmick.

Dimmick saw the future of the club in expansion. In three years he wanted the club to have doubled its membership and moved out of the semi-rural four-bedroom brick and tile to a real property with a new clubhouse. Like the other clubs had. But he knew it was all a pipedream unless he tapped into a vein of fast money. So the club went into the amphetamines business.

Towards at the back of the clubhouse was shiny new shed – the kind you buy in a kit and assemble yourself. It was big enough for three cars, but its sole purpose was to house the chemicals, apparatus and personnel required for manufacturing speed for the Sydney market. It was where certain members of the Rogue Riders spent much of their time preparing, mixing and cutting amphetamines.

This had split the club, as Dimmick knew it would. Until recently, some of the club’s members had taken the double-R patch on their backs way too lightly, said the Pres, so he’d implemented a minimum penalty for missing a meeting. The penalty was meted out by a 50,000-volt handheld Taser he called Judas. To Dimmick, idle hands were tools of the devil and Sydney’s streets were awash with cheap speed. He worked them as hard as he could, but he needed other sources of income.

Then he’d hit on the idea of outsourcing the club’s more worldly members to perform certain delicate tasks for needy members of the community. It was like the Bob-A-Job scheme – with guns.

## Chapter 3.4 - Hole in my heart

The trip to Randwick from my brother's place in Mascot is a bog-standard 15-minute commute, but it's amazing how much time is lost to arseing about when you're not sure if you really want to get to where you're going.

A new pair of sunnies, a pie and radioactive blue Slurpee in hand, I eventually rolled into Honen's street in a cab. From my vantage point two doors down and across the street, the place looked the model of suburban serenity – just as it had yesterday. Actually, the white van I'd streaked past the night before was gone, but that was the only change. Suburban bliss - blue Kingswood, manicured lawns, distinct lack of hairy psychopaths.

I paid the cabbie and stood shivering on the street watching him leave. I felt utterly alone. *Come back, Mustapha, we could have had it all.*

The sun came out, snapping me out of my funk. I needed my gear, a change of clothes and some damn flea powder. *Deep breath.*

The front door was locked and, fleeing for my life the previous night, it occurred that I'd left my keys inside. *Tsk tsk.* Attempted murder will do that to a person. Around at the back door, all was quiet. I pressed an eye to a frosted glass panel. I could only make out fuzzy areas of light and dark, none of which were shaggy, drooling and dog-shaped. Joe must be locked inside.

I rattled the doorknob. This getting locked out bullshit was become a habit. As were the attacks from assorted malevolent miscreants - some brandished guns, others glassware. I was unsure which made by balls shrink faster. I rattled harder and hung off the knob like a seven-year-old with ADHD, the acid sting of persecution blooming in my chest. *Why me? Who dumped the flaming bag of dogshit on my doorstep to be stamped out?*

Fuck it - I knew if I turned up late to the game one more time and my arse is grass. I took my shirt off, balling it against one of the door's panels, and drove my elbow sharply into the glass, sending pieces flying to re-shatter across the slate inside. Then I stood among the shards, rubbing my elbow and wishing a pox on the whole week.

In front of me, Spicy Joe lay frosted in broken glass. Dead.

He was spread out across the kitchen floor, a half-gnawed sausage by his frozen face. Oh Jesus, it looked like the poor bugger had suffered. His fur had dried in ringlets around his head and the surrounding slate was splattered with a patina of dried saliva and gobs of sausage gristle. I stroked his fur willing a whimper, a twitch, anything, but Joe's forever-animated tail was stiff, petrified in mid-wag. Joe was beyond help. Then I remembered where I was - what had happened - and scanned the place fast, peering myopically through misty eyes. No signs of anything untoward... until I spotted the carnage in the living room.



## Chapter 3.5 - Debris and me

Squatting where I was I could only catch a glimpse of it past the couch. I left poor old Spicy to it - poor bugger - and crept into the next room, where the scene only got weirder.

Honen's flatscreen TV lay on its side in front of the entertainment unit, cracks dividing the screen into angular fields of dead pixels. It was as if the box had taken a dive, literally cracking up after relentless bullying from that smartarse DVD player, and committed TV suicide... then bled to death? From under the panel, a black pool of fluid spread out, footprints tracking it this way and that.

It was only the congealed footprints trailing off up the hallway that dragged me out of la-la-land to figure what had actually gone down. The fluid on the floor was either congealed blood or barbecue sauce, and I didn't see too many sausage sizzles about the place. So in the process of hauling the gigantic TV from its perch, one of the hair bear bunch had dropped it on his foot, probably when the thing caught on its power cord. But that much blood from a crushed toe? A gunshot that had triggered my Carl Lewis out the front door 10 hours earlier...

I hauled the TV aside, dragging a furrow through the gloop and found a ragged in the centre of the dark puddle. Some of the liquid had run through the splintered boards before it set. There was also a high concentration of chunky white foreign matter embedded in the blood around the drain hole.

I shook my head. "And these little piggies went to God." That's what you get when you haven't even the sense to put down your gun before operating machinery or lifting heavy objects. For a gang of thieves with tough-guy beards and a loot van, they hadn't exactly covered themselves in glory. And looking around, they'd left behind plenty of good gear. Like missing teeth, there were a few holes in the entertainment unit - a CD player hole here, maybe an amplifier hole there. Aside from a few scattered boxes, all of the CDs and DVDs were also gone, but it didn't look to me like the kind of haul you could retire to South America on. Maybe foot guy's accident, and my escape had put the kybosh on the operation.

I didn't find anything else missing until I got to the bedroom I'd christened the night before. The bedsheets hung down onto the floor, but the rest of the room was exactly as I'd found it yesterday.

Exactly. No kitbag full of gear. No bag full of CDs, vinyl and trophies. I found a clock - Oh crap, here we go again.

## Chapter 3.6 - Gene dream believer

At the SCG, I kept my head down and did a passable job of blending into the game day preparation, thanks mainly to a spare uniform I begged the assistant manager for. It's marvellous what a quivering lip and a fake blub will do. Since I was a late call-up to the team I hadn't made much of a dent in my shirt allocation, this would be number three, which wasn't enough to raise too many eyebrows, and I found a spare pair of pants under a bench in the locker room that fit OK.

I looked around for Honen, not sure how to tell him that his dog was dead and parts of his house resembled a crack dealer's apartment post-turf war. Whispers that he was sick, or injured - definitely not around - were being bandied about but I was too busy scrounging up a uniform to get any kind of sensible info. Before I knew it I was safely ensconced in the outfield, chasing more leather as the Bulls tried to match our huge first-innings score. The sun was baking. You could have cooked an egg on the Curlydome out there, even with the floppy hat, but it needed some space and processing time, so I was happy to fling the old frame around.

I thought about the day I'd made my first-grade debut. I'd carried Poppa Rigg's bat in every kitbag that I'd owned since then. In the last two bags I'd even had a special pocket sewn in the side my bag to house it. I guess subconsciously I hoped my grandfather's luck or talent or Test Match mettle or whatever it was would rub off on my gear. Consciously, it was my lucky charm, a cricket talisman that reminded me a talent for the game was in my blood when I felt at my most vulnerable on the park.

My mum's father, Keith Edward Rigg, had played eight Tests from 1930/1 to 1936/37, taking on the Poms, West Indies and South Africa with the likes of Bradman, Ponsford, Grimmett and McCabe. He'd had to wait until his second Test for a win but, during the second Test versus South Africa at the SCG in 1931, he truly made his mark. The Aussies won by an innings and 155 runs and Keith Edward Rigg outscored the Don (and everyone else on the park) with 127.

He'd sold most of his other gear, including his Baggy Green, to help support his family during WWII but when I started playing grade cricket, had pulled out "the bat" and presented it to me, all red-eyed and emotional. I hadn't known he even had it, although I grown up on a diet of Pop's tales of epic battles against the old enemy, the Windies and the team he called "those irascible Boers". To me the yarns all sounded like stories from old Biggles illustrated comics - tales of yesteryear when enemies would glare into each other's steely eyes, go at it hammer and tongs and then clap each other on the back and finish the day trading shorts of Pimm's in the library.

Poppa Rigg died in February 1995, less than a month after calling to congratulate me on making my first Sheffield Shield squad. He called again the next day to commiserate with me for being made 12th man and give me a "gotta start somewhere" pep talk. I'd been grumpy during our conversation and never got the chance to apologise.

I tried to use his bat to remind myself that I had the genetic talent for this gig, I just needed to supply the application. It even worked some of the time. But could I get by without it?

## Chapter 3.7 - Mo in the know

Running around in the outfield is not all glamorous grass-sliding and the surreptitious scratching of nuts - it's fucking hard work. Having said that, it beats being spirited off the face of the Earth, which is what appeared to have happened to Paul Honen.

Queensland finally petered out late in the day with 464 runs on the board and as many litres of my sweat soaked into the SCG turf. At the change of innings I trudged off to rest my weary bones and vowed to spend the remaining 90 minutes of play making some calls and arranging a double knee transplant. There was no further news of Honen, and my talk of a rumoured secret county contract had been met with howls of laughter at lunchtime. I decided that the situation warranted me breaking that confidence, but stopped short of informing the coach of last night's mini-staging of "Braveheart With Guns" at Honen's place. I feigned ignorance of well, everything, which wasn't much of a stretch. Best to distance myself from him and his no-show antics at this stage, since I was on shaky ground anyway.

In any case, no-one had heard boo from the guy, and our media gurus had told the papers he'd been struck down with the usual mystery "virus". I, however, was worried the hirsute army may have offed him along with Spicy Joe and I had somehow slipped to the top of their hit parade. It was clear I needed to call in the big guns, so I rang around and got Greg Matthews's number. "Mo. Curly Gibson."

Silence, snuffling, odd grunting sounds. "Yeah ... right, man. Who?"

"Mate, I'm with the Blues at the moment. Just after a bit of help."

"Yeah..."

"Mate, I heard about that stuff about you and a stalker, back in the 'Yeah yeah' days, and heard you got a private detective or something to sort it out."

Suddenly Mr Confidence was whispering like a pedophile in a cop-shop. "Mate no-one ever proved..."

"Come on, Greg. The pictures of the voodoo doll went around and everything. I just want to know who sorted it out without the papers getting hold of it. That was no mean feat."

Half an hour later I met that very fellow.

## Chapter 3.8 - Curly, P.I.

According to the sign, along with a couple of other chi-chi businesses, Duncan J. De Walt worked from an office in a converted two-storey sandstone mansion in the Eastern Suburbs' cash-cow central – Double Bay.

The guy had been surprisingly accommodating. I decided applying a battering ram to my comfortable two-bedroom fortified bunker could wait, since De Walt had agreed to move things around and see me as soon as I could get over there. He was presuming I wasn't already around the corner polishing my Lamborghini with \$100 notes, I noticed.

I was wondering how many clients a guy who could meet me at a moment's notice could have, but it was obvious that De Walt was doing very nicely thank you. No Philip Marlowe-style shoebox office above a Chinese takeaway for this gumshoe.

No doubt many a rich, disgruntled socialite had trod the path under the gigantic fig trees before me, their minds humming with plans to have Watts catch hubby boning his personal trainer in order to retain their dignity and retire to the Seychelles with their personal trainer. I followed the discrete signs up a central stone staircase and along a second-floor balcony to De Walt's quadrant, making a largely useless attempt to straighten up my stinking whites. I could actually see the cartoon stink lines radiating away from my person.

The reception was cool, cream and attractive, as was the woman commanding the reception desk. She seemed to know who I was and showed me into De Walt's inner sanctum. Like Scrooge McDuck's arse, the place smelled of money. I'm no art critic, but I'm guessing you don't bother with individual down lights on artwork from the \$2 Shop.

After the greeting preamble, De Walt leaned against the front of his desk. "Mr Gibson – I get the feeling you're not used to consulting people in my business."

"Well, no. I have an accountant." The Duncster had the look of a country boy made good, or a city boy who yearned for life in the sticks. He was a shade shorter and slimmer than me and decked out in moleskin trousers and a Ralph Lauren shirt. His riding boots looked like they saw their toughest action in the carpark outside.

He laughed affably. "Look, a former client vouched for you, so you needn't feel apprehensive. This business runs on referrals. As far as I'm concerned, any friend of his is a friend of mine. And your first visit is free, so you really can't lose." Apparently I was looking as uneasy as I felt. Time to loosen up. Shit - I'd been vouched for, after all.

"Call me Curly. Is Duncan OK?"

He looked pleased, and I explained the whole saga. The Duncster listened intently, but with a poker face, making marks in a notebook. Finding a gang of homicidal bikies holding a gun to your head was almost exactly as inconvenient as finding hair in your plughole, apparently.

## Chapter 3.9 - Help wanted

I looked across at the impassive PI. “So I feel awful about the whole thing. Spicy Joe... and everything, and I’m bloody worried about Paul Honen.”

“Tell me, how well do you know this chap Honen? Even had any clashes? Would he bear a grudge?”

“Against me? Hardly. The guy’s in the team more than I am... and he asked me to mind his house - he may have already slept with my girlfriend... what else is there? I don’t really know him outside cricket anymore though. Just doing him a favour.”

“And these contracts with English county sides. Your agents would really have to negotiate them well in advance to sort out all the logistics, wouldn’t he? There’d be a lot of paperwork and legal work involved. Insurance, etc.” I knew what he was driving at but I was temporarily distracted by the fact that he thought I had an agent.

“I’ve never had a county contract, but I assume so.”

“And when does the English season start?”

“Soonish. Maybe six weeks.” De Walt shut his notebook. “Curly. I believe you’ve been set up.”

“Mmmmm - I thought you’d say that. But...”

“Someone you know well enough to do a favour for, but not well overall hears that you need a place to stay for a night or two. He asks you to house-sit while he’s called overseas suddenly and says that you have to be home for a delivery. No delivery turns up, just a bunch of guys with guns who seem more intent on harming you than robbing the place. But something goes astray and you get away.”

Astray? Strong words. “So you think they wanted to top me?”

“I presume you fed the dog that night?”

“Well, he looked hungry. But I suspect he always looks like that. Used to...”

“There was plenty of dog food, wasn’t there, Curly.”

“But what would Honen stand to gain from my death? I’m not rich and he’s a fixture in the side.”

“Maybe his freedom. The bad guys have a body – they’re happy. A man can then disappear.”

De Walt’s stoneface shtick was starting to give me the shits. I’d seen more emotion in chess tournaments. From the computers. Meanwhile, I was facing my worst crisis since they took *Underdog* off TV. “You seem to have all the answers, Duncan. I’m glad I came.”

“Curly, it sounds like you’re in a difficult position and I can understand that you feel betrayed and confused. Look, you were saying you thought there were four guys.”

“At least four or five. One at my head. Two at my legs, maybe one in the hall and one busy shooting his foot off in the other room.”

“It’s very likely a bike gang. And I’ve had some experience with them.” I was waiting for another “and”.

Then De Walt picked up the phone. “Assuming you were set up for harm, the main focus is whether you got out clean, or if they know who you are. I know someone who can keep an eye on your apartment. That way we’ll know if they’re likely to wait around for you or break in.”

I had to laugh. “Mate, if they can break in I hope they hold the door open.”

## Chapter 3.10 - Chase the white rabbit

Dimmick paid his more reliable members a wage to mix drugs. It wasn't a ton of cash, but it meant that they could leave their jobs and devote more of their time to the Riders, and less to the outside world. The president fostered this commitment/indoctrination with regular piss-ups, bong nights, trips, strippers, free pros and whatever else he could dream up to keep everyone happy. The house was always well stocked with food, although he could never seem to keep enough piss in the place to keep everyone drunk, now that the bedrooms were full every night.

The daily speed production shift started at dusk, all concerned agreeing that it was safer to cook at night - the temperatures being cooler and their comings and goings less visible. The club's backyard was big enough to be considered a small paddock, but not so huge that the shed was out of sight of the neighbours on either side. But Dimmick wasn't about to give his neighbours any reason to complain, and tried to cultivate cordial relations with them. The noise of the bikes was the only thing they had to complain about and, by the looks of them, they had their own reasons not to start a dialogue with the cops.

By three o'clock, about 10 Riders were at the house, many folded into the two non-Squid couches working on the next carton of VB while fighting over one of three video game consoles, a few out the back tinkering with their bikes on the weed-strewn pavers behind the house. A couple had even stopped what they were doing and blithered out to the shed to check on the night's production like they were supposed to.

Dimmick had buttonholed Bones, his chief toady. Of all his clubbies he probably hated Bones most of all, but he was a good little chemist. Bones scratched at his little junkie arm. "Everything went real smooth. I reckon we've busted our record."

Dimmick clapped him on the back. "That's what I want to hear. You done the measures? Checked the temps?"

"Yeah - but I know you like to check..."

"Good. Fuckwit here has fucked himself, so we all have a larger cross to bear."

The President thought Squid was a weak shit before he shot himself in the foot, but he was one of the few others in the club, other than their Pres who had ever shot a firearm in anger. Look at his down there, shivering like a dog. Now he'd shot two people. As long as he didn't croak, he could lie on the sofa until he grew roots.

"Squid, how goes it?" Squid managed a croak and a weak smile.

"Hurts, eh? That's good. That'll remind you to focus on one thing at a time, eh?" Dimmick got the requisite sniggers from the rest of the room.

"Crumbles taking care of you?" A blink and a grunt this time.

“OK then. Try to eat something, or have a beer if you can get one off this lot.” He went out the back to meet Bones, waiting as impatiently as a puppy.

They spent the next half hour in the shed checking production, and at the kitchen table going through the proceeds from the Randwick job with Period, the resident numbers man. The cluster-fuck in Randwick meant that, not only didn't they get paid for the main job, they had to choose between finishing cleaning the place out or disposing of a corpse that had just bled out all over the scene. Squid had won out, but fuck it had been a close thing. It occurred to Wilson the next day that if today's compulsory DNA sampling was around when the guy was inside, it would have been a different story. There was no cleaning that mess up. Squid would have had to fertilise a state forest somewhere.

According to Period, after they'd offloaded the stereo shit and the meager collection of DVDs, CDs and records they'd stolen, they were only up about two grand.

Dimmick pounded the table. “Dumb cunts! That's not petrol money.” As the non-soldiers quietly sloped off somewhere, the president quietly tallied the value of the stuff they left behind – hundreds of DVDs, more electronics... at least 10 grand in the living room alone.

“And add to that the 20 thou that ran out the front fucking door while Squid was busy shooting his cock off in the next room.”

He tried to rub away a bad case of eyestrain growing into something more. He glared at the deadheads around the table. “Stay with me on this. These guys who gave us the 20 grand to get this guy - these Italianos? They do this shit in their sleep. They could rub all off us out tomorrow - but they paid us so they could get alibis sorted. Now they've gotta do all that again, and we've gotta chase our 20 grand rabbit. Or they chase us.”



## Chapter 3.11 - Rubbish binny

The sun was down but Gacy was still sweating into his synthetic shirt. He popped another button and slouched lower in his seat, feeling his age plus 10. Carrying large cameras around the streets was not kosher day or night, so he dropped his camera and lens down inside his shirt, hooking the strap over his head like a necklace. As he stepped out of the car, the camera swung beneath his baggy shirt to finish under his left arm, where he held it place with an oily bicep.

Nothing significant had happened in over an hour. No movement at the curtained top-floor bedroom window his lens was trained on, or at the front stairs to the block, or in the surrounding streets, for that matter. Time for a closer look. As he crossed the road, down the street from the small block of units, he was just an overweight guy with bad fashion sense taking his chins out for an evening walk. Nothing to see here.

Gacy's other important edge in his business was that he was an everyman. He didn't stand out and no-one ever took notice of a single thing he ever did. He was automatically written off as the human padding between society's true individuals, and that's the way he needed it.

This job, which consisted mostly of getting grubby surveillance pics of people doing grubby things, was usually a series of decisions, based on a series of hunches that were based on bugger-all. That was probably why he liked it so much. When he was working, about once a day when a hunch came off, he got to feel smarter than people who had far better lives than he did. Smarter because he was the one who caught them doing dumb things with their genitals that jeopardised their cushy lives.

But this was a different kind of job - cushy though. Just hang around and look for any bad guys. Gacy assumed he was supposed to rule himself out. There had been nothing to write home about. The top floor unit occupant either not home, or keeping a very low profile. Time to cross over and apply his patented creep around the back and go through the garbage technique.

Hold the phone. Halfway across the street he spotted a tall, bald, angry-looking dude heading up the front stairs to the block. Gacy gently changed his direction and continued on up the footpath, past the building, already looking for a back entrance. He was knee-deep in recycling and rottweilers soon enough.

## Chapter 3.12 - Naked revenge

Gacy jumped when his phone rang, dropping his bag of seeping “evidence” as he pulled an arm out of the wheelie bin, the juice of a week’s garbage coating his fingers. He fished in his pocket with less care than you might expect from someone with a hand oozing slime.

“John Gacy Investigations,” he whispered.

“What? You there? Can I speak to John Gacy, please?” said a nasally voice. Gacy surveyed the potholed alley. It looked deserted enough.

“Yeah, this is he.”

“Mr Gacy. I was wondering if I could talk to you about something. Well, it’s about someone, really. A colleague of yours.”

“Who is it, and who the fuck is this?”

“I’m talking about Duncan De Walt.”

“Yeah, I talked to him today. Does he need some more work done?”

“Er, that’s highly unlikely.” Then around the front of the block, someone started breaking down a door.

When I found Karen, she was lying spreadeagled naked on my bed. Her hands were chained together with fur-lined handcuffs through the vertical wooden slats of the bedhead. She manufactured a shiteating grin when I walking into the bedroom, and couldn’t decide whether to keep using her feet to try to cover the manicured strip of public hair with the sheet. Finally - thinks were looking up.

I’d been in no mood to remain homeless, so I’d stepped back till I was leaning back on the balcony railing, took two quick steps and launched myself at my own door. The meat of my shoulder hit it just above the lock, a whump, combined with the spiky sound of splintering wood. I’d gone some way to forcing the door and its lock to part company, but the lock had held firm, surrounded by a semi-circle of split timber. The door was now slightly concave.

I’d stepped back and given it everything. The door gave in and a heartbeat later I was surfing my living room rug to a stop, almost shattering both kneecaps on the coffee table. The door swung in and, failing to embed itself into the living room wall, bounced back, shuddering.

When the blood stopped rushing in my ears, I heard the muffled voices in the bedroom. One high, one low and monosyllabic. I didn’t need a crystal ball to know that the high-pitched muttering was Karen, and I’d identify the owner of the deep voice via Ouija board after I was finished with him.

Then a bloke had appeared from the bedroom doorway, as bold as brass. As expected, he was naked and, less expected, running towards me comically cupping his genitals in one hand. Can you believe some people? I'd covered the doorway. "Wait up - who are you?" I asked the olive-skinned naked man, his semi-erect penis withering on the vine. I had to admit, the guy had big balls, only metaphorically speaking, as it happened. He stopped. It seemed he was also mute.

"Mate, I'm the guy who owns this place. The owner of the bed you've been fucking my ex-girlfriend in." His right arm actually twitched, as if to shake my hand. Then he remembered he was holding his nuts and let it stay where it was.

Maybe my face had also belied my policy of never shaking hands with naked men. Maybe it was my own right hand, making a fist. "So how about you get the fuck out now, before I give you a quick trip to the ground floor. Or you can just wait down there. I plan to be turfing her stuff over the railing. I'll add yours to it if you like." "Now hang on..."

My punch caught him pretty well on the point of the chin, sending him slack and crashing back onto the couch. He'd be OK there. Then I followed the whining and a curious rattling to the bedroom where I found her. It was perfect - and I had the luxury of a prolonged revenge. I'd only been on the edge of the bed for two minutes savouring the situation, when the fat bloke out of *Jake and The Fat Man* suddenly appeared in the bedroom doorway brandishing a camera. "Everything OK? Hey - you're Curly Gibson." He was talking to me, but staring at Karen. I know my fan base is loyal, but this was getting ridiculous.

## Chapter 3.13 - Worlds collide

Karen had finally dragged the sheet up to cover her crotch. A classy chick to the last. “She’s got no tan lines. Anywhere.” The fat stranger beside me finally tore his eyes away from the bed.

“I know you - you used to play cricket. Ashley Gibson, right?”

“Used to, my arse. I’m back, big fella. Call me Curly.”

“Well, I haven’t followed the Blues lately. John Gacy.” He stuck out a sweaty hand, which I instantly regretted shaking. His entire body seemed to be oozing a clear, smelly film. Karen cleared her throat and clanked her chain. Somehow she was managing to pout, despite everything. I ignored her. “So what brings you to our little love-in, John-boy? And how did you get into my place?”

“Mate, the door’s off its hinges. I’ve been working.”

I looked him over. “Wedding photographer?”

“Funny. No, I work for Duncan De Walt. I assume you know him.” This was getting a little creepy. “Yeah - he’s helping me with a ... thing. A situation.”

“Another one?”

I couldn’t help chuckling. “What - this? This is just getting big tits here and her mate out there out of my house, out of my face - out of my life, preferably.”

Karen’s eyes brightened. “Nothing would please me more. Undo these cuffs and I’ll be out of here in a flash, Ash.”

“And where are the keys to the handcuffs, dearheart?” She pointed her chin. “Those pants.” On one hand Karen was trying to hide her vagina from view, and on the other she was temptress Karen, flaunting herself to get another man to do her bidding. It didn’t look like she cared which one at this point.

John, by the look of him, could have stayed all day, content to watch her jiggling her tits at us while I figured out what to do. There I was, searching through another man’s pants for keys to unlock a gorgeous blonde sex slave from my bed head and kick her out into the street untouched, while a wheezing fat man looked on and licked his lips. Whoever said life was a trip wasn’t kidding.

I unlocked one of her handcuffs and slipped it free of the bed head. Then I snapped it onto my own wrist and led my naked ex through where the door used to be. “Carn, folks. Let’s walk.”

## Chapter 3.14 - Sex and death

I shoved Karen, naked and swearing, out onto the landing and unlocked the fur-lined cuff from my wrist. The scowl magically returned to her face. “Great - and what about clothes? I can’t be hanging around out here like this.”

“You may want to head downstairs around the back to the bins,” I said. “You know the drill. We don’t want you scaring the neighbours with that landing strip down there.” John Gacy’s mouth was open, though he was visibly drooling. I checked. John and I eventually dragged Naked Guy outside, careful not to scrape - or touch - any of his man-parts. He was starting to groan and come to when we retreated back inside, pulling a bookcase across to block the door. Karen had an extensive wardrobe, but happily it only took five minutes to empty her side of the wardrobe.

I think John was having fun. “I was sure the pair of them would pick up the first outfit and leave,” he said.

“Oh God no, Karen’s a material girl. Dignity comes a distant second.” She’d grabbed the first blouse and skirt and covered herself, but now she was busy scrambling across the weed-riddled concrete trying to pluck \$500 skirts from the air before they hit the filthy asphalt and screeching at her man to rescue this or that from atop one of the bins. When I saw one had been left open and began firing her shoes at it, things really got good. There was much laughter. And screeching.

It all must have been quite an eyeful for Mrs Cavanagh, and it may have killed Mr Cavanagh if he hadn’t already been in the ground 10 years. When the dust had settled, I said to Gacy, “Now to get our mate Duncan D to sort out my other little drama.”

The grin fell from John’s scarlet face. “Yeah - that could be a problem. I’ve got a sneaking feeling he’s dead.”

## Chapter 4.1 - Starsky & not much

Gacy handed the phone over, and I squinted at it, trying not to run into the car in front. “Yeah, see - it could be him. Maybe at his desk. This light doesn’t help.” Gacy snorted. “Mate, it could be my Auntie getting a cut and colour in the dark. Fucked if you can tell.”

He’d filled me in about the whispery call he got about De Walt - dramatic but vague allegations of foul play - then a photo sent straight after. It was vague shapes rather than a distinct image. Like it was taken with a crappy camera phone in low light by someone having an epileptic fit. It could have been almost anything; but maybe it was someone sitting at a desk or in a chair; maybe Bigfoot, maybe a monkey’s uncle.

I was all for going straight over to De Walt’s for a look, but John made a good point. More anonymous calls and shaky photos... it had set-up written all over it, and I’d fulfilled my fall-guy quota this week.

When I tried De Walt’s number I got the machine. A soft classical music backing track behind his assistant announcing: “You’ve reached the offices of Duncan J. de Walt Investigations...” I thought of leaving a number, but I started to wonder who could be standing over the machine drooling and cleaning off their axe. Perhaps not.

We weren’t far away anyway, but John still wasn’t convinced, so I had some talking to do. Yes, it was sticking our necks out, I said, but we both had a vested interest in making sure De Walt was still breathing. Maybe I needed him more than Gacy. I told him we’d be careful.

Turns out that my fetid friend John was a cricket fan, so we had something to chat about (window open) until I pulled the EH up a couple of streets away, and as we got out the heavens opened. Perfect.

We snuck through from the back, Gacy struggling over a low fence next door, then along the fenceline at the edge of the carpark. Such was the quality of Gacy’s Rayon shirt I was surprised the rain didn’t bounce off his back. But no, by the time we were past the fig trees and back to back at the stairs to the sandstone mansion, we were a couple of drowned rats reprising an episode of Starsky & Hutch. As a kid, I was always Hutch.

Then the bugger started hanging back. Rain was drumming down so hard I had to shout. “You coming or what?” So much for the stealth mission.

“Isn’t it better if I stay here. As lookout?” He pulled his gun out of somewhere behind his belt. “Borrow this, though.”

“I’d only shoot my cock off.” I left Gacy and his gun there and tiptoed up the stairs, staying to the side to make less of a target or something. No-one was about anywhere, but the lights were on inside De Walt’s offices, the main door closed against the weather. I wiped my feet and swung the door open gently. No sound, so I peeked.

No glamorous blonde behind the front desk this time. “Hello? Duncan?” No-one about. Nothing out of place, so I went through to his office, walking on eggshells. Now it made sense. That pic *had* been a guy in a chair. De Walt sitting behind a desk. And one of the fuzzy dark shapes had been his brain sprayed across the wall behind him.

## Chapter 4.2 - Brain space

I couldn't take my eyes off him, in the same moleskins and a poloneck as earlier, slumped back in his seat, with a vertical puddle of his brain painting the wall. When I got closer I could see the chunky texture to it. It looked to have stopped sliding, but was clearly still wet. There was a small hole in his cheek that had taken a chunk of his nose, and a matching one just next to the logo of the guy on the horse on his shirt.

I was leaning over the desk to get a glimpse at the line of chunky stuff that collected at the bottom of the wall, and the hole around the back of his skull where it came from, just to check. Then I realised I hadn't check the place over.

I looked up, my guts flip-flopping. There was no sound and no receptionist, but I hadn't checked the toilets or cupboards or - what is the done thing at a crime scene? I had a quick vision of her falling out of a cupboard when I opened the door, her tongue lolling. The room seemed to and put a hand on a sofa to balance. Fuck. Can you fingerprint a leather couch? They could do anything on *CSI*. My head was starting to swim.

A few deep breaths and a quick stocktake of lurking goons and ticking boobytraps in the suite's other rooms, yielded nothing suspicious, which was a decidedly good thing. I reflected that hairy men with guns were entering my life a little too regularly for my liking. Sadly, it was a little farfetched to think that my latest associate-cum-corpse was a coincidence. Time to head out for a Bex and a lie down. I'd heard Tasmania was nice.

I made for the door, but pulled up short. Two things. One: my muddy footprints tracking through the place. Poor form, but not much could be done now. And two: can you get done for leaving the scene of a murder - assuming you weren't the one that did the murdering? This had to be reported, and he'd soon start to stink up the joint. I tiptoed across to the desk and grabbed the phone, dialling 000 with a fingernail. Next to the phone, a large hardcover notebook was open. No dates, just plain lined pages. I could make out phone numbers, names and notes on bike gangs.

"Emergency. Police, fire or ambulance?" I pinched my nose and honked "Police, please" and said there's been a murder. Under pressure, it's always the old tricks that you rely on. I wiped the handset clean and dropped it the desk, tore out two pages from the notebook and flipped it closed.

Then I tiptoed out of there like Carl Lewis in *Swan Lake*. On the other side of the door, I closed it carefully and fought to walk calmly down the stairs to Gacy. I'm no law student but bolting from a murder scene may not be the best of looks. Then a weird thought - I never did tell De Walt about the white van from Saturday night. I didn't suppose it was bothering him now.



## Chapter 4.3 - Rogue element

The ongoing fuck-ups had forced Dimmick to stick his neck out again. There he was, in the middle of the night somewhere in Auburn in a van hardly believing he was still alive. Let's see - they'd pocketed 20k from their employers to make their man Honen disappear, but he'd beaten them to it, and now there was his bum-chum mate running around who could probably identify them all. Someone Gibson, according to the stinking shirts in his cricket bag.

Cricket. Stupid game, even stupider players, apparently. He looked across at the others. It was starting to heat up knee-to-knee in the back the way they were, but his boys sat patiently, waiting for the nod. Crombie looked like a heart attack wasn't far off - but here was here under duress. Despite his protests, having him there gave everyone more confidence in the address he'd supplied. Four blokes to find one passport. And these were his smartest troops. Surely they couldn't fuck this up. And if they did, he knew they wouldn't see these Serbs, or Bulgarians, or whatever they were, coming.

Dimmick finally opened up the back and led the others out. These were supposedly the smart ones, so he hadn't had to tell them not to come in the club's leathers. They stood there sweating into dark tracksuits, jumpers and jeans. His black sheep.

"OK. Guys. We don't get this passport ... I don't need to tell you what happens. Our friends make sure no-one sees another birthday, put it that way." Period piped up. "We'll get it boss. No probs. Bones'll just pretend he's looking for smack. No worries."

"OK. Shut up. Now, again, Period - you'll be inside with Bones, Tommy-boy, you'll be on the front, just keep your eyes open and buzz if someone comes, and I'll watch the back. Everyone out the back to me when you get my buzz. Now pull out the phones and show me they're on silent." The other three held up their phones in turn.

"OK, and you two know where you're looking?" The unlikely duo both nodded back, the weedy one too amped to be pissed off at the junkie remark.

"OK then," Dimmick growled. "We've got the gloves and the address - thanks Crumbles - so let's use 'em." They stretched on their surgical gloves, split into pairs and were in position three streets away a few minutes later. In the hands of an experienced addict, the lock lasted about 10 seconds. And that was the hard part.

Crombie stood in the shadows down the street, shaking like a leaf, wondering if he could just leave town. Drop everything. Maybe go somewhere in WA. But wasn't Dimmick from there? Fuck. Dimmick watched proceedings from the backyard of the unit block next door, pleased the torches in the unit next door were rarely visible. Period and Bones went through the run-down upstairs flat like a dose of salts. Neat but fast - it wasn't a ransacking, but the owner was hardly going to complain about the mess. Just as long as the place didn't look done over. They concentrated on the paperwork, bookshelf, phone table, and - bingo - the expanding file under the desk in the spare bedroom. It was filed under "P" and everything.

## Chapter 4.4 - From beer to eternity

We parked the EH in an alley and made a beeline for the bar. I was still shaking like a leaf and Gacy was doing the same, his red nose practically flashing “beer o’clock”. On the way over I’d filled my fragrant new mate in on the events of the past few days, and he’d told be a bit about his experience in the field of freelance skulduggery. He had a pretty useful sneaking around skill set, but clearly also a raging addiction to alcohol. He spent the whole drive licking his lips and insisting we head to The Courthouse at Taylor Square - an early-opening dive at the top of Oxford Street - and there’d been no talking him around. Whatever.

Inside, the usual winos and reprobates were cheek-by-jowl with groups of office workers slumming it and looking like they had a big headstart on us. I thought a quick shot of whisky might calm us down, so I got four. We elbowed in on the edge of a table in the murky fumes, threw one down and palmed one. I was still alive. I had a drink. Things could be a lot worse.

Then, out of nowhere: “I saw you on *Sports Tonight* a few weeks ago, you know.” “John, I’m glad you’re up to speed with my media commitments, but we just met this arvo, and since then I’ve seen two naked people - one of which I punched out, and a dead body with his head all over a wall.”

Gacy made the “busty” sign. “Yeah. Your ex was fairly easy on the eye. Thought I was going to have a heartie.” I ducked my head to reign my volume in. “Mate, tits are all well and good, but what about the murdered guy? And that phone call? If you aren’t worried, I sure as shit am. Given the bloke who called you...”

“Or woman.” “You are hard up, fella. Or woman - was probably the one who ventilated his head.”

Gacy downed his second shot and nearly choked with laughter. “Oooh - that burns. All I wanna know is, did you really hold your nose and call triple-zero?” He half-fell of his stool and strolled to the bar while I tried to simmer down. The fat man was still grinning when he got back bearing beer.

“Mate, I know you’re scared, I’m not surprised. But we don’t know the why. We just need to know how we respond.” “We?” I was surprised by the solidarity.

“I figure you could use a hand to sort this out.” “I surely could - but what’s in it for you?” “Mate - that was the first free naked lady I’ve seen in six years.” John Gacy was positively glowing, his eyes sparkling, his oily film glistening with delight. “You want to risk your life to ogle my exs?”

He snorted. “All we’ll be risking is a bit of brain power figuring out what or who the bad guys want. And I’m pretty sure it wasn’t you to start with. Now we just need to know if they know who you are from the other night.” “And you’re going to help me out of the goodness of your proverbial?”

“Yeah - but you’re going to be helping me back. There’s a PI agency out there minus a PI. If we can figure out why De Walt was rubbed out, maybe I get a job out of it without stepping into harm’s way.” I raised my glass. “Now I see, said the blind man.”

## Chapter 4.5 - The new firm

As always, Kessler walked into the room to find his partner at her desk. He'd sometimes wondered if she slept. He often wondered who she slept with. Paula McMurray had seen her partner coming and used her peripheral vision to watch the old fella dump files, phone and dinner on his desk. He looked tired as usual; pretty understandable, given he and his wife had just taken in his newborn grandchild by a daughter that was well off the rails and rarely mentioned. McMurray wondered if Sue Kessler's ambition extended to merely taking on an even dozen.

As he did every day, Kessler put down his drink and crossed off the day on his calendar with a red marker. The combined wisdom of the station had decided that this was his way of counting down to retirement. A few in the detective division knew that he was already eligible for his pension, though only the senior "D" himself knew it was his way of thumbing his nose at the dangers of the job.

That done, Kessler was ready for another night shift. "Any crime scene stuff back from the De Walt thing, Paula?"

"The pics are here, and the lab's been told to put a rush on the analysis."

"That'll have it back by Christmas then."

McMurray humoured him with a smile and manoeuvred herself between her boss and the rest of the long room to muffle their conversation. "Look, Dave, I just want to say that I appreciate..."

Kessler was already shaking his head. "Whatever you do, don't thank me for this. It'll be a big pile of shite, this De Walt business."

"But you didn't have to keep me on it. You could have pulled in any of the other dees."

It was true. Detectives from the morning shift had held the case for a few hours after the tip came through, taken control of the scene and set the crime scene people loose, keeping the station's senior detective up to speed with developments until his night shift started. They'd known enough to hold it for him.

Kessler commanded respect in the media and knew how to keep his mouth shut – which was handy, given executed society PIs had the potential to cause a media stink. And he was armed with a more hidden talent - with retirement always an option, he could be the bombproof man jumping on the ticking device. If the shit hit the fan with this case he could take one for the team and then fade into oblivion.

McMurray seemed disappointed to be cut off. "Well, thanks anyway. And I've come up with a few ideas."

"I thought you might have. I'll hear them at the briefing."

## Chapter 4.6 - Pop goes the cherry

Other cops in suits had started to drift in and fill the desks in the long dees' room. Fishbowl offices were built down one side of the space, and Kessler and McMurray took the opportunity to grab their files and coffee and settle into the meeting room in the middle. After a few minutes of greeting and seating, Kessler stood and took centre stage. After talk of ram-raids and chop-shops and various B&Es, he started to lay out the details of the De Walt shooting thus far. Two-shot execution-style murder; likely gang or organised crime related: given nothing had been staged to look like suicide it was likely someone was sending a message to someone. Two pages of the notebook on the PI's desk had been removed, but it remained to be seen whether any impressions could be lifted off the uppermost page.

De Walt's phone records were still to come through, someone had the rest of his diary, the secretary was cooperating, they still had the tip-off tape, a set of muddy footprints that weren't De Walt's, prints everywhere except on the pistol discarded under the desk - one mother of a mess.

Somehow sensing the trifling matters were over with, Inspector Holland drifted in silently, standing stiff against the wall at the back. The atmosphere changed - "Dutchy" Holland was much more bureaucrat than policeman, and his presence meant headlines, political heat, election year. If he was good at anything, he was a master of maintaining the status quo. And when a high-profile PI to the rich and famous gets offed in Nabob Street, Woollahra, certain people were likely to take notice. The type of people who donate large amounts of money to political fighting funds, for example. The killer or killers needed to be charged before Joe Q Public forgot all about the case and it became another barroom discussion that ended in "...but I don't think they ever got the guy".

So Dave Kessler - his most senior active detective, mind you - had been authorised to drop everything and adopt a one-track mind. Unfortunate that he'd refused to have his rookie partner reassigned while he worked the case. Dutchy was reluctant to make him. It was likely to get out and harm morale.

Kessler had put it differently: "Ah, she has to pop her cherry sometime." So the veteran crimefighting team of Kessler and ... McMaster were on the case. Jesus - that didn't fill him with confidence. His gut started to turn. They couldn't afford amateur hour on this one, Kessler notwithstanding. Listening to the old man lay out the facts at their feet, and watching the young girl furiously taking notes at his knee, Dutchy wondered whether he couldn't make a few inquiries of his own. Just as a bit of insurance. He still had his own contacts, after all.

## Chapter 4.7 - Metal gear

After a couple of quiet ones I quickly realised that going shouts with Gacy would leave me one liver short of a picnic, so I switched to softies early on. With one of us substantially more fortified than the other, we'd loosened up a bit, picked my bottom lip off the floor and decided to continue the bikie doorknock that De Walt had alluded to, given that my buddy-pal Honen was either O.S. or in hiding, and therefore of little use. Without him the hairy bikies were the common link between me, my two bags of gear, and a bullet in the frontal lobe.

The trick was going to be how to find anything out without getting my arse shot off. We'd decided to sleep on it, but I got the feeling Gacy would be giving his bed the swerve for more pub-based lubrication. It was his life.

I dropped him off in Randwick and wasn't home in Rozelle until nearly ten. I stopped in at the local Thai takeaway for a pad thai and was looking forward to shovelling it into my gaping maw in the comfort of a hot bath. Who knew that rubbing shoulders with alcoholics, bikies naked gigolos and other unmentionables who want you dead would make you appreciate the simple things – like eating sleeping, breathing, living. It was a shame, then, that I was still without the simplest necessity of all: a secure place to live.

Nomatter, halfway up the stairs to Chez Curly I'd decided I'd barricade the shattered door and cop a blissful 12 hours in the cot. An odd clang caught my ear - like the doors Maxwell Smart catches his nose in at the end credits of Get Smart. I looked up to see Karen flouncing down the stairs toward me.

She froze. I calmly dropped my bag of steaming thai, shrieked and herded her back up to the top. "Jesus H. Christ on a popsicle stick! What is this? I can't believe you'd have the balls to show your face around here, after your legs-akimbo work yesterday. Just jumped off someone else in there, have you?"

She just looked at me – dumbstruck for a change. Then I looked past her to where my shattered door should have been. In its place was a brand new door and steel bar security door with a very shiny, very hefty lock.

Oh sweet Jesus... I put an optimistic face on it. "This a peace offering?" I stepped past her and have it a thump with a fist. The thing would survive a direct missile attack. "It's not that bad an area..."

"The installation guy said it was the safest one they had – 22-strong points and solid metal core. And the grill's got a pickproof lock." She waggled a chunky key at me. "I told the man I have a psychotic ex who wouldn't take no for an answer. Which I do. He was a nice guy."

My turn to be dumbstruck. "I think that means no more Rambo raids," she said. She smiled sweetly, the keys dangling at the end of her talons. No fucking way. That tiny piece of metal was the only thing standing between me and my life, and another sleepless night on my brother's brown couch of ill repute.

I lunged and the element of surprise nearly got me there. She wasn't expecting the ferocity of the attack, and I'd snatched at the keyring before she'd reacted fully. But all I'd done was knock the keyring from her hand and back onto the stair behind her.

I was moving again, diving up and past her, hands grasping for the catch. Before she could turn and get down, I'd crashed into her legs, which she'd spread out to block me. At the impact she started shrieking and didn't stop as we struggled, arms and legs flailing, me lying on the stairs with my head under her skirt fighting, stretching to get past, Karen all slashing nails and high heels, dropping knees into my chest and swearing like a sailor with Tourette's. Then she got a leg free and kicked the keys through the stairs, a jangling impact as they landed on the path below.

Now the game had changed, each trying to throw the other aside to get downstairs. I was bent almost double and still blinded by the skirt over my head, when I heard the voice.

"Madam, is this man bothering you?"

The blows stopped raining down on my head. I said goodbye to the glorious triangle of white lace in front of my nose and freed an arm to drag the fabric free of my pate stubble, popping my head out.

There was a tall older bloke and short woman, both in dark suits standing on a landing further down the stairs. The man had a dusting of grey on his dark temples and a heavy build, the woman was much younger, blonde hair in a bob. They didn't live in the block.

The bloke reached into his jacket and pulled out a black leather cop-wallet and flipped out his ID. "This wouldn't be our Ashley Gibson would it, Paula?"

## Chapter 4.8 - All right on the night

Finally something had gone right. Smooth as silk. Untouched, unseen. Once safely ensconced in the clubhouse, and allowing a few window peeks to the road out front, Dimmick cracked a rare smile, shook a couple of hands. "All right, boys. That's what I'm talking about. You keep it simple, you come out fine. Chaste but not chased. You fucking think - that's the key." Some in the room thought they knew what he was on about. There'd been no hint of trouble, but they'd still been told to split up and change cars.

Tom Crombie now had the unpleasant little task of ducking out in the morning to pick up the van. But who gave a fuck now they were back safe, right? Safe and not in jail yet. Ten hours or so and Tom reckoned he'd probably have stopped hyperventilating, so it was all good. The pain in his chest was fading, so he tried to join in the communal backslapping without clutching his chest.

As crew members on one of the few jobs that had gone to plan, Period and Bones were busy lapping up their privileged status, but were at pains to enjoy it separately until the beers and chemicals kicked in. It was noted that Bones skulked off to shoot up at some point, which really toned down the hostility.

The pffft of beers being cracked peppered the rising conversation, sending the house's usual rowdy vibe further northward. Playstations were humming and being argued over, a few had disappeared out into the barren backyard for round 78 of world series pissed cricket, and the conscientious few even checked production in the shed. In short, it was Riders happy hour. And their club president knew they had plenty to be celebrate.

With another passport secured for their Serbian friends, they'd taken an important step towards shoring up the contract for the club's most profitable sideline outside the back shed. Dimmick was pretty sure that the Eurotrash he'd taken Crombie's passport scam to were just doubling the price and passing them on to who knows who else. Asians of some flavour, by the look of the sons of Nippon passports they always ordered.

Whoever they were, chances were good they'd see financial sense and the scam would carry on as normal, once he'd handed over the one in his back pocket. Dimmick had motivated his troops with the spectre of bloody retribution, but the bad guys probably wouldn't have come gunning for the patriotic and unassuming bike enthusiasts, had things gone belly-up. But it had been a risk - a risk that with one phone call went away and was replaced by cash. The Honen debacle would still take some cleaning up, though.

Dimmick went into his study - off limits to all - closed the door on the din and dialled the phone. "Yeah. Anto thanks." As he drummed his fingers and waited, a tennis ball smacked into the back window next to his face, followed by raucous screeching from the backyard. He bashed back on the window. "What's with the fucking cricket at the moment?"

"Anto? Yeah, it's about that thing you asked for. Yeah, that. It's ... yeah, that's me." Another big grin. "Yeah, I've got it right here."



## Chapter 4.9 - Fuzz ball

“I think it just might be him, Sarge. Hard to recognize hiding under the young lady’s skirt. Yes, I think so.” I extracted myself from that steamy netherworld and stood, trying to look learned and in control. Luckily I have no crazy hair to smooth down.

“And yes, he’s bothering me. He’s a maniac. I think I need protection ...” The sluice gates were opening, and the waterworks were underway. Love-15 to Karen. “I just... want to be... left... alone.” They should have seen her spreadeagled last night. Any more of this and the daytime Emmys were in danger.

Sergeant Bilko flipped through his little notebook and suddenly we were in a bad cop drama. “Ashley Lawrence Gibson – that’s you isn’t it.” “At your service, your excellence. Not a cricket fan?” He wasn’t a fan of any sort, by the looks. “If you could stop manhandling the young lady for a minute... I’m Detective Sergeant Kessler and this is Detective McMurray. We’re from Rose Bay police.”

The little cute one took over. “We’d like to ask you some questions about Duncan De Walt.” Kylie composed herself quickly. “Thank you, officers. It’s a good thing you arrived when you did. I think I’ll take this opportunity to put some distance between us.”

The two stiffs did everything but tug their forelocks, parting like the Red Sea to allow the blonde with the chest to bounce down the stairs. We watched her bend demurely at the footpath and collect the keys in question before trotting off down the road to her car. Life had yet again taped a “kick me” to my back. All eyes turned back to be. Had the female copper’s eyes lingered a touch too long? Hard to tell.

“Lovers’ tiff, Mr Gibson?” said the big old guy - was it Kessler? I hoped I had my roguish grin on straight. “Yeah, she’s a fiery one. But we like to keep it spicy.”

“Spicy things give me the hiccups,” said McMurray. “How terrible for you.” “Just as long as spicy doesn’t turn into assault-y,” said Kessler.

I managed a grave nod. OK, how did I get stuck in an audition for The Bill? “Mr Gibson, we mentioned Duncan De Walt. Did you know him?” “Yes, I’d just met him today.” “Is that right?” They exchanged looks. “He died suddenly today. His body was found this evening at his Woollahra office. Can we talk inside?”

Time to act surprised. Don’t overdo it. “Died? Jesus.” I took a minute to compose myself. Kessler checked his notebook. “You do live here, don’t you Mr Gibson?” “Oh yes... but I’m just on my way out.” McMurray butted in. “Off to chase that skirt, I’d say, Sarge.” “Either that or got a body in the cupboard. Just as long as the blonde doesn’t wake up dead anytime soon, eh Mr Gibson.” “We can only hope.”

## Chapter 4.10 - Heartbreak hotel

Waking up in a hotel room is usually a bittersweet experience. On the plus side, you can dance about and floss your bum with a towel should the mood take you, and you are ensconced in the perfect venue for illicit hotel room sex. On the minus side, a fleabitten \$80 room is rarely enough of an inducement to lure anyone you would want to have sex with. Even illicit hotel room sex. Ah, such are the contradictions of the human experience.

I'd picked the Winning Post Motel, one of the well-worn establishments near Randwick Racecourse in which those in the racing fraternity still looking for their first Golden Slipper choose to stay. Being early in the week, the place was deadsville, but I was still woken in the pre-dawn by the clip-clopping of hooves on concrete. With my head and gut churning, further sleep wasn't possible, so I lay there listening to the squeaky voices of the small horsey people outside and waited for dawn to break.

The place was perfect. Aside from the fact it didn't have a bloody great steel door on the front, it was cheap and it was halfway between the SCG and John Gacy's place in Randwick. I needed his help but there was still a day's cricket to get through, and there'd be hell to pay if I wasn't at the ground by 9.30am. That gave us plenty of time to head west and smoke a peace pipe with our hirsute Harley-mounted friends and get me back in fine fettle for a day's heroics in the middle. Or run away like blubbing little babies. Whichever came first.

By 5.30, I'd showered, dressed, tried to swallow some freeze-dried imitation coffee and pored over the two pages of De Walt's notes I'd stolen. Among the random jottings and cryptic scribbles were a list of bikie gang contacts that, frankly, I'd been pretty fortunate to spot and remove. The Rogue Riders were circled, which is what had put them at the top of our list. The rest of it meant nothing to me and obviously related to other cases that would now go unpursued.

The plan, such as it was, consisted of "find the bikie clubhouse and make pricks of ourselves", so it wasn't something that took long to put a fine-toothed comb through. Gacy had said staking out the clubhouse and trying to isolate one of their weaker members was our best bet. We'd follow him and, in John's words "bust his chops" until he told me what the fuck was going on. I couldn't wait to tell Gacy about my little visit from the cops.

I called him at home and got a sleepy, barely coherent promise that it would assume human form by the time I got there, and the lugubrious largie was good to his word. After less than five minutes of leaning on the horn outside the peeling Cassel Apartments, a groggy Gacy stumbled into view pulling on something dark and polyester over a chocolate brown shirt with pictures of playing cards on it. I thought he said we'd try to dress like detectives, not bit players from *Partridge Family - The Musical*.

## Chapter 4.11 - Fester wester

For safety's sake, we swapped cars in a wafer-thin alley behind an Indian takeaway off Alison Road. I left mine with two wheels on the footpath, locked it and spent a few minutes shovelling a drift of rancid Macca's packaging from Gacy's Camira into a nearby bin. Soon after easing down into the seat, I realised it still stank like an infested greasetrap in there. When I wound the window down I tried to do it politely.

Ten minutes later Gacy was still a mute lump, his swollen hands clutching the wheel.

I spotted his wedding ring.

"How long you been married?"

"Twenty-four years."

"Kids?"

"Yeah, one of each."

"What do they think of this kind of work you do? The surveillance and badguy stuff?"

"Mate, it's all legal and it pays the bills."

There was an edge to his voice, so I cut the smalltalk and let some dead air go by until I saw we were headed for - you guessed it - the gold arches drive-through.

I scanned the street directory for the address in Mount Annan, and Gacy's mood improved markedly with a mouth full of food substitute. The further west we got the more my mouth ran.

"Mate, this clubhouse looks like it's in the middle of the burbs. I thought they were usually in industrial areas? Weird."

Gacy choked down half a burger and blurted something unintelligible, tears in his eyes.

"Surely these guys aren't going to believe we're cops?"

He was actually using a hand to squeeze the food downward past his adam's apple. "Mate, these guys are generally just about money. If we get lucky and find the ones who've got your stuff - if it is a gang - and offer them enough cash to go away, why wouldn't they go for it? They don't care about you, and they certainly don't care about your stuff."

"More fool them - some of that vinyl was signed."

Gacy guffawed around his blockage but laughed something loose, which led to a choking fit that lasted until Ingleburn, with only a handful of highway near misses. I was warming to the guy, and was almost used to his smell. He finally breathed again and got the car straight on the road.

“Yeah, great. But us as cops...”

“People tend to believe what you tell them to believe. You wouldn’t believe some of the shit I’ve done. Plus, I’ve got a couple of fake badges in there.” He pointed at the glovebox and they were pretty official-looking. We pulled up down the street from the place - a regular street on the edge of the burbs.

I still wasn’t satisfied we’d actually nussed out what the fuck we were going to do? Just march up to the front door? I checked my watch. Shit-o-shit.

“Now all we’ve got to do is straighten these pricks out and get me back to the ground in two hours.”

“I’d concentrate on the gun to the head part if I were you. You’ve just made it back into the Blues. Hard to star with your brains all over the wall.”

## Chapter 4.12 - Knock on wood

I sat looking past Gacy at the house. The car's motor was off, cooling, the ticking somehow amplifying the silence. Gacy had flicked me a fake ID and looked ready to take the lead. Just as well, really. Resplendent in fake beard, glasses and a baseball cap, I wasn't feeling overly sociable anyway. Weirdly enough, he was chipper. "Well, up and at 'em," he said, climbing out.

"Where is everyone?" I said, following suit and checking that all five doors were locked.

"Maybe they're inside practising their bikie handshake... hey, you want to leave it unlocked. We may need to leave in a hurry. I wouldn't think anyone'll steal it in case it belongs to one of them."

Fuck it. Rookie mistake.

I popped the locks and we strolled up the driveway, bold as brass - for all the world like any other rundown family brick-and-tile, except for a few high-end bikes on what was once lawn. Someone must have been watching, because just before we were there the front door opened suddenly, which made my back door almost do the same. I only just caught it in time.

A big bloke with a shaved head and handlebar mo stood there. The fire from what looked like a dragon crept up his neck from beneath his leather vest. I was betting there was some sort of "RR" logo on the back, but he looked barely capable of getting through the door, and I wasn't in a hurry to step inside and ask for a look. I noticed there was a steel grill door behind the main door.

"Hello, boys."

"Morning," Gacy said. "Can we speak to someone in charge, please? Randwick police." He flipped his badge expertly and I moved to do the same but left it, not trusting my shaking hands. Big Boy looked at us like we were speaking Swahili. "In charge of what?" Inside looked like a true boys' shithole. My brother's couch would have fit right in.

"We've lost something, and we were wondering if one of your boys might have found it. We're offering a reward. A couple of bags of stuff."

He considered this. "Wait there." He turned and swung the door closed. The second door clanged as well. We were stuck there like shags on a rock. It sounded like there was a party going on in the backyard. Laughing and shouting, and swearing. Odd this early.

"You still thinking this is the way to go, John?" Something about the place was creeping me out more than it should, but I couldn't place why. Gacy smiled at me encouragement. "No worries. We're no threat to these guys, especially if they know we're not cops."

The doors opened again, this time a slightly less gigantic bloke in a monumental sat-and-pepper mullet that would have made Billy Ray Cyrus's heart go decidedly achy. And breaky. His mouth smiled, his eyes sized us up. "Fellas. What have you lost? Your senses?"

"Not at all. We lost a couple of bags of stuff from a house in Randwick North. On Saturday night-Sunday morning." I watched his eyes closely. There may have been a flicker of recognition there, but he hid it well.

"And you're here because?"

"I... that is, we were just thinking that you... may know who has them."

Oh fuck. The colour was rising on his neck.

He finally blew up. "Listen here you fat cunt..." but I didn't hear the rest. I was watching something moving on the roof. From where I was back from the doorway I could see it but the others couldn't. Something white, bouncing, trickling across the tiles and, wouldn't you know it, zeroing in on us. Instinctively, I stuck out a hand and caught it. Oh Jesus H. Christ on the dark side of the moon. Both the others saw me. Gacy stopped mid-sentence.

Turning, under my breath. "John. Fucking run."

We ran. We heard the house's door slam, and didn't know what side of it the bikies were. I was used to this no-look-back stuff.

We were nearly back on the freeway before he found his voice, eyes bulging, barely gulping enough air.

"What... the fuck was that about?"

"Backyard cricket," I muttered. "With one of my practise balls."

## Chapter 5.1 - Guts for starters

Kessler let her talk, knowing she'd drive straight down the procedural highway.

"Summary first, then current lead threads, then brainstorming." She started flipping through the file laid across her knees. "We have a Duncan James De Walt, 41, deceased yesterday at approx 4pm-6pm. COD is twin bullet wounds, head and chest, execution-style while seated at his desk. Two triple-o calls: first one from the reception phone, the next, almost an hour later, from De Walt's desk phone, which is left off the hook. No sign of a struggle at scene, which is deceased's Benelong Crescent office. Watts works as a private investigator, cashed-up clientele, he mainly handled infidelity, runaway teens, some burglary, comfort cases and general surveillance."

"Comfort cases?"

"Ones that make the rich feel better with someone looking, but don't necessary achieve anything."

"Yep. Go on."

Crawling along in heavy traffic, Kessler was tempted to switch on the siren and light but resisted. He suspected McMurray needed quiet thinking time.

She turned more pages. "The receptionist - Annalise Quade of North Bondi - was on sick leave, no-one in the other offices at the building saw anything of use. One security camera disabled. No footage. Nothing missing from the office apart from a couple of pages from a notebook. De Walt had a few enemies through his job, and a few more from his days as a copper..." she flipped furiously, "at various commands in western New South Wales. He left the force after a problem with an assault of a colleague - a female officer."

"Alleged assault. Give the dead guy his due. Inquiry turned up some harassment on the female's part, so we won't hang the guy on that. Hard to say what went on."

McMurray paused, but let it go. "At the scene, we've got muddy footprints something around a size 11. Tread pattern unclear. . Started about seven. They skirt the body and there are traces near the desk, so they were probably left post mortem, which is sort of confirmed by the weather bureau and the prelim crime scene report. It was raining heavily yesterday afternoon. Bureau says the rain started 6.25 give-or-take 15, which is after our TOD range."

Kessler wrote on a pad. "I'll get you to check with our meteorologist mates where they collect that rainfall stat. We might me able to get a more accurate time on the rain but I think, with the footprints skirting the body, it's reasonable to assume they were post." She jotted and he cut to the chase. Got to spur some critical thinking in this brain of hers.

"OK, yeah - there's a million and one facts to be chased. And we'll get there. But at this early stage what's your gut say? It's reasonable to say we've got an execution here. Why? And why now?"

Give her her due - cut off, she adjusted quickly.

“Weeeell, we’ll know more after.”

“Yeah, we’re always going to know more later, but your gut needs to talk now!”

He was pleased he got a laugh. A rare sign of life. “OK, my talking stomach says it’s all about those two pages from the notebook. Whoever pulled the trigger was linked to something on those pages. His recent cases.”

“So?”

“So we go and lean on his last few clients. Harder.”

“Now your guts are fucking talking.”



## Chapter 5.2 - Suspect logic

Groaning his way under the police tape, Kessler closed the door behind them, flipped the lock and the lights. The temptation was still to keep hands in pockets, but crime scene had had their way with the place, so the dees had free reign. And that many uniforms had been through by now that a bit of on-the-job training wasn't an issue.

McMurray had no "off" switch. She pointed above the entry door and kept going. "For a PI, De Walt was surprisingly lax. That's the only camera - disabled with spray paint."

"He wanted more, but the other businesses wouldn't pay for the externals, apparently."

She grunted, undeterred. "He was unmarried, and lived alone, and he didn't tell his girlfriend much, so no help on what he was working on. His car was cold when police arrived. Probably hadn't moved. And the only other major evidence is the phone calls, footprints and missing notebook pages." She dropped the case file on the reception desk.

"Apart from the guy with two bullets in him," he said.

Kessler drew her through to the office with the stain on the wall. Mmmm, there was a charming aroma wafting off it now. She barrelled on again. "Phone records are back and, the only thing that stands out is a series of calls to various bike OMGs." She looked up. Her with the acronyms. "Outlaw motorbike gangs - now there are some likely lads who could off someone efficiently," he observed.

"I'll go through the calls in more detail ... not much to go on."

"Yes and no." Kessler was struggling to be more fatherly, less critical. "So the forensics probably won't be back until Friday, at the earliest knowing them, unless Dutchy can give them the hurry-up. So, until then all we've got is our razor-sharp detectivising powers."

A mini-smirk from her. He would draw her out of her CSI: Miami fantasyland if it killed him. *Come on Paula, grab a mental pen and draw a conclusion, for fuck's sake.*

"So is your gut in a chatty place, Detective McMurray?" He bent to talk to it. "Speak, stomach, speaaak to us."

She quickly stepped away, acting out her scenario. "I'm interested in this notebook and these bike gangs. We can pretty much assume that our footprints are post - so it's mud probably from our triple-o caller, who comes in after the rain, finds De Walt's corpse, puts on a Daffy Duck voice and calls it in."

"Good. That's a good bet."

*Yeah, and...* Kessler had pulled De Walt's diary from the file. "And I find professional shooters rarely bother much with reporting their executions, let alone leaving and coming back later in the rain to do so..."

"So we've got two at the scene." McMurray looked genuinely surprised.

"Well, two parties: shooter or shooters, and one caller," Kessler said. He handed the diary to his partner and pointed out phantom objects long removed from the desk. "Hard to say which party ripped the pages from the notebook. Did you notice...? No spatter on the desk or notebook, so no telltale clean pages."

She was soaking it all in, bless her. "But I reckon one of his recent clients might know. One very recent one in particular. Anyone catch your eye?" He pointed at the book in her hand.

She flipped through, eyes scanning. "If we're talking size 10-11 feet ... there's that sleazebag Gacy that worked for him, he's big, that obnoxious restaurant guy Mainwaring - holy shit - our upskirting cricketer Curly Gibson."

## Chapter 5.3 - Test of characters

We battled the traffic all the way back into town, I leapt out at the hotel and swapped the Gacy shitbox for my more classic one and laid rubber to the SCG. Sprinting through the bowels of the cricket ground, I saw Si Katich and screeched to a heel-halt like a cartoon character, trying to lay on a saunter and look casual while panting and perspiring freely.

Yet again, I'd missed the start of the team meeting, and looks were exchanged. I kept my head down and, for the third time in three days, started eyeing the odds and ends of kit around the room, looking for my sizes.

It was a game that was threatening to peter out to a draw - we were 160-odd ahead with 10 wickets in hand - but at the meeting we decided to take it to the Queenslanders and see if we could engineer a miracle win and guarantee a final next week.

All I cared about was that our openers were still in, so I had plenty of time to get into character, and try to forget about bikies and bullets and undesirables making merry with my personal effects. I settled into the viewing area and admired our boys throwing the bat in an attempt to build a total for a declaration. Phil Jaques and a young bloke called Ed Cowan were throwing the bat like crazy men, which is always enough to take your mind off naked women chained to beds and visits from the police.

Then we leaked some wickets and I was padding up, slotted in at five with el capitano Katich holding himself back. Two licences to go the tonk in two innings. At least the cricketing gods were smiling on me. Wish they'd tell their mates.

An hour before lunch, I'd flicked the TV monitor over to a gardening show and settled in with a Gatorade and Chiko Roll. Before the Chiko had disappeared a kerfuffle behind me snapped me out of the hibiscus maintenance. A knot of bodies that included coach Mott and the PR guy I could never name. They looked earnest and quiet and ominous.

Oh fuckaduck. They were flanking the two police from yesterday. It had been an indian summer, but even in the air-conditioned luxury of the viewing room, the sweat sprang out of me apace.

"Hey, officers."

"Mister Gibson. Sorry to disturb you at work." It was the older, senior bloke.

If anyone was sweating more than me, it was the PR minion. "I tried to get them to wait until stumps..."

"It's an ongoing murder investigation. It doesn't work like that." Big Bloke didn't look happy. What was his name?

"Anything I can do..."

Then a cheer and a smattering of applause. A nod from Kat loitering darkly at the back of the room. Saved by the falling wicket!

“Officers, duty calls. And you know how I love Judy.” I grabbed my bat and fled out the door in the stony silence. Nothing like the need to plan an alibi as motivation for a long innings.

“We’ll be waiting.”

## Chapter 5.4 - Game drawn, day saved

With two harbingers of all things unpleasant hovering in the stands, a nice long innings would have been just the thing. Mental preparation time to answer questioning about a certain hour last night I assumed they'd be interested in. Where was I between the hours of six and eight? Well officer, certainly not tiptoeing around bloodspatter, making doing comedic voiceovers for the benefit of emergency services.

But Simon Katich wasn't on the same page. He declaring before I'd been out there long enough to adjust my box into the sweet spot. So it was innings closed and me walking off with the massive haul of 5 not out, next to a young bloke called Dan Smith, who seemed nice enough. Scanning the rooms as we neared the boundary, I couldn't see the plod twins, which didn't mean much. Didn't they just have the knack of popping out of nowhere to probe me. And not in a good way.

A phone book beating? Nasal voice analysis? Electrodes-on-testes? Anything goes in Hollywood's interrogation rooms - I could barely wait to see the real-life version.

But there was no time for that. A quick gutful of Gatorade, a shower and more borrowed clothes and I scuttled back out to safety. Rather than go out with "Jaques" across my back, I chose to recycle my last eponymous shirt - no doubt they'd have me on boundary duty anyway, so my teammates would be safe from the stench.

Jesus H. Christ on a Space Shuttle mission - what an afternoon. Rather than laying down and dying like the Queensland sides of yore, these northern monkeys came out throwing the bat from the get-go, actually chasing the impossible 360-odd we set them. At one point Jimmy Maher and Ryan Broad were flaying everything, and looking odds-on to do the impossible. I saw every inch of the SCG, cursing it as my knees started speaking to me, making a great case for a impromptu retirement announcement.

From the outfield I watched the brains trust try everything to dismiss the bludgeoners, to little effect. Then they got really desperate and threw me the ball.

Don't tell anyone, but the first thing I noticed was that the Queenslanders had pounded the ball out of shape. Probably when they carted my first three deliveries to all parts. Then, as wily as a old bloke who can't run has to be, I waltzed up and fizzed in a straight one that was too wide of off stump. Then it hit the point of its egg, and crashed into middle.

No one was more surprised than me, and I'd later see that the TV highlight footage had managed to frame perfectly the look of raw shock on my dial. The boys were than relieved they overlooked my odour in the celebratory huddle.

The breakthrough got me another couple of overs, which got me on a roll. I ended up skittling another three and the afternoon built to a crescendo of boundaries, bat-throwing, stress and incredulous celebration.

We almost lost defending an impregnable 364. Queensland almost lost 10 wickets. In the end neither quite happened and the whole malarkey ended in a draw, which felt more like a win than most wins I've had.

It was a team effort, but clearly *I'd like to thank my late mum, my dad, my under-14s coach and everyone who's helped me get to where I am today.* Only as we were dragging ourselves back up the players' race did my face fall when I remembered where that was.

## Chapter 5.5 - Paging Doctor Zhivago

Gacy followed the bike far enough back, changing lanes, dropping back on the straights. Forget Easy Rider - this guy was the safest almost-Harley rider on the road, so it wasn't exactly taxing. He should've bought a moped. They headed east toward Smithfield, then bike guy turned north. When they crossed the M4 Gacy started seeing signs. "Off to see sick Aunt Jemima, are we?" he muttered.

They turned in at the general entrance to Westmead Hospital, then the bike threw the tail. Gacy pulled the Camira into a park, watching the bike head around the building, through to a separate staff parking area.

"Paging Doctor Zhivago." John Gacy brushed the crumbs off, went inside and picked up the phone. Forty minutes later his shiny new offsider walked in, clean and smiling and out of cricket clobber.

"Howdy, offsider." Curly looking spent.

"Howdy yourself, sidekick," Gacy said.

They shook and Curly shook his head. "I've gotta say, I'm pretty impressed with your initiative. Following a biker guy. I'm amazed you went back."

"I do love a puzzle. And I hate it when my main employer dies. Hurts my business. Hey, did you win?" "Draw. But I got four wickets. I left the party for this shit."

They found a pair of seats in one of the joined rows. "The party's over then. See cutie nurse at reception? I asked about our guy. Said I scratched his bike, but they didn't buy it - won't give out staff info. Now her and the head dragon she's with have got an eye on us."

"We're even then. I've got an eye on her."

"The good news though. Our guy's not a doctor - he's a nurse." Gacy flicked his collar. "Same shirt pattern as cutie pie."

"Nice one Matlock."

They threw around a hatful of ideas, but it wasn't looking good. After a while wedged between two rigid plastic chair arms, Curly stood up. "Give me your jacket."

Gacy did it, and Curly put it on. A blue crimpolene refugee from the seventies. Soon the head nurse left the front desk, and cutie got a phone call. Curly walked around the nurses' station and plucked a clipboard from a row of holders stuck to the end of the counter furthest from the door. He picked a direction and disappeared down a hallway.

## Chapter 5.6 - Lightning dolt

We needed the guy's name and when he was finishing - the place was just too big to guarantee catching him on his way out. We could easily miss him - a heavy, balding shortish nurse in his late thirties, according to Gacy. Not much to work with, but on the positive side, not exactly someone scary enough to mix it with Ozzy Osbourne in a chook chomping contest.

The place was a shiny, pale green maze. At yet another T-junction I could hear what sounded like a shift-change meeting going on somewhere, so I turned the other way and disappeared into what turned out to be a staff tea-room. Good and empty.

I wiped my brow, casting about for something to show for my pathetic investigation. Taped to the walls were the usual safety notices and irate printouts, angry block letters reminding people to PLEASE CLEAN UP YOUR MESS. Not much there.

Then, around the other side of the fridge, something. On the wall was a cork noticeboard covered in memos, thank you cards and notices about inservice training and seminars, and at its centre a single sheet of paper titled "Nursing Roster - March". It was a beautiful thing - full names, and only three males that I could see.

My hand was actually on it when a small nurse with dark frizzy hair squeaked into the room. Same nurse-pattern shirt. I clicked the power point next to the board meaningfully, as she popped the door on the microwave and paused, coffee cup in midair. "Can I help you?" A crease appeared in her smooth forehead.

"Hi, not really, but I can help you. You'd better not reheat that tea. The mike is cactus." I was smiling and trying to look non-threatening, which was easy; she was cute.

Her crease increased. "What's wrong with this one now? We only just got rid of that last piece of junk."

"Yeah, I know. But someone reported that this one had an attack of the lightnings yesterday... so here I am."

"Lightning? Like when you put metal in there?" Now she was smiling. This was good.

"Well we have to run a test to check. An EGI-5 arc test."

"Hey, the other maintenance guys have blue shirts, with a logo. And where's your ID?"

*Shite.* "Yeah, sorry, it's my second day. I clipped my ID to my hat and left it in the van. They've got a shirt in a 42 on order."

She looked confused. Join the queue, lovely. "You have to wear your ID, you know," she said.

"Yeah, I'll start this test up and go out and grab it. Can I borrow your coffee?"



We watched her mug go around in the nuke box for a few seconds. I was starting to sweat.

“Hey d’you see that male nurse stack his motorbike in the carpark just before. Nasty.”

“Who? Tom Crombie?” A fair reaction.

“You know him?”

“Not really. Wow.” A look of distaste and she very nearly shuddered and the silence lengthened again. I wondered who would break first.

“Sorry, but I’ve got to get to changeover.”

She hurried away. I gave myself the time it takes to cook two cups before I ripped the roster down, checked the hall and skedaddled.

## Chapter 5.7 - The nursenator

We both got calls at the same time - Nurse Brooks on the landline and me on my mobile. I stepped away from the desk.

“John-boy - no, nothing yet. The nurse here was giving me the lowdown her profession. They should pay them more, you know.”

Over at the nurses' station, I got a schoolgirl smile. Given Brooksy had a ring on the bad finger, I tried not to make it abundantly obvious that I wouldn't have minded giving her a thorough physical exam of my own. You know, out of respect. For the husband guy.

“No, they still don't know. Some others are coming out in drib and drabs. He's a late worker. Yeah, maybe I can pump the nurse for information.”

Gacy was out in the night watching Crombie's bike and no-doubt working on his next chip packet heartie. He said the guy didn't look hairy or scary - not enough to have been one of the bozos that roughed me up at Honen's house on Saturday, anyway. Still, he could have shaved and had a chill pill sandwich since, so he was to be regarded as a freak until proven un-freaky. Then Gacy's voice changed and I knew we were on.

Somehow John had the Camira at the entrance and I slammed the door as Crombie swung out of the carpark after the bike. Pretty soon the fat man was working his magic three cars back. He started explaining the kind of spot that we were looking for. Somewhere with privacy, he said, with no easy escape routes. But it was going to be no mean feat cornering a guy on a motorbike on the side of a highway.

Pretty speccy. Maybe all the jargon meant he was a cop once. I made a mental note to ask him when all this shit was off our shoes. If ever.

It looked like our man was heading back to Horsley Park, and the closer he got to his biking brethren, the more change we had of one of them happening by and seeing us, and tearing us both a new muffler.

I was following our progress in the UBD, and spotting likely sites for our dodgy dealings. A servo with a big car park. No good - cameras. A breakdown bay - too open. An industrial park - too busy. Traffic was light, but there were still enough bored motorists with mobiles going slow enough to spot a number plate.

Shitbags - I didn't need to consult the UBD to know we were closing in on the Great Western Highway, and running out of time. In this traffic, it was going to be hard enough getting to the guy, let alone getting him off the road. Gacy was only a car behind now - he was looking grim now, moving in, but Crombie was throbbing along in the centre lane and we couldn't do anything about it. Then, like a solid citizen, he indicated before moving into the left lane.

“He’s getting off - Wallgrove Road. We’ve got no fuckin’ time,” Gacy said.

We turned off right behind him.

“Get the light out of the glovebox. Stick it to the roof.” He said it so loudly I jumped, then did it fast. I pulled out what looked like a giant red snowdome, the wire trailing behind it. Strong magnets banged it down onto the roof. I jumped again.

Ahead, some kind of quarantine or weighstation. It had a nice, wide entrance road and a carpark inside. But it was on the other side of the road.

Gacy flipped something on the dashboard and everything outside went red, then dark.

We were longside him now as he slowed and looked around. He was pulling over to the left, away from the entrance to the dark quarantine station.

“Fuck! He’s going the wrong way.”

“Needs a helping hand,” Gacy said. He gunned the engine and caught up with the bike. Then he nudged it.

Crombie barely stayed upright, the loose gravel stones kicking out the back end. He righted himself, then took off.

## Chapter 5.8 - Australia's wanderland

We chased. Up over the bridge over the M4, through the lights and down again. We kept nudging the bike, but somehow Crombie kept it upright. He was wearing his double-R club jacket, but he had no leather on the bottom half - just blue nurse slacks that would melt nicely in a fall. Cars were pulling over left and right, and Gacy was weaving around above 90.

The next thrust forced Crombie to the wrong side of the road, with a set of lights looming. He straightened and gunned it through a gap in the cross-traffic just as the lights went red. We saw him turn off into the entrance to Australia's Wonderland.

"Time for some rollercoasters!" Gacy spun the wheel, fighting to stop the Camira's arse-end taking the lead as we slid sideways into the intersection, wheels squealing, trailing blue smoke. Drifting past the red lights, frozen redder by a burst from our roof, we were eyeballing oncoming headlights.

I'd experience some slow-motion moments in the past, but this was right up there. Flash - me, staring at the wide eyes and red-white knuckles of a truck driver and the couple in the sedan next to them. Flash - Gacy, fighting the wheel. The thump of compression brakes.

I'd been unconsciously clenching my buttocks, and maybe the car had too. It can only be a tucked-in rear-end that prevented it being cleaved off, leaving our little legs to run along at the back, Fred Flintstone-style.

Then Gacy got the fishtail straightened, bypassed the clearly marked entrance where Crombie went and gunned it along to the next road - the exit. He nearly cleaned up Crombie coming the other way. We stopped inches from impact and I was out the door in seconds, dragging the nurse off his bike and dumping him on the asphalt. He nearly got squashed by the falling bike.

He wouldn't stop screaming. "*What the fuck are you doing? You trying to fucking kill me? You can't hit me!*"

Gacy was alongside me in a flash. "Shut the fuck up, Thomas. That's your name isn't it? Crombie?"

He looked up again. "Wait a minute. Who the fuck are you two?"

"We're the cops. So shut the fuck up. Who did you think we were?" Gacy killed the car and the light and joined me standing over nurse-boy.

"Cops in a Camira? Like fuck you are. And I know you. You used to be a cricket player." I buried my foot in his ribs, then picked him up and threw him against the bonnet. "Your facts are way off, Tiger." I was finished playing.

Gacy nodded his approval and was about to take over when Dumigan kicked out backwards, catching him in the shin. Odd-on this wasn't the guy with the missing toe of foot. In a flash Gacy had a scratched black pistol centred on the double-R patch on Crombie's jacket.

I looked around. A couple of cars - must have been staff at this time of night - pulled up short of us and soon disappeared out the other way.

Gacy's adrenaline was in full flow, by the colour of his face. "We're investigating a little break and enter and attempted murder in Randwick North on Saturday night," he growled in the nurse's ear. "Ring any bells, dickhead?" After the other night, I felt better being on the blunt end of the gun.

"Fuck off."

Gacy pecked the gunbarrel down onto the back of his skull. Hard. He yelped and buckled, but we held him.

"Remember now?"

"Fuck... off."

Another peck. Another. Faster, cracking now. "Break and enter?!" Now Crombie was crying and trying to protect his balding pate. He was blubbing in earnest. "I can't tell you. I didn't go. I'd be fuckin' crucified."

I didn't know whether he meant he'd be crucified if he went along, or if he told us about it now. "Mate, turn the gun around and use the butt this time."

"Fuck! Come on. They never let me go on those jobs and I'm not interested." Gacy leaned close. "Tom, mate, I know you're not one of the bad guys. You're a male nurse, for Christ's sake. The bad guys were in North Randwick, and you were probably working at the time."

Another peck. Almost gentle.

*"Please.* I'll haven't got anything you want."

"Yeah, we'll see, shall we? Mate, go and check his saddlebags. Then go and get my silencer so we can shoot this fuckwit and go home." He shot me a wink, and I resumed breathing.

After I worked out how to open them, the left saddlebag was empty apart from smelly socks and shoes, the right held a sports bag. I rummaged through it, holding it up to catch light from the headlights. More yelps from the car in the middle of the exit ramp to a closed amusement park. Dumigan was crying harder when I dumped the bag on the bonnet next to him.

"What's this about? Why did your mates go to Randwick the other night, fucker?"

Crombie was barely coherent through the sobbing. “Why don’t you ask... him? It was that cricketer... they were after.”

“Honen? Yeah, we thought so, but why?” I said.

“Please. I wasn’t s’posed to know that much.”

“Any bang-bangs?” Gacy nodding at the bag.

I ripped open a cardboard box. “No. But - what - about 16 vials of what-is-it ... pethidine. But that’s not the weirdest bit.”

“Stealing drugs, Thomas. Tut tut.” Gacy gave the nurse another crack over the ear for good measure. “What else?”

“They look like death certificates.”

## Chapter 5.9 - Pig food

Kessler sat back down after ordering, privately congratulating himself that he was new-age enough not to send the female on, let's face it, what was a woman's errand. He eased his bulk into the booth as customers queued at the counter and the throaty gurgle and double-clack of coffee-making cut through the chatter.

"Right. By the look of the dunderhead at the till we've got buckley's of getting our order right, but anyway - what's our next move, boss?" "You got Gibson's phone records in yeah?" McMurray looked up from her notebook and its voluminous scribblings. "Yeah. How did you get 'em? They're not usable, court-wise..."

"Don't ask - we just use 'em to get to court."

"Okaaay. So we've got a PI the rich and-or famous gets done, and it looks professional, and he probably knew his attacker. The secretary ... Amanda Quade her name is ... seems clean, been there for ages, steady boyfriend, and apparently not sleeping with De Walt..."

"That we know about."

She ignored that half-smirk - was it supposed to be suggestive? Oh dear God, she was about to eat. "...And no red flag calls from her phone. Call records from the other phone - the one on De Walt's desk - are more interesting."

*It's like one of those nightmares where you're running through molasses.* "OK. And..." he said.

"And the list that's come back has calls from that phone to known associates - contractors and clients mainly - for 48 hours before the ETD. Our ducking and weaving cricketer Gibson is there, and his professional peepshow snapper Gacy."

"They're top of our list."

"Yeah, along with half a dozen local chapters of bikie gangs."

"He's had dealings with them before," Kessler prompted, "and they'll be exactly zero help."

"Yeah - then there's one last call from De Walt's desk phone and, unless the Coroner's people have the ETD a couple of hours out..."

"Which is possible, but unlikely. Karlson did it yeah?"

"Correct. So someone's come in after the rain with their size 11 clodhoppers, found the mess and called in the triple-0."

"And the feet rule out that restaurant guy and a couple of other clients..."

“Yep. Unless they had help, but hard to see motive from a client - if De Walt was helping them out of trouble.”

“OK. So what’s new here?” If this dragged on too much longer, Kessler knew he was was going to have to put an end to Amateur Hour.

“Well, Gibson’s phone records link him to De Walt, but we know that he hired the PI the day before, but here’s the thing: he called from his mobile earlier that day, and even though he wasn’t in the appointment book, the secretary confirms Gibson came in to the office - stayed half an hour.”

“When?”

“Saturday, maybe 6.30pm.”

“They were open after six on a Saturday?”

“I asked her about that. They worked oddball hours, apparently. Some big case. Unrelated.”

Kessler hoped letting her do that interview alone hadn’t been a mistake. Then he heard their order called and looked at his partner meaningfully.

She got the message and was soon back with a tray of coffees and pastry. She looked troubled. “Hey, Sarge - you know you can’t order donuts. We’re police - people ... it looks bad.”

“Fuck that - we’re not in uniform. And that’s only in Yank cop shows. Fuck them if they’ll dictate if I have a donut.” The old bloke was clearly unimpressed. Time to barrel on.

“So, there’s no other forensics, nothing much from De Walt’s bank...”

“Yeah,” Kessler said, shutting her down through a mouthful of dough, “so we go and pick up the cricketer and the fat spy.”



## Chapter 5.10 - Home truths

At the listed address of John Gacy Investigations the eponymous “investigator” was still in bed. McMurray eventually roused him, her fist red after a workout on the door. Her watch read 10.10am. More pounding and the locks snapped and door opened to a fat man in grubby boxer shorts and a singlet, what hair he had standing on end. “Yeah?”

The smell wafting out from the void behind him was no match for the stench of alcohol and halitosis that assaulted her when he opened his mouth. She should have waited back a couple of steps. Kessler would have, she thought - the wisdom that comes with experience. She thought of him doing the same thing on the other side of the city.

McMurray breathed through her mouth and started firing questions at the bleary-eyed snapper, each parried by the same verbal brick wall. Describe his relationship with Duncan De Walt (mainly business), did he know if the dead man had any enemies (only the usual nutters). She asked if he knew anything about any investigations De Walt was undertaking involving outlaw motorcycle gangs (no). Did he get on with the guy? Yes. See him socially? No. McMurray knew the guy was either hiding something, or at least bowing to some sort of ill-advised bottom-feeder code of silence. The fact that he stood out in the hall and swung the door mostly shut behind him only added to his air of guilt. Not that the detective would have set foot in that place for love nor money.

When Gacy scratched his balls and offered a curt, “If there’s nothing else, I’m off back to bed”, she decided she’d been nice enough.

“John, I think you need to come back to the station and answer a few more questions.”

“I don’t think I need to do anything.”

“You don’t want to make enemies of us. Especially if you’re after an Investigator licence.”

She’d done her research and knew Gacy was chasing his PI ticket but had been rejected four times over the last six years. He’d passed the course, but stumbled on some old drink-driving convictions. At least that was the reason he was given.

“Mate, I always get knocked back anyway, so that’s not much of a threat. So unless you’re arresting me...”

She made a few more threatening noises, but could do little if he dug his heels in. She didn’t have any cause to arrest him, and if he was involved the last thing she wanted was an unlawful arrest to taint the case.

She glared impotently but had to leave. But that didn’t mean she had to go away.

On a hunch, she went downstairs and waited in her vehicle, and was five cars behind him barely 40 minutes later, as he slid his wreck of a Camira through traffic like he had somewhere to be.

The destination seemed to be a row of four townhouses in Fern Street, Clovelly, not far geographically but a million miles from the suburb's chi-chi waterfront. The man her internal voice had started referring to as "the suspect" had pulled to the curb and casually walked past a row of townhouses looking at his feet. Once he was past them he stopped as if he'd forgotten something, and retraced his steps.

McMurray frowned. She trained a set of compact binoculars on him for a while, then got out as he disappeared around a corner. Following the footpath close to the fenceline, where she'd be shielded from Gacy's view, she watched him let himself in a back gate. A dog barked, then nothing. Soon she was back in the car, controlling her breathing, trying to work out which property he'd just illegally entered.

She picked up the radio, identified herself and asked for residence checks on 47 and 49 Fern Street, Clovelly. A scratchy radio voice squarked something and she dropped the handset into his lap, straining to see movement in any windows. The the radio squarked again. "Go ahead," she said.

"Forty-seven Fern in the name of Alfred James Lebreve and 49 in the name of Friend - John Harold and Natalie." No bells were ringing. "Any dependents at either residence?"

"None at 47. Forty-nine has David Gary Gacy, born 1988." *Bingo*. She got out and got the loudhailer out of the boot.

## Chapter 5.11 - Dead letters

The dining room of the Winning Post Motel is a truly depressing affair. It had been pointed out to me when I got the tour of the facility the other night – “Through there (jab) is the dining room, breakfast finishes at nine-thirty on the dot, there’s a laundry room out the back (jab), and a common room on level one (stab). As dining rooms go, one glance through the double glass doors suggested that its culinary experience would rate just below a hot bowl of broth at the Matthew Talbot Hostel for homeless men.

Yet, here I was, sucking up the Weetbix and cold toast and murdering my tastebuds with another cup of instant dirt. I wasn’t at my sunniest. It could have been the murderous bikies, the flat lock-out, an ex that made Beelzebub look like Bert Newton, the spluttering career, eating in a Laminex wasteland – take your pick.

The laws of cause-and-effect told me that none of this could have stemmed from losing my lucky talisman, but tell that to my subconscious. Not to mention Poppa Rigg. By now the old guy would be rolling in his grave like a pig on a spit. This is how superstitions get a foothold.

I’d called the Durham County Cricket Club after all the action the previous night, and had talked to the club’s assistant secretary, a bloke with a broad Geordie accent and a hacking cough. With his cough, sing-song burr and the two-second delay, it took us 10 minutes to get through a two-minute conversation. The upshot was, as far as he could tell, Paul Honen was officially Neville Nobody to the DCCC. He said he’d ask around, but all the contracts were spoken for, as far as he knew.

Back in my room, I put on the kettle and sat down at the scarred table laying out the death certificates and drugs from Crombie’s bag. I lined up the 50ml vials - I counted 14, each with a little label that said “Type A drug” and “pethidine” all over it. Was 700ml of Pethadine a lot? All I knew was that it came in pretty small bottles, so I had to think each dose of the stuff would be potent, otherwise you’d buy in bulk. What did I know - alcohol was my drug of choice.

I did know it was a powerful painkiller, presumably addictive enough to fetch a decent price on a street corner somewhere. It looked like the good ol’ Roguies had at least two sources of income: stolen ’80s classic albums, and hospital-grade pethidine, courtesy of that thieving little weasel Crombie. Weird combination. It was anyone’s guess whether the club members themselves were on the stuff but, if Pethadine worked anything like heroin, Crombie’s abject lardyness ruled him out.

But this wasn’t getting me any closer to the inside of my flat, or Pop’s bat, and I still didn’t know where I stood with these biker freaks. Oh, and the police were looking at me for the PI’s murder.

I made a cuppa and tried to get logical. Topping the to-do list was to continue trying to track down Paul Honen, surely the absent architect of most of my troubles. It was odds-on that he was up to something illegal, but any partnership he had with the bikies had clearly soured. Problem was, the bloke could be anywhere on the globe – except, apparently, Durham, England.

If I found him he was pencilled in for an unfortunate accident with a cricket bat. I'd be tearing him a new arse so wide he'd whistle in the wind and the cops would have to source some adult diapers.

Then there was his ex business partner. You'd have to assume that, if a mob of whackos for hire are paid to rub someone out, they'd have the wherewithal to check they had the right murder victim. It was just common courtesy, surely? Maybe then the armed fuckwits could carry out the plan without shooting several limbs off.

I could also assume that it was way too coincidental that Duncan De Walt wound up a human sieve the day after he started looking into the incident. It seemed the double-Rs were shooting at 50 per cent, but how to avoid being the stiff that ups their average?

## Chapter 5.12 - Vial marketing

I looked over the three forms on the scarred table in front of me. Scanning the documents, it seemed David Josef Denechev, Wen Leung and Ding Weizhong had all shuffled off this mortal coil in the last few days.

The forms were a list of each individual's details and the circumstance of their deaths. Near the bottom was a doctor's signature and a date, time and location of death. They'd died of various nasty things - in the "Cause of Death" section Denechev's form said "endocarditis", while Leung, a 40-year-old male, had died from something called "acute myocardial infarction" and Weizhong, a 29-year-old woman, had died of "anaphylaxis secondary to peanut allergy".

Dark outlines around the paper suggested that these were photocopies of the original forms, which must have been slightly smaller than these A4 sheets and could have gone on for pages. As far as I could decipher, there were no suspicious circumstances surrounded the deaths, but I wasn't sure that they put that kind of thing on a death certificate.

My first theory was that Crombie was doctoring the books at the hospital to try to hide his bikie mates' hits, but that didn't ring true. The forms were only copies, and it looked like it took a doctor to sign off on the cause of death, so red flags would go up if there were brains bashed in or bullet holes involved. An OD might be easy to fake, but I reckoned "pulmonary edema" meant heart attack and if so, there was little chance of foul play.

So either Tom was just a fat little sickie who liked to revel in the misfortune and gore of others - a real possibility - or he was delivering the forms along with the drugs to his biker buddies. Probable - but why?

I couldn't figure it, so I gave up and procrastinated up a diversion. There was stuff strewn around the room, but checkout time was 11am, so there was plenty of time to get my shit together, so I sent a text message to Nurse Brooks to see if I might eat dinner in her pleasant company - and in a restaurant for a change. All this fearing for my life didn't exactly snap the needle off the fun-o-meter, and I craved company of the attractive, skirt-wearing variety. Anyone who didn't want to see me dead, maimed or in jail would do, but you gotta aim high.

Waiting for what would surely be an instantaneous reply, I hit the teev and waited for the overnight World Cup highlights. It was another get-out of jail escape for the Aussies, this time against the Kiwis, and the Cup was practically full of champagne and chilling in the bar fridge. It all brought half a smile to my face, even among in the ambient vacuum of the Hotel Room At The End of The World. Several massive stand-and-deliver sixes from Brett Lee had me whooping with glee, and elicited a thump on the wall from a neighbour. I thumped the floor in reply but was distracted by a snatch of the chorus of Hit Me With Your Rhythm Stick. Hot text already!

I was thumbing at my phone to get to the message when there was a knock at the door and, grinning and not thinking, I sauntered over and opened it.

Out in the hallway, Detective Kessler was smiling too. “Hey, Detective,” I said, wagging my phone. “Got a date.” Then he was in the room, uninvited mind you. “Congratulations, dickhead. Now how about you call him back and tell him you’re going to be late.”

“Hey, you can’t...” Kessler was going over to the table. *Oh, Jesus H. Christ on a joint Senate ticket.* The detective grabbed a pethidine bottle. “By the way, cricket man, what the fuck is this?!”

## Chapter 5.13 - Dead losses

When Crombie pulled in and saw the parking lot on the clubhouse driveway, he realised the shit may be spraying the fan harder than he expected. He'd been up half the night turning his predicament over in his brain, searching for a tunnel out of the hole he'd dug himself - but now he was going to have to explain himself in front of almost the entire club.

He wedged his bike into the last remaining sliver of space on the concrete, although the lack of space helped to keep the dents in his muffler and rear wheelguard out of view. He'd decided the trick was to pretend it was business as usual, then figure out a way to get the fuck out of Dodge. He pulled his helmet off and donned a fake smile.

Everyone was in the shed out the back. With Crombie's arrival, almost the entire membership of the club was present, all crammed in around the central table, now free of the usual mounds of powder, plastic bottles of chemicals, glass tubing and burners. With the lab's bright lights and 14 bodies squeezed inside its walls, the can was starting to cook. A wall of sweaty heat greeted Crombie as he swung open the door.

Dimmick looked up. "Brother Crumbles. Now here's a soldier who's willing to put in for the team. All you supposed hard men take fuckin' note." He dropped a hand on the shorter man's shoulder, and it strayed to the back of his neck. He shook him for emphasis. Crombie could feel his face wobble.

"This man has created one market from fuckin' scratch, and was instrumental in getting our major one off the ground."

He turned to Crombie. "You got our gear, soldier?" A deer in the headlights with its hoofs nailed to the road. Crombie wanted to lie, but he knew his face had betrayed him.

"Fuck! Not you too! What?"

"The papers are no problem; they're just copies I can do again... But they took them, and the peth. I can get more."

"Who? If you tell me it was that cricket clown and the fat man..." Crombie nodded and concentrated on keeping his bottom lip from quivering.

"So these guys are about to cost us the twenty-k from the Eurotrash army - who are losing patience rapidly by the way," he looked around the room, "and they're holding how many grand's worth of juice, for a DVD player and a pile of fucking CDs we don't even have? Are they the death wish twins?!"

Crombie found his voice. "They didn't mention an exchange or anything."

Dimmick smoothed a hand over his mullet but left one on Crombie's neck. "Gaz, Bull, Nick, D.J. we're going to finish these two motherfucking worms. We're going to get our juice back, then we're going to carve holes in them until we find out where that Honen cunt is, and then we're going to do a Milat on them up some fire trail in Belangelo Forest." He squeezed. "You're coming to help too, Crumb-bum. Be good for you to see that, maybe dig a grave."



## Chapter 5.14 - Video link

The ERISP room was four walls of grey painted brick, apart from a few paper coffee cups on the table at its centre. McMurray quickly snagged them and dropped the rubbish in a bin outside, swinging the door shut behind her while her boss ushered John Phillip Gacy into a chair. The men looked at each other. Kessler chose to remain standing, next to the large mirror. They both knew what that was about.

Detective Sergeant Kessler said nothing for a full minute. Then, after a knock on the window, “OK, Mr Gacy. I’m required to inform you that we are taping this interview through the video camera above me, which captured both video and sound. Do you understand?”

“I know what a video camera is, yes.”

“And can you state your full name, age and place of residence.”

Gacy could, and did.

“Good. This record is only for our purposes to record what you say, but is not admissible in any court, because you have not been charged with an offence. As I said outside, that’s why we don’t have to go through all the legalese quite yet. You’re what we call ‘helping us with our enquiries’. However, should you start screaming for a lawyer and making our life hard, well... all I will say is that we will respond in kind.” A crocodile smile.

When McMurray had watched Gacy calmly walk out the front door of number 49 Fern Street from the comfort of the car, even she knew the scales of justice were tipping in their favour. All she had to do was step out and say hello. Funnily enough, Gacy had agreed to accompany her to the station, and she had agreed to not remember to fill out a charge sheet for breaking and entering. Naturally, all this was agreed before they were anywhere near Rose Bay’s Electronic Recorded Interview of a Suspected Person rooms.

“So, in the spirit of helping us with our enquiries, to which you have generously agreed, to come here today of your own free will, what can you tell me about your relationship with Duncan De Walt?” Both John Gacy and McMurray watching next door were thinking the big bloke was laying it on a bit thick. Neither was in a position to argue.

Gacy cleared his throat. “I was what you might describe as a subcontractor for De Walt. If he had cases that involved investigating that he didn’t have time to do, he would pay me to gather information or do what needed to be done. Probably a couple of times a month.”

“And what kind of work would you do for him?”

“All sorts. Mainly surveillance but also background checks, ringing around for information, stuff like that.”

“And did you like the work? Did you like him?” Kessler asked.

“He was fine. Without that regular work I would have been struggling at times.” Gacy was keeping himself steady. Not letting his surroundings rattle him. That’s what they were relying on.

“But you didn’t really like him.”

“He wasn’t a close friend, but I would hardly want to see anything happen to him. I needed the work,” Gacy said. Just keep it even. Friendly.

“In the recent past, did you ever hear him mention any case that involved outlaw bike gangs - you know: the Comancheros, the Rebels etcetera.”

“No I didn’t. But the extent of our conversations was usually: ‘Hey, Gace, I’ve got some work on. I need you to follow such-and-such and see if they go to Blah-blah Street. I’d say OK and get the Nikon out.’”

“Charming work if you can get it. You’re a peeping tom photographer, yes?”

“Look, it’s totally illegal. People get their problems solved and they leave you guys alone to do proper work.” Gacy was careful not to really bite, but he knew he wasn’t getting out of that room without giving something up. Not with the B&E stick they’d been quick to wield.

Kessler pushed on. “Yeah, you’re a fucking humanitarian. So you have no idea why Duncan De Walt would be calling bike gangs in the days and weeks prior to his death?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Whoa, Nelly. So he did tell you about bike gangs.”

“No. He referred a guy called Ashley Gibson to see me. You know, the cricket player.” It was a white lie, but Gacy didn’t think Curly would want the cops knowing about the doorbusting naked hijinx he’d walking in on at Curly’s place the other day, and that that was how they met. A small lie in a tissue of truth. *Ah, and what nakedness it was...*

“When did he do that?”

Gacy looked around, dredging up the real memory. “It would have been Saturday evening, I reckon.”

“A day before he died. Sorry - before someone put two bullets in him.”

“Yeah, it’s tragic.”

“Are you weepy, John? I can get someone to bring you a tissue.”

Gacy rolled his eyes. “Call me Mr Gacy.”

The interview room's door opened and Detective McMurray stepped in holding a box of Kleenex. Kessler stared and shooed her out again. The door closed and Gacy could hardly stop snorting. "I don't know if you've been following Ashley Gibson's career, but he's not one of the ones on the huge bikkies."

"So Watts didn't think he could pay and you got a referral. Even though you don't have an Investigator Licence. Why would Watts refer a celebrity sporting client to you? You said you worked for him."

"He just said he was too busy. My guess was that he made some initial calls and an answer didn't land in his lap straight away, so it wasn't going to be worth his while. So he handballed it to me."

"What problem does a part-time state cricketer have with bikie gangs?"

"He thinks he had a bag of cricket gear stolen by a biker."

"You're shitting me."

"Hey, it's a dead end job, no question. Now do you see why De Walt didn't want it?" Kessler frowned, pulled up a chair, turned it backwards and sat astride it. "So what was in it and where did this happen?"

"Outside his place, apparently. A valuable bat or something. And he's paying me to look for it, but we won't find anything and he'll soon get sick of paying."

"So a guy on a bike was waiting outside his place to bag-nap him. And Gibson knows it was a gang member how?" "He thinks the guy had some sort of gang patch on his jacket, but he doesn't remember which one." "Mr Gacy, John-boy, I've told better stories around the campfire with a fucking torch under my chin."

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