

## FRIDAY MORNING COMING DOWN

It was about ten when I surfaced that Friday morning and, after a shower, stumbled to the kitchen in search of something substantial for breakfast. Amid the excitement of the night before I had forgotten to eat.

Arriving, I found Bright Eyes preparing her own breakfast, and since the intricate manoeuvres over the stove demanded concentration and restricted opportunities to conduct a conversation, she pointed to the note that Sandy had attached to the fridge door on his way to work.

The text read:

Good morning you bastards,  
I hope the morning finds you well.  
Two young ladies said to thank Herston for his hospitality before I took them home on the way to work.  
The pool area was interestingly clear of both survivors and dead bodies.  
Hopalong and I have cleared the dead marines.  
I presume we are convening at the Palace this evening. Please advise *via* the staff room phone if this is not the case.  
I'll get out of your way now,

Sandy

On the breakfast front Bright Eyes may have beaten me to the punch, but her preparation of bacon and eggs was almost complete and then I would be free to do whatever I liked in the cooking department. While I waited for her to finish, there was time to rummage through the pantry and fridge, building up the requisites necessary to redefine the hearty breakfast and pondering the implications of Sandy's note.

Presumably Bernelle and Gloria had sheltered and possibly showered in the room they had found for the night. The fact they had remained on the premises rather than departing in high, medium or low dudgeon meant something, but I wasn't sure what it was.

Having become aware of unoccupied rooms there was every possibility that one or both would want to move in. Would that be a development to be encouraged?

A conference with Jeffrey was indicated, but of him there was no sign.

My thoughts returned to Bernelle and Gloria. Sandy had delivered them home on his way to work. Would they, in turn, be heading to work? If they did, what was the likelihood that they would be engaging in tasks involving the delicate manipulation of scissors or other sharp implements? If they were, could the liability for any subsequent damage to the customer be attributed to us? Was our third-party insurance comprehensive enough to cover such circumstances?

So many thorny questions, so few remaining brain cells...

As I continued gathering the breakfast ingredients, I asked "And no sign of Jeffrey so far?"

"None at all," was Bright Eyes reply. "Someone rang looking for him just after eight and I went down to see if he was up and about."

The thought crossed my mind that while he might well be *up*, there was no certainty as to exactly what he was *about*.

"The door was closed. I was about to check the handle when I heard voices inside so I thought it was best to leave whoever was in there undisturbed."

"A wise move," I suggested. "*Discretion is the better part of Valerie, though all of her is nice.* So there was no one else left around the pool? There were a few sleeping beauties when I wandered off to bed."

"None at all," Bright Eyes replied between mouthfuls. "Sandy and Hopalong were up before I was."

"Sandy's note," I pointed out. "indicates that there was no one left around the pool this morning, so I guess that they made their way home under their own steam somehow."

These were matters that would need to be investigated, but first there was breakfast to be prepared. Those familiar with the works of Hunter S. Thompson would be familiar with the statement that *anyone with a terminally jangled lifestyle needs at least one psychic anchor every 24 hours, and mine is breakfast.* My recent lifestyle, if not *terminally jangled*, certainly needed some sort of anchor.

Although I was missing some of Hunter's preferred ingredients (it was far too early to be indulging in Bloody Marys or margaritas and there was an absolute dearth of cocaine) sausages, a small steak, bacon and scrambled eggs washed down with a pot of coffee and a jug of Tabasco-laced tomato juice would be an acceptable substitute. I thought of adding a couple of grapefruits and decided against it.

There were half a dozen in the fridge, since Sandy's other passion in life apart from Tabasco sauce and beer was the consumption of citrus fruits. He was obviously living in permanent fear of coming down with scurvy.

As I assembled the ingredients, sounds outside the kitchen door signalled Jeffrey's arrival, closely followed by the Terrible Twins. I was surprised to see them until I recalled both worked at the local paper and, with the second and last edition for the week produced and in circulation, the services of the paper's jills-of-all-trades were not going to be required on a Friday morning.

"Morning Jeffrey," was my greeting as the party wandered in. "Morning Char, Morning Jools. Something for breakfast I assume? The stove will be in use for the next few minutes if you don't mind waiting."

"For me, I think," Jeffrey suggested, "a cup of warm dripping for starters."

The suggestion sent his companions hurtling outside.

Sounds of regurgitation filtered back and I made a mental note to check the whereabouts of the deposits, so I could, if necessary, remove them with the hose. There was only a slight possibility of Sandy wanting fertilizer and anything being deposited outside would, I suspected, be rather acidic.

I made a mental note to undertake research on the matter. The information was likely to be useful.

Shortly thereafter, the pair returned to the room, looking marginally healthier.

Jeffrey remarked that it was probably *better out than in*, a remark almost sufficient to send them outside for a repeat performance. He took my place manipulating the kitchen utensils as I moved towards the nearest table plate in hand, and while I hoed into the mountain before me, Jeffrey continued to do his best to cause the Terrible Twins to add further nutrients to the vegetation.

Eventually, with his culinary pursuits having reached their conclusion, the three of them joined me at the table.

The Twins refused all offers of solid nutrition, settling for frequent doses of black coffee.

Demand for coffee had been rather heavy that morning, and we were, according to Bright Eyes, on our fourth brew for the morning. Of the Twins the taller, who travelled under the name of Charlene Sullivan, had gained some notoriety around town as *Charlene the Chardonnay Queen*, though requests for *Another Char for Char* usually indicated a need for another glass rather than another bottle.

"So," I suggested, "that last call for *another bottle of Char for Char* may not have been the greatest idea in the history of Western civilization. The fourth bottle is rarely a sound concept."

"It was five, actually," Julie-Ann remarked. "I slipped indoors to pick up an extra bottle to get us through the small hours while you were distracted with those two hairdressers."

"In which case it might be just as well to check the supply level. I'm not sure how long it'll be before reinforcements arrive from the Hunter; and it wouldn't do to run out."

Pleasantries flew back and forth until breakfast had been completed and Bright Eyes had suggested that the Twins might be in need of a lift back into town.

Once they'd gone it was time to disperse the products of repeated distress, and with that out of the way, the next stage of the recuperative process would be a retreat towards the bedroom. I planned to rise around noon, in time for a visit to town to buy the form guides, but he best laid plans of mice and men are inclined to go astray, as Burns so aptly put it.

I had, it seemed, barely put my head down when a barrage hit the door, followed by the dulcet tones of our janitor:

"**Herston!**" was the opening volley of the blast. "*You awake? You'll be wanting your room done?*"

From further down the building Jeffrey added to the tumult.

"What's going on out there? Is this a hog-calling competition or what? If it is a hog-calling competition, would you mind giving thought to shifting somewhere on the seaward side of Tierra del Fuego?"

By this stage I'd reached the door: I had, I thought, little option but to usher the hog-caller inside and conduct further negotiations indoors.

From the time when negotiations to buy our headquarters had started, I'd been aware the size of the premises and the number of rooms involved would mean we'd be finding ourselves losing significant chunks of time if we decided to do the cleaning ourselves.

A cynic might be inclined to ascribe this conclusion to inherent laziness, but I was more concerned with relative efficiency. A professional would work quicker and smarter than an amateur.

One afternoon we'd been discussing the question at the Palace when we'd been joined by Daphne, the upstairs chambermaid. She was characteristically to the point.

"They tell me you pair are buying that motel out at *The Crossroads*. That's a big place, and it'll need a lot of cleaning."

I'd suggested that since we'd only be using about half the rooms we'd probably only be needing someone to come in about once a week to clean the communal areas if we couldn't come up with some sort of roster involving the residents.

"Won't work," was Daphne's blunt assessment of the proposal. "You'll find that there'll be someone not pulling their weight and next thing you know there'll be arguments and all sorts of stuff. No, you want to get someone in to do it."

"Someone such as yourself?" I suggested.

"I could," was Daphne's response. "But there are issues."

"Usually are," was Jeffrey's observation on the matter.

"I mean, if I work any more than one or two extra hours a week I'm up in the next tax bracket and I'll end up worse off. On the other hand, if I took payment in kind."

"It would depend on what kind of kind, you're talking about," Jeffrey pointed out. "I'm sure you'll find my rates quite reasonable." The remark was delivered with what can only be described as an evil leer.

"I'm not talking about *that* kind of kind," Daphne replied. "I could do it, or rather Marguerite and I could look after it."

Marguerite was her twenty-year-old daughter who'd been a surprise nonstarter at last night's party.

"Neither of us would mind looking after Marguerite once or twice a week. Right, Herston?"

While young Marguerite was exceedingly easy on the eye I thought it was best to refrain from commenting. Daphne chose to ignore the suggestion.

"No," she went on, "you could pay me in books. Sociology books."

Daphne, after the departure of her husband with a much younger tomato-picking floozy had become bitter, and had, in the process of exorcising inner demons and reasserting the womanhood, which had been called into question by the elopement, fallen under the influence of the women's movement.

Some broadcast on Radio National where the sociological aspects of marital breakups involving older partners absconding with much younger playmates of either sex had led her on a course of inquiry that ended with an enrolment at one of the nation's universities as a mature-age correspondence student studying sociology.

Over the past few years, she had got her teeth into the subject, and was now capable of sitting down and discussing the writings of C. Wright Mills, Marcuse and the alienation inherent in postindustrial capitalist society with the best of them.

So, after further negotiations, the matter was settled. Daphne and Marguerite would pop by three times a week and do what needed to be done in the cleaning department. Marguerite would be paid in cash at the hourly rate and Daphne would present us with a shopping list of the latest sociological treatises every couple of months.

Having ushered Daphne indoors, I thought a little casual conversation would help bring the noise level down to a more suitable number of decibels.

"So," I commented, "we didn't spot you last night. Or Marguerite, for that matter. Pity. Could have saved you the trip..."

"No," Daphne replied. "We were both home. We're moving this weekend and we had to stay at home since there were people coming around to look at buying the furniture."

This willingness to redistribute the contents of her house every time Daphne moved had been widely remarked on. She seemed to feel, as a matter of principle, that a new address required a fresh set of furnishings, as the new address was invariably had a different colour scheme to the previous abode.

This habit was much appreciated by furniture showrooms who greeted Daphne with open arms whenever she walked in announcing that it was time to relocate from her current home.

Of course, new furniture could not be bought unless the old had been disposed of, so a change of residence on Daphne's part was music to the ears of those who needed items to finish outfitting their home. The frequency of relocations meant such items came into the *very slightly used* category.

Jeffrey, as I recall, needing a table for his room at the Palace had once bought a kitchen table off her for sixty dollars and a head job. The price of a lounge suite, I had often thought, was something best left to the imagination.

Once I'd pointed out that any cleaning in my living quarters would be best left until I'd finished filling the shelves and I expected the process would last until Monday, or Wednesday at the latest, Daphne's interest turned to the sociological questions associated with our travels.

Her questioning concerning the relative status of racial groups in the Los Angeles area, evidence of a rise in status of the Afro-American in the Deep South (remembering that New Orleans was a more liberal area than, say the heartland of Alabama or Mississippi) showed her sociological enquiries had not ground to a halt in our absence. A lengthy discussion ensued, and, eventually when it seemed the questions had been covered in sufficient depth I indicated I still needed a couple of hours' rest.

"So you won't be needing me?" Daphne was keen to confirm her understanding of the situation.

"Not in here, at any rate. Not until Monday, maybe Wednesday. If you wouldn't mind hosing down the area around the pool and giving the old restaurant side of things a quick once-over..."

"Shouldn't even take an hour," Daphne pointed out. "So that'd be all?" The small matter of important business that would need to be conducted before the morning flashed across my mind.

"Pretty much," I indicated. "Unless, of course, you wouldn't mind popping into town and calling in to Richie at the newsagent to pick up the papers. That would be helpful."

Apart from the latest issue of the *Sleepy Hollow Sausage Wrapper* such a journey would bring back the form guides which I knew were going to be needed for Saturday's punting activities.

"Travelling time to and from at the regular hourly rate?" Daphne was an experienced negotiator who invariably drove a hard bargain.

"Of course," was my response. "It saddens me that you felt it necessary to ask."

"Done," Daphne replied as she headed in the general direction of the hose.

"You certainly have been," was my parting thought as I closed the door and turned towards the bed.

## ANOTHER FRIDAY NIGHT

Once I'd returned to the cot the next few hours passed without incident, and it was slightly after three-thirty when I managed, considerably freshened, to resurface. Propped against the door, I found copies of all the form guides available at the newsagency.

A shower added further freshness to the frame and I sat down for a look at the fields for tomorrow's races. About four thirty Jeffrey's head appeared under the open door, intimating Sandy was back from work, Hopalong was in the process of hurling himself at the shower and it was almost time for a visit to the Palace.

A quarter of an hour later, Bright Eyes was at the wheel of the red chariot and we were reversing out of the car park.

It was around ten to five when we entered the premises to find our favoured spot in the side bar boasted a sign indicating the space was *Reserved. Herston/Jeffrey Gentlemen's Club and Guests*.

Since the area was likely to fill over the course of the evening, it was thoughtful of His Lordship to ensure there was room for us at the bar. Then again, his commercial interests made the channelling of as much of our income as possible into his pockets a matter of some importance.

Directly in front of the sign, four bar stools were positioned, with an item of headgear placed on each to indicate they were not available for use by the public. I recognized one of my old cricket caps, a beret used by Jeffrey during his dishwashing career, a stylish Panama frequently been sighted on Sandy's scalp and a cardboard cowboy hat.

"Nice touch, isn't it?" remarked Sandy. "When His Lordship asked me to grab things to put on the seats we couldn't find anything for this bloke but I thought the cowboy hat would go with the name and I headed to the toy shop and bought one."

The cricket cap adorned the barstool closest to the *Quick Service* railing, my preferred position since it provided sight lines covering the entrance to the public bar and the door through which we had entered. Seated there, I'd be able to monitor all entrances, an ability which experience had shown to be useful.

There was the added benefit of being able to chat to those using the *Quick Service* area, although once the attention was directed that way the doors were no longer in the eye line. As soon as we were seated, His Lordship hove into view, descending from the living quarters.

I had the impression that he'd been scanning the horizon for distinctive vehicles.

"Herston, Jeffrey, Good to see you back," was the greeting as the right hand extended forward. "By way of a *Welcome back* it's my shout for the first round. The usual all round?"

The greeting had obviously aroused Jeffrey's cynical streak, and as the landlord departed to personally deliver the preferred potables, Jeffrey addressed the gathering.

"From which we can presume that the takings have been down over the past few weeks. Correct?"

His Lordship had considerable expenses to meet, not the least of them being the cost of maintaining his children in the style to which they had become accustomed. There was also the matter of The Duchess and associated extravagant tastes.

"At first, yes," Sandy replied. "Once you pair headed off, things certainly seemed quieter. Not that I've had the opportunity to check the books, mind you. It certainly *seemed* quieter."

"On the other hand," Hopalong opined, "things have picked up over the past couple of Fridays. Not that it's likely to have anything to do with you bastards, of course. The farms have started picking, the parents have paid the back-to-school expenses, Easter's out of the way so you'd be expecting things to pick up around now."

His Lordship had, by this stage, returned to the area, bearing three brimming beakers of beer and a distinctive blue tin. I thanked him for the beer, and for the foresight in reserving the area for us.

"I won't be able to do it every day, of course. Even on a Friday there's always a chance there'll be someone sitting there at lunch time who decides to stay for the afternoon. Won't happen that often, but I'll make sure once the area's clear after lunch on Friday the hats go on the stools and the sign goes on the bar. Betty's started a pasta night on Wednesdays, so if you're planning to roll up for that."

"Sounds good to me," I replied. "What do you fellas reckon?"

There was general agreement Wednesday nights would probably find us partaking of the pasta.

"If we're not likely to lob for some reason, a phone call to indicate the change of plans'd give you a chance to rearrange things. If we're on our way down some other day we can call ahead."

"Not a problem."

The arrangements would probably do something to allay any concerns His Lordship might have had regarding his cash glow.

"Hopalong tells us," I went on, "that business has been on the up since the end of The Slack. An accurate assessment, or evidence that excessive scoffing has clouded the bastard's judgement?"

"Well," His Lordship started, adopting his most diplomatic tone, "The Slack certainly has been worse than usual this year."

The Slack was the period between New Year and Easter when the town's economy was affected by inactivity in the horticultural sector. Since the period coincided with the start of the school year and the arrival of the biannual rate notice from the council, business activity tended to be slow until Easter.

"Easter was late this year, so people who use that as a yardstick for when they can start spending again would've been affected by that, but things have picked up over the last fortnight or so. More or less since the news that you pair were on your way back."

"Which the well-known scoffer has been inclined to dismiss as contributing to the economic upturn."

"As he would," was His Lordship's response. "On the other hand, he hasn't been fielding the number of questions I've been asked about when *those two mad bastards* were likely to be on their way home and what was likely to be happening out at *The Crossroads*. I pointed most of the inquiries in his direction, but since he's been living out there rather than just down the road he's only been dropping in a couple of times a week and when he has turned up, there've been plenty of people pumping him and Sandy for information."



"The people who've been asking?" Jeffrey inquired. "They've been."

"Largely female, unattached and interested in establishing your long-term plans. Most of the questions got the standard response. As far as I knew you were going to be using the motel as a home rather than operating it as a business, and if they wanted to know more than that they'd need to be directing their questions towards the people who were doing the renovations and the landscaping. The ones who seemed interested in pursuing the matter further seemed to be thinking about ways they can benefit from your."

"Largesse," I suggested. "Tell me about it. There were a great wing of 'em at the *Welcome Home Surprise Party* last night."

"Some of the discussions that took place while they were waiting for someone to take them out to your place were interesting, I can tell you. It might look like it's an out-of-the-way spot for a quiet drink and a discreet conversation, but when the wind's blowing in the right direction, which it was yesterday afternoon, if you're sitting in the office you can hear every word that's uttered in that corner."

He indicated a spot to our left favoured by those with a disinclination to have conversations monitored. Jeffrey suggested the phenomenon had as much to do with the idiosyncrasies of the building's structure as it did with the prevailing breeze, and there had been times when he'd been able to use his observations to advantage.

"You know what it's like. You're sitting over here and you see someone tilt the head in your direction while they're talking about something. You get the impression that they're talking about you, and you're wondering what they're saying? Well, if they're *over there*." A nod of the head indicated the area under discussion, which was next to a passageway leading to the kitchen, the cold-rooms and the back way to the front door that provided access to the accommodation upstairs.

"They probably reckon they can see if there's anyone coming, so if you don't want to be overheard, you'd expect that'd be the spot for a discreet conversation. Right?"

There was general agreement this would have been a reasonable conclusion.

"From there they can't see anyone coming and going from the office. Not unless they're heading towards the kitchen or coming through here. On the other hand if you've got an excuse to go 'round the public bar and wander into the office that way."

"You can hear every word they're saying," His Lordship pointed out.

"And the relevant discussions yesterday afternoon?" I asked.

"Were concerned with whether either or both of you were likely to *settle down* and whether."

"I get the picture. You don't need to go any further. On the other hand, if you wouldn't mind giving either of us a quiet word when someone who's been thinking that way starts getting too close."

"I know which side my bread's buttered on. Anyway, how was the trip?"

By this stage, feeling jaded by the need to repeat the details to every acquaintance we met, I had the saga reduced to a few minutes of solid information, and once the main details were glossed over I was able to change the subject and ask about developments on the local front.

A series of snorts and peacock calls behind me warned me of the approach of the Fringed Warbler, another former colleague, who had entered the building through the tradesman's entrance, passing the area we'd been discussing as the preferred option for seemingly secure discreet discussions.

The Warbler had been involved with negotiations regarding the challenge match on our new field between the local representative team and a group of assorted cricketing lunatics sponsored by a prominent accommodation facility. Before arriving in Denison I'd been involved with this outfit, which comprised players from Townsville whose club loyalties prevented them from playing together in the regular season, but combined to participate in charity matches and social events in the off season.

A loose sponsorship with the accommodation facility gave them access to a courtesy bus and sponsored playing shirts, and the actual playing roster varied from game to game, based on such variables as work commitments, matrimonial obligations, the state of the individual player's liver and who was talking to who at the particular time when the team list was being assembled.

Their excursions were legendary, alcohol-fuelled affairs that went into overdrive when they boarded the bus, continued apace through the cricket, golf, fishing or other drink-friendly activities and only scaled down when the bus dropped individual players home on the Sunday.

On one excursion I had been looking after the score book when someone remarked the boys obviously liked a drop or three on a hot day. I'd replied they were, to a man, one of the most *dedicated collections of dipsomaniacs* that it had been my good fortune to meet, a remark made within earshot of one whose status as the team drunk in a collection of noted drinkers had never been in question.

I was scarcely finished before he was demanding to know what *dipsomaniac* meant, and over the next few months references to *that big word that Herston called us* became so common that the term had been adopted as the unofficial team nickname, used on a range of touring shirts, though the original sponsorship and access to the courtesy bus meant that the Dipsomaniacs never became the official team name.

The Warbler reported the Dipsos had been in regular contact, and arrangements were well under way. Michael Brooks, captain of the local team and a noted dipsomaniac himself, had been looking after the playing side of things while the Warbler was coordinating travel, accommodation and catering arrangements. The need to liaise with His Lordship and The Duchess regarding catering accounted for his use of the tradesman's entrance.

The Duchess's ideas about catering belong to the days when Lords of the Realm roasted whole bullocks on spits and guests rode in by the battalion with spurs on as villagers danced on the green beside the duck pond while wine seeped out through the windows and collected in colourful puddles in the gutters. His Lordship could hardly be described as niggardly, but, at the same time, he was no feudal aristocrat and in our absence takings had been down considerably.

His Lordship assured me this would not be a problem since he'd undertaken to provide liquid requirements, and at \$2 per tin, if that price structure proved inadequate to cover the cost of the rest of the catering, all involved might as well join the Temperance League.

"In any case, the boys are going to camp in the old movie theatre next door. Same arrangement as we use for the Crustaceans Classic at the start of the football season, so we've already got mattresses and that sort of stuff. They'll be doing most of their drinking here, and from their reputation."

Knowing the size of their collective thirsts I was forced to agree that he was probably right.

"On top of that I'm thinking of a perpetual trophy and an annual home and away challenge."

"They're not too keen on the *home* side of things. An annual grudge match down here should be a nice little earner for you, though. I'd hold my horses until I had a better idea of what I was in for before I committed myself to any long-term arrangements if I were you."

His Lordship's suggestion that after dealing with the Crustaceans in full *play* mode anything else was going to be a cakewalk suggested that there was something in the way of a surprise in store.

"You're saying that these Dipsomaniacs are worse than the Crustaceans in party mode?"

Raised eyebrows all around suggested a degree of scepticism.

"Well, maybe not *worse*. But different. Definitely different."

As the Warbler apologized for his need to head to the fish and chip emporium, and headed towards the tradesmen's entrance, the side door opened and Michael Brooks vaulted in, full, of complimentary remarks on the attractiveness of the bar staff and enquiring whether there was a possibility of obtaining liquid refreshment.

With that attended to, he turned his attention to Jeffrey and I, with enquiries regarding our attempts to assuage the lusts of the flesh. Not that enquiries were worded so diplomatically.

He looked me straight in the eye, raised an interrogatory eyebrow and asked, "Any *rooting* on the trip?"

It was a question I had anticipated.

"A *little*," was my response. "though I suspect you'd be inclined to call it a lot."

On meeting Mr Brooks, there is only one tactic to adopt, which could be fairly described as *Sledge, sledge and sledge again*, since you can expect that he'll be applying the same principle towards anybody, present or not, who he considers a worthy target. An evening on the grog with Brooksy is an interesting intellectual exercise, with participants on their toes as they attempt to get a shot in at any available target while maintaining a strong defensive position.

He turned towards Jeffrey, "And yourself, Mr Jeffrey? Got a shot or two away I presume? A lady of the night here and there?"

"Well," I interposed, "maybe not the *night*. But definitely the *late afternoon*."

"No doubt," was the Brooks response. "And how were they, those big black barefoot mamas with looby lips, and hairy armpits? Average weight a humping hundred and fifty kilos and counting?"

"Fine," Jeffrey replied. "they said to send you their regards, and hope that the shots turned out OK. Betty Lou, in particular, asked to be remembered to you. Said to tell you that the course of injections did the trick and hoped that the spots had cleared up nicely."

"Actually," I suggested, "they didn't quite fit into the demographic you described."

"You mean," Brooksy exclaimed, "that they weren't big black barefoot mamas with looby lips and hairy armpits? Wonders will never cease!"

"You were right on the money in most regards," I suggested, "except for one minor detail."

"Which was?"

"Most of them," Jeffrey pointed out, "were wearing shoes."

As the bar filled, it was obvious that we were in for a session with many of the previous night's participants fronting for a return bout with the demon drink. Friday night is also raffle night for the nation's football clubs, and the sponsorship arrangement His Lordship had with the local rugby team granted the Crustaceans the right to conduct raffles on the premises.

Six thirty saw the happy hour and the emergence of the Crustaceans' ticket sellers led by the treasurer and the captain, *Mad Mick*. As they approached, Sandy and Hopalong suggested it might be wise to invest heavily, since there were meat and seafood trays on offer; the freezer at home was empty, and success in the raffle would negate the need to visit the butcher and fishmonger on Saturday morning.

With the sellers gone, Brooksy resumed his account of the latest developments on the cricket front and the makeup of the eleven to take on the Dipsomaniacs. I listened, keeping an eye on both doors, and sighting Bernelle and Gloria as they entered after a hard day's hairdressing.

The crowd around us meant that they were forced to seek the *Quick Service* area first, and, drinks in hand, work their way into the crowd. By the time the Crustaceans were about to draw the goose club, Bernelle had succeeded in infiltrating her way to my side.

One by one, prizes were drawn, and though there were the occasional shouts of jubilation from the occupants of the side bar, most of the prizes went to the public bar, where an uncanny and disproportionate number seemed to go to members of the Crustaceans First XV.

As the board listing the winners entered the side bar, held up by *Satellite*, the line-out expert almost permanently in outer space, I noticed that, although there were a dozen names on the board, certain names were noticeably absent, despite the substantial investment we had made.

Noting our lack of success, I suggested that since the Lotto I seemed to have been unable to win a thing, it was an exaggeration, of course. I'd made a number of successful investments in the meantime, but present company would have been unaware of them, and the line seemed to fit.

"Well, you've won me," a voice beside me stated. "Doesn't that count for anything?"

I was surprised, to say the least, at this unexpected development. On an adjacent stool Hopalong was equally surprised.

"This, would be a recent development? What can inquiring minds ascribe the situation to? His wit? His charming urbanity? His..."

"Musical taste, for a start. Ever since I was in Year Five I've thought that Mr Herston was one of the coolest people around, and now..."

There was a pause to allow her to regain her composure in the wake of a Hopalong Cassidy beer-splutter. She turned in my direction as much, I suspected, to shield herself from further flying spray as to continue the conversation.

"You remember, back in Year Five when you used to go across the road from school at lunchtime and come back with a couple of records?"

I nodded. The electrical store across the road boasted a music department supervised by one of the few attractive female Music Freaks I've met, a girl whose musical development was more than matched in physical dimensions. Not that I was likely to be pointing that out in present company, you understand.

"You remember that every time you came back through the gate there were a couple of us wanting to know what you'd bought this time?"

I nodded, though the recollection was nothing more than an extremely hazy memory.

"I think it was Sharon who noticed that just about everything you bought had got rave reviews in her brother's music magazines."

Sharon Graham was one of Bernelle's classmates whose brother Jim frequented the places where I bought most of my music. He was an avid reader of the music publications on offer in Townsville's premier niche newsagent.

"Really?" I wasn't surprised though the fact that the recollection endured was unexpected.

"Yes, After you'd shown us one of those new disks, Sharon was at home flicking through this magazine, she didn't like her brother's music or anything, she was just looking at it for something to do while she was waiting for dinner, and there it was. Cult album of the week, or something. Of course when she told us about it none of us would believe it, so she had to bring the magazine to school."

I recalled wondering what a ten-year-old girl was doing with a copy of *New Musical Express* at school.

"After that, whenever you showed us what you'd just bought we'd go around to Sharon's on the way home and check it out. They always got rave reviews."

"You mean," Hopalong interjected, "that you were in this bastard's class at school? Strange. I thought you looked relatively normal, not someone who's been scarred for life..."

"He was a cool teacher; Always telling jokes and stuff. Remember when I was in Year Seven and Miss Clarkson had us writing staff profiles for the Year Seven magazine? Remember all the kids who came up to you for information?"

"Vaguely," I admitted. "It was a while ago."

"Well," she turned towards Hopalong, "we were asking the usual stuff, you know, *favourite colour, last record you bought, favourite band*. There must have been twenty of us. Went up to him on playground duty with the clipboard like good little reporters. When we sat down and compared his answers, every one of them was different. We just thought it was so cool"

By eight-thirty, the session was in full swing. This was the signal for the entrance of His Lordship's consort, whose emergence on the staircase leading to the upstairs quarters was staged with an extravagance which was perhaps more appropriate to Hollywood than to Denison.

The conclusion of her supervision of the kitchen after last meal orders had been taken at seven-thirty would have been the signal for an escape *via* the back stairs into her conjugal apartment, a quick shower and the selection of a suitable ensemble before her emergence at the top of the stairs.

As she descended, various guests were greeted, enquiries made as to the suitability and quantity of their meals, and opinions about outfits worn by the ladies expressed. At no time during the descent were Jeffrey and I mentioned, though as she crossed the floor towards the bar, The Duchess was moving in our direction.

Once she had received her favoured *little glass of bubbles* from her consort, she turned in our direction inquired whether all was well with the two of us, and asked how the trip had been.

Having had enough opportunities to polish his repertoire and find which anecdotes provoked the best reactions, Jeffrey delivered his version of events, with élan. As one anecdote followed another, the narrator was regarded with the sort of haughty disdain usually associated with something unsavoury that has been found on the under side of one's shoe.

Once the report had been delivered, His Lordship was directed to refill the glasses all round, and The Duchess moved off to chat to members of the community who rated rather higher on the social scale than we did. As she moved away, Bernelle and I found ourselves wedged into the intersection of the bar and the *Quick Service* railing beside the cash register.

Early in my drinking career, I realized the importance of obtaining and holding a good position at the bar, since experience proves that there were areas where it is difficult to get a drink on Friday nights. On the other hand, seated beside the cash register, it is only necessary to remove the empty from its holder, place it label outwards on the bar, and the bar staff have no difficulty knowing when further liquid refreshment is required. The proximity of the cash register to the *Quick Service* area meant one of the bar staff was always likely to be on hand when a refill was required.

The location has the added attraction that it provides a view across most of the public bar, much of the private bar, both television sets and most entrances to the building. Many a session had been spent there watching a combination of the races and the cricket, or the races and the football on a Saturday afternoon. On a Friday night, as I knew from experience, this was the spot to be to keep an overall eye on developments.

Bernelle was in the process of filling in the details of her classmates' current activities. Hopalong was listening, intrigued by the turn events had taken.

There were interruptions from the *Quick Service* area as some acquaintance negotiated a refill, but I was content to give Bernelle a free run with the narrative, adding a comment or reminiscence here and there and surveying the scene. Sandy, seated on the edge of the circle, was conversing with a couple of colleagues and their partners.

Jeffrey was engaged in further chatting up of the Terrible Twins. Although you couldn't hear the whole of the conversation, with some effort it was possible to pick the odd word out of the hubbub. His back was to the door, was obviously getting on very well with the Terrible Twins, and a betting man might have tempted to take very short odds that a little *menage a trois* was a distinct possibility, even if it was to be a short term arrangement.

Jeffrey's position, and the fact he was placed between the Terrible Twins meant he was in no position to see anyone coming through the door; which opened and a shortish blonde in her early to middle forties entered.

Although the face was unfamiliar; the fact she was obviously in search of somebody meant I kept my eye on her. Most people who'd walked in through the door had been at least vaguely familiar: I wondered who the stranger was looking for.

## THE THICK PLOTTEN

As usual for a Friday evening, with the bar packed, anyone arriving would have had difficulty picking an individual out of the crowd milling around the bar: unless they had a height advantage.

As she stood just inside the door, the new arrival was obviously looking for someone, and it seemed whoever she was looking for was likely to be in the area we were occupying, since the public bar and the area behind us received scant attention. There was an appearance of concern on her face but then, it seemed, she spied the back of Jeffrey's head since she immediately started to move towards him. From my vantage point, I could see everything.

It was obvious, from the evil glint in his eyes that Jeffrey's negotiations with the Terrible Twins were about to develop into some little excursion into the realms of kinky sex. Suddenly he was interrupted by a tap on the right shoulder.

As he turned a look of horror crossed his face as he recognized the newcomer; just before her arms went around his neck in a greeting which suggested great affection coupled with gratitude at being reunited after a long separation.

The Twins did not appear to be amused.

Bernelle had her back to the door; unaware of what was happening behind her. As I smiled, watching the dismay on Jeffrey's face, and the resentment from the Terrible Twins as competition emerged on the horizon, she asked what I was finding amusing.

You can imagine my reaction when, after I had described the interloper; she suggested, "Oh, that's probably Mum. She's OK."

I looked around in search of a feather with which someone could knock me down.

So the scene was set, and as the night went on under the influence of alcohol scruples associated with my former profession were going to have to go. I was in a situation where an attractive female over the age of consent was thrusting herself in my direction. She seemed to have one thing on her mind, and that seemed to be establishing a physical relationship at the earliest possible moment.

Indeed, every time I raised my left arm to lift my drink, my forearm had occasion to brush against Bernelle's ample frontal endowment. Not that she seemed to mind in the least, and when I realized what was happening and changed to the other hand, she seemed positively put out.

Or at least perfectly prepared to put out.

As the liquids flowed, and the crowd began to thin, a degree of movement became possible, and Bernelle, having spent a couple of hours demolishing those brightly coloured alcopops that seem to be all the rage with the younger female, needed to visit the Ladies'.

Before she left, she sought reassurance I was not going anywhere in a hurry, and promised to be back as soon as possible. As she headed away from us, a familiar voice behind me expressed a view that things were not heading in an appropriate direction, and I turned to find Jeffrey in for a *Quick Service*.

It seemed mother and daughter had departed in the same direction. I was mildly surprised that an immediate strategic withdrawal had not been suggested, but noticed that the Twins were still in the vicinity, and guessed that Jeffrey still had intentions in that direction.



With a fresh tin, he moved into the spot recently vacated by Bernelle, and advised me as to the current state of play. Bernelle's mother, whose name was Olga, was of eastern European extraction and was someone with whom he'd enjoyed a brief encounter just before I arrived in town.

Reading between the lines, there had been a relationship developing, and may have even been some discussion of setting up housekeeping, but before an arrangement had been formalized, Olga had attempted to reshape Jeffrey into something approaching the suburban family man, which would have been guaranteed to set his course in precisely the opposite direction.

I guessed a single suggestion along those lines would have brought the relationship to an abrupt end, and Olga would have made a tearful departure, pursued by comments to the effect that *no fucking bitch* was going to turn him into *some fucking house cat with its balls cut off*.

As Bernelle appeared on the horizon, I inquired if he was aware of the relationship between her and Olga. The news caused a raised eyebrow and a suggestion that developments were *very interesting*.

"But not funny," I added, quoting the old *Laugh In* line.

Jeffrey weaved his way back into the crowd as Bernelle resumed her position. It might have been my imagination, but despite the thinning of the crowd she seemed to be moving, if that was possible, even closer. Absence had, it seemed, made the heart grow fonder, giving me an opportunity to do a little investigating. There were details which needed to be filled in.

When she had been in my class in Townsville, her parents were separating, following alterations to the Family Law Act in which the old *sinking the sausage* rule ceased to be the only grounds for divorce.

I recalled something to that effect, although it had not been of particular concern at the time.

From what I remembered, the kid did not seem to be traumatized by the process, a consideration which had something to do with a degree of affluence on the father's part. Given the fact there had been no impact on school work or behaviour, the details of the matter were no business of mine.

Following the split, Olga had moved to Denison, in an attempt to establish a new relationship, and had stayed after it folded. Given uncertainty in her mother's lifestyle, by mutual agreement Bernelle remained in Townsville in her father's custody, since a change of residence would have an adverse effect on her schooling, and she was *doing so well with Mr Herston*. Those arrangements continued until Dad had met up with someone who did not fancy acquiring a ready-made daughter.

Once that happened Bernelle had been shipped off to Mum in Denison.

That had brought her into town a year or two after me, and I had remarked at the time that a kid around town bore a striking resemblance to a former pupil before I discovered that it was the same kid. The timing of her arrival meant Jeffrey, in his brief encounter with Olga, had failed to come across Bernelle, since she had been in Townsville, except for the occasional holiday excursion southwards.

As closing time approached, we were forced to consider the options for the rest of the night. One possibility involved moving to a cocktail bar where some singer/guitarist would be serenading the masses with a selection of songs that neither rocked nor possessed anything approaching balls.

The venue's location on the other side of town was a disadvantage, and transport was going to be a problem since there seemed to be about twenty people in the party around us. Bright Eyes was going to be a busy girl.

Apart from the question of transport and the lack of anything reasonable in the way of music, the venue was smaller than the side bar at the Palace, and would almost certainly be packed wall to wall. Several of the crowd planned to move on to there, and asked me whether my plans for the evening involved a move in that direction, probably hoping to bludge a lift when the time came.

The other possibility was to head home, but we'd need to shed Olga if Jeffrey's intentions were going to reach sexual fruition. At least if we were to move across town, there'd be opportunities to break the crowd up.

We were about to call Bright Eyes to start the ferry service when we learned, knowing our return would be the occasion of general rejoicing, His Lordship had negotiated an extension of trading hours. There was, therefore, no immediate need to either panic or leave the premises since the extension would keep the Palace doors open for another two hours.

Since His Lordship liked a good night's sleep before his punting activities on a Saturday, he usually felt no need to keep his doors open past ten o'clock. The extension was obviously intended to maximize the opportunities for our friends to catch up with us. The arrangement, of course, would have had nothing to do with any decline in profits during our absence.

While it gave us more time for manoeuvre, the change still left us with the problem of what to do afterwards, and where to do it. It was obvious most of the people around us planned to party on, and there was no other viable option in town which would be able accommodate the people who were with us, and seemingly planning to stay that way.

A little party at *The Crossroads* was, it seemed, inevitable, but it would have been rude to have departed too far ahead of the revised *Last Drinks*.

There was, however, one fly in the ointment. While His Lordship had made the relevant arrangements with the appropriate authorities he'd neglected to advise a curvaceous chauffeur who'd spent the previous four hours working on an assignment, of the changed arrangements.

Bright Eyes strolled in, obviously expecting to be collecting assorted degenerates *en route* to wherever they were going just after ten, when the bar would, under normal circumstances, have already closed. While she was willing to accept a soft drink to fill in the time needed to finish a current round, beyond that point it was obviously a choice of using her services or letting her head back to base and joining the queue for a taxi.

Given the fact that there was a substantial queue outside waiting for cabs, it was a no-brainer.

There were at least a dozen people in the vicinity looking to head to wherever the party was continuing, so it seemed logical that Sandy, Hopalong and a couple of others would head back to get things moving, then Bright Eyes could gradually move the rest of the crew in the same direction.

While His Lordship would not have been happy to see the crowd break up it wasn't going to come to an immediate stop and half a dozen cartons of beer, assorted bottles of spirits and several bags of ice would take the edge off his disappointment. Sandy and Hopalong collected the replenishments for home supplies which had been seriously depleted the previous evening, placed them in the boot of

the chariot and prepared to depart once the ice had been handed over. As acknowledged masters of esky-stacking they needed to be in the first carload.

Fortunately, the departure of vehicles parked outside the front door left space for Bright Eyes, so the supplies did not have far to go. Sandy climbed into the front seat, while Hopalong climbed into the back and all that remained before the first shipment headed off was the small matter of packing three or four more people into the back. I was planning to go in the second group, since once the eskies had been restocked, something would have to be done to get the music started, and that was my department, but with Hopalong, Dagwood and Blondie in the back seat there was a space that no one seemed inclined to fill. Executive decisions needed to be made.

"Change of plans," I said to Bernelle. "Since there's a space in this load I'll head back and crank the stereo up. You can come in the next lot."

Bernelle was less than impressed and once I'd made my way into the back seat, I found her squeezing in as well. A place on the seat was out of the question, so she solved the problem by sitting on my lap.

The events of the previous few hours meant judgement and motor coordination were significantly below the optimum level, so as Bernelle's *derriere* found its location my right arm was trapped underneath it. The movement coincided with the vehicle's departure from the kerb so I felt obliged to relocate the arm, a matter that possessed a degree of difficulty in the gold medal range,

Matters were complicated by the minor fact that the arm's current position was not bringing serious discomfort, although the need to maintain a flow of blood to the fingers meant that I was obliged to rotate the wrist slightly as we sped towards base, which could have been a factor contributing to evident reluctance to allow the arm to be relocated.

After we'd decanted ourselves from the chariot back at base I stood flexing the wrist to restore the circulation while Sandy and Hopalong unloaded the boot and took care of the stacking of the eskies.

The half dozen bags of ice we'd obtained from His Lordship, were never going to be enough to chill the entire stock, but Sandy and Hopalong made up the shortfall from the ice machine on the premises. Buying ice from the Palace had been a matter of politeness rather than necessity.

With esky-stacking under way, it was time to crank the sound system into overdrive, so I retreated room-wards with Bernelle who seemed to be interested in learning about the finer details of my musical tastes, not to mention an apparent interest in establishing a sound working knowledge of some of the ins and outs of anatomy along the way.

After a brief grapple, we remembered the reason we were in the room. A selection of discs was placed in the CD changer, and the volume turned up to a level which would satisfy partygoers. The volume level had the advantage of being loud enough drown out the noise of events unfolding in my quarters, and so, my responsibilities fulfilled, we settled in for a very interesting grope session.

We had, I figured, a good thirty minutes before the transfer of the crowd waiting at the Palace would be anywhere near complete, and there was every possibility that, given the nature of the ferrying process, the absence of a couple of people might pass unnoticed.

I had thought of placing some indication the occupants of the room did not want to be disturbed, but decided against it. Experience suggested that a sign on the door, even if it didn't explicitly advertise events, would at least attract attention.

The disks I'd placed in the changer should keep the party going for a couple of hours, so with the preliminaries over, we were ready for the main bout, and the real business at hand was about to start.

There we were poised over the bed, hands engaged in a preliminary examination of each other's salient points with just a slight push needed to tip the pair of us over the brink into an abyss of sexual degeneracy when the door opened.

*Just as it was getting interesting.*

As one of nature's gentlemen Sandy would have found the situation embarrassing but explained he'd been looking for me with news he thought I might find amusing. Since I had last been seen heading this way he'd been knocking on the music room's door. Having received no reply he thought he'd check my living quarters before looking elsewhere. I might, after all, have crashed.

The explanation seemed reasonable, and recent form suggested that the fixture had been deferred rather than indefinitely cancelled, so a minor interruption was forgivable.

Bernelle excused herself, moving towards the bathroom.

Sandy, once he'd apologized profusely, went on to relate a tale of great interest. The second load from the Palace had included Jeffrey, the Terrible Twins and Olga, along with a couple of hangers-on.

"Which would," I suggested, "have created an interesting atmosphere on the journey out."

I'd picked up enough of the pre-Olga conversation at the pub to have a fair idea of Jeffrey's intentions as far as the Twins were concerned. I wondered whether those intentions would be flexible enough to include a fourth player; and whether, if that was the case, Olga would be inclined to share nicely. *No, I thought to myself, she's going to want a monopoly.*

It wasn't an unexpected turn of events, but I failed to see how it warranted the interruption.

"But wait," Sandy pointed out. "there's more."

The suspicion that *more* might well concern details of her mother's behaviour that a devoted daughter might prefer not to know about may have prompted Bernelle's departure for the bathroom.

"Anyway," Sandy went on, "there you are. Each new load of passengers from the Palace adds a few more players in the background, but they're just the backdrop to the unfolding tug-of-war. Jeffrey's obviously got one thing on his mind."

"Which would involve a certain room's king-size bed, but would not entail sleeping?" I guessed.

"*Entail?* Nice word, that. Definitely a bit of tail on his mind. The question is whose tail it's going to be."

"The Twins seem capable of working together for their mutual benefit. Would I be right in suggesting that Olga would be more interested in sole possession?"

"That's the way it looks. On the other hand, this Olga seems to be indulging in an interesting variation on the old *Induce Jealousy* strategy. You know, the one where they attempt to attract your attention by flirting outrageously with someone else, so she *seems* to be trying to attract Jeffrey's attention by playing up to Hopalong like it's going out of style."

In the bathroom I heard a flushing toilet.

"Anyway," Sandy concluded, "I thought that you needed to be kept abreast of developments. I didn't expect you to be otherwise occupied..."

As Bernelle emerged Sandy turned to go.

"We'll be out shortly and won't be needing any further updates unless something really drastic happens." I was already making mental notes to ensure doors were locked and chained as soon as humanly possible.

"Updates on what?" Bernelle asked as Sandy disappeared.

"Your mother seems to be harbouring certain intentions as far as Mr Jeffrey is concerned."

"They had something going a couple of years back," Bernelle pointed out. "You know that."

"Indeed, and it seems like she's decided to make up for lost time. Unfortunately Jeffrey's intentions are directed towards the other two. Tell me, do you think your mother would be into foursomes? You know, one bloke and three women?"

"I doubt it. She's pretty straight when it comes to things like that."

"Which is what I figured. So according to Sandy she's attempting to reestablish her territorial rights by flirting outrageously with Hopalong Cassidy."

"I don't believe you. I'd better go out and have a look to make sure that she's all right, though."

Once she'd made up her mind that events in the wider world needed to be investigated plans to ensure all doors in the vicinity were locked found themselves shelved. Whether this was a temporary or indefinite deferment remained to be seen.

Outside it was obvious things were as Sandy had suggested. It was clear Jeffrey wanted to elope roomwards with the Twins, having presumably dreamt up a number of gymnastic possibilities for trios which he was keen to explore while Olga was determined to resume their interrupted relationship.

The Twins were making *Let's go* noises, Jeffrey seemed poised to fly to the coop and Olga, from what I could see, was doing her best to delay the departure. Hopalong, whose inebriation had presumably inflated his ambitions, along with other areas of his anatomy seemed to be doing his best to suggest Olga would be better served by looking in other directions.

*Peyton Place*, I thought, *had very little on this.*

The hour was late and the quantity of beer I had consumed meant as far as I was concerned there was no alternative but to head straight towards the red. As we stood on the edge of the party I'd suggested the possibility. The response suggested that *a glass of white wine might be nice, perhaps in a tall glass with lots of ice and maybe just a little bit of lemonade.*

I shuddered. There was no way I was going to subject the contents of any decent bottle to treatment like that, but there was a cask of white in the fridge with *Riesling* on the exterior: that would do for the moment, though some serious taste adjustments were going to have to be made if Bernelle envisaged

becoming a permanent fixture on the premises. Once I had prepared the concoction and returned to the party, I settled back to watch.

The Twins apparently decided to play a waiting game, figuring that they could outlast the competition. Having watched them in action, I suspected they'd be odds on to outlast any but the hardiest party animal, but they'd decided to play it safe and had switched to glasses of something like soda water while they waited for the competition to fold under the weight of accumulated alcohol.

The competition, meanwhile, had decided to throw herself down the path of conspicuous alcoholic consumption while doing her best to engage Jeffrey and Hopalong in conversation. I'd brought the bottle of red outside with me, and when Bernelle had finished a glass of her concoction I offered to prepare another.

The suggestion produced a response that I *didn't put in enough lemonade last time*, so someone *might go inside and make one for myself*. I didn't object and suggested mixing the ingredients in a jug might cut out the need to travel back and forth.

As Bernelle headed inside Sandy and I analyzed the situation and concluded that Machiavellian intrigues are apt to come unstuck in their own intricacies and so it was in this case. Hopalong was putting in plenty of hard work, and Olga's reactions to the attention, while intended to arouse Jeffrey's jealousy, merely allowed him the opportunity to establish eye contact with the Twins.

While her attention was distracted and Bernelle was out of the way, subtle hand signals followed by a thumbs up resulted in the Twins moving off, bidding the company goodnight, allegedly intending to crash in Room Ten.

The discovery that his tin was empty gave Jeffrey an excuse to disappear for a refill. His absence resulted in a marked decrease in Olga's flirtation with Mr Cassidy, who appeared put out when she suggested it *might be about time for you to hop along to bed*.. Once he was gone, confident that she had outstayed the opposition, Olga sat back awaiting an event which, predictably, failed to happen.

I glimpsed a furtive figure crouched as it moved out of the bar towards Room Four. When the figure arrived at the door, it opened, as if by magic, and closed silently.

It took several minutes for Olga to realize what had occurred. Although Bernelle had returned, it was obviously not a good idea to suggest it was time to head off ourselves, since that would result in Olga's premature departure in search of Jeffrey.

Eventually, Olga was forced to inquire whether Bernelle had sighted Jeffrey during her travels.

"In that case," Olga slurred, "it might be best if I went to have a look. Maybe he's fallen over: By the way, which is his room?"

I waved in the general direction of the accommodation.

"It's that one over there," I announced, being careful to avoid mentioning precise details such as numbers or sequential details. As the figure headed towards the bar I turned to Bernelle.

"Most of the mob's gone," I suggested, waving to point out the relative lack of other partygoers. "We might as well become went ourselves."

"In a minute. There's still a little bit left in the jug here and I want to make sure that Mum is all right."

At that moment pounding on a door suggested Jeffrey's ruse had been detected, his whereabouts established, and the discovery had been the cause of considerable displeasure.

That displeasure would hardly have been mollified by a voice from within suggesting that Olga should *piss off*, and that, if she was a good girl in the interim, her request might be favourably considered at some time in the future, possibly as soon as *the empty-first of October*.

Bernelle, extracted a mobile phone from her purse. "I'd better go. She's had a bit to drink and she might have a problem getting into the house safely."

Eventually, the sound of a car horn outside the entrance brought their departure, and although there were regretful glances in my direction on the way out, it was obvious that Bernelle would not be returning.

I moved off in the direction of my room, reflecting that Hopalong's best efforts had been in vain, but that any disappointment on his part was, after all, no great matter for concern. Hopalong had his beautiful, talented and extremely dangerous fiancée, even if she was on the other side of the world.

A short while before I had been on the verge of a night of lust.

Now, through no fault of my own other than a failure to ensure that doors are locked, I was going to have to sleep alone. I was moved to reflect as I headed for my cave, that Jeffrey was in there rooting himself into oblivion, while, thanks to his success, I was missing out.

Justice, it seemed, was an optional extra.

## AND SO IT GOES

The following morning saw all of our little community rise late. When the inevitable couldn't be delayed any longer, I staggered towards the bathroom to relieve the buildup of surplus liquid in the bladder. On the way I looked in the mirror. The figure I sighted caused me to reflect that it was fortunate that I had woken up alone.

I recalled Hunter S. Thompson's *The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved*. Hunter knew his drunkenness and degeneracy. At the end of several days of terminal drunkenness he described a *puffy, drink-ravaged, disease-ridden caricature . . . like an awful cartoon version of an old snapshot in some once-proud mother's family photo album*.

The face Hunter S. had sighted was, predictably, his own. If it had been worse than mine, I thought, it could prompt the reaction portrayed by Edvard Munch in *The Scream*. Some lines from the Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band sprang to mind. *What should I tell my wife? Darling I've been beaten up again. Let's face it, she'd have to be credulous as hell*. I was obviously hallucinating.

Still, there was no use going back to bed. As I tottered out of the bathroom the thought of returning to the cot did, momentarily, cross my mind. The sight of my face had done something to wake me up, and it was time to consider the day's agenda.

It is a well-known fact that Saturday mornings follow Friday nights as surely as blood follows a punch on the nose. The way I felt was a familiar Saturday morning feeling, like having been smashed across the back of the skull with a large hop-flavoured brick. Saturday afternoons inevitably follow Saturday mornings, and over the years have come to mean one thing: a session on the punt.

There were other things to consider. It was one of the few Saturdays through the year when the Denison Turf Club was permitted to hold a meeting, so the first consideration was strategic.

Spend the afternoon at the track or operate as usual, watching the races on TV at the Palace and use the phone account for punting purposes? There were advantages and disadvantages with each option, and I thought it would be wise to defer that decision until the chance to canvas a variety of opinions presented itself. A glance at the clock showed that it was approaching nine-thirty.

There were investments to be made, money to be won and lost. *Damn the torpedoes*, there was no choice but to telegraph *full speed ahead* and consider the consequences some time on Sunday. That thought swung me out of what remained of my stupor.

Soon afterwards, showered, and somewhat refreshed, I headed for the kitchen with my mind bent on repeating the gastronomic excesses of the previous morning. There was no sign of life as I moved towards the catering department, a wad of form guides and other material in hand.

The kitchen area was deserted, so I gathered the breakfast ingredients, poured myself about half a litre of tomato juice, fortified it with Tabasco, Worcestershire and raw egg and downed it as quickly as I could. The kick start it gave the system produced a burst of activity as the chops and bacon went under the grill, the ingredients for a batch of mushroom scrambled eggs were ready to go and a flurry of phone calls in between other tasks accessed the latest information.

A further batch of tomato, Tabasco and Worcestershire kept me going, and once the Late Mail and other selections had been recorded it was time to turn to more substantial sustenance. The chops and



bacon were ready, and once the eggs and mushrooms had been scrambled I took the accumulated plateful to the table and sat down to eat, flicking through the pages of the form guide as I ate.

Breakfast finished, the dishes, pots and pans rinsed and placed in the dishwasher; I was about to resume form study when the door of the room opened, and a haggard Jeffrey shambled in, obviously the worse for wear after overindulgence in amber fluids and gymnastics. He glanced at the publications scattered across the table.

"Found anything?"

"Not yet, but I'm working on it. Should have something within an hour."

"Right, then, I'll grab something for breakfast and then we can figure out where we're going."

True to his word, within the half hour he'd grabbed a form guide and seated himself on the opposite side of the table.

Working on the principle that two heads are better than one, even if, as a result of the exertions of the preceding twenty-four hours, they bore a greater resemblance to sheep's heads than to anything human we discussed the prospects of various runners.

Lurking at the bottom of the field for the last in Sydney was a nag that, from its name, belonged to Waddles, but the form guide summary was a straightforward **No**, and surely, we reasoned, if it was *on* the owner would have called to advise that it was.

The comments flew back and forth, with observations on the state of the Melbourne track, the prospects of various starters, and enquiries about last starts and factors which might have affected recent runs.

Having been out of the country, these were largely speculative, but we'd gained some perspective from Waddles a week ago, and we could consult the form guide when we needed detailed data. By twelve fifteen, once the selections had been made, the other residents were summoned to a conference.

"Right," I started. "First decision. Who's going to join us for a little afternoon on the punt?"

Much to my surprise, Bright Eyes indicated an interest, while Sandy and Hopalong abstained. "So, the next decision is the venue. Do we spend the arvo at the Palace or head out to the track?"

"I'm easy," Jeffrey replied, ignoring remarks that this was common knowledge.

"Bright Eyes? The pub or the track?"

"I think I'd like to go to the track. It might be interesting to see how it compares to Randwick."

"So, since we're going to the track," I inquired, "are you two bastards interested in joining the party. *Only for a drink, you understand. There's plenty of space at the bar!*"

"A change is as good as a holiday," Sandy suggested, "and since it's been a while since the holidays it might be time I had a change."

Hopalong indicated that a variation in venue fitted in comfortably with his nonexistent plans and decided to join the party.

"Right," I announced once consensus had been achieved. "Rendezvous in the car park in ten minutes."

It was more like twelve minutes before I arrived at the point in question and when I did I found Jeffrey rearing and ready to go. The rearing could perhaps be ascribed to the arrival of the Twins who had, after advice from Dagwood and Blondie, selected suitable attire for a visit to the races.

"There is one minor detail that needs to be attended to," I announced as we prepared for departure. "We need to slip into town so I can visit the hole in the wall. If we call here on the way back we can check whether anyone else has lobbed in the meantime. If not there's room for Sandy and Hopalong. Be a bit crowded, but there's room. If there's anyone else joining us it'll mean two trips. What do you reckon?"

Unanimity prevailed, and so I placed myself in the front passenger's seat, leaving the back seat to Jeffrey and his playmates.

"And what," I asked as the vehicle headed towards the ATM in the main street, "are we planning to do at the races? I know what Jeffrey and I will be doing, of course. But ladies?"

"We're *here for the beer*," Julie Ann replied. "We figure that there won't be any *char for Char*, and definitely no *jewels for Jools*, so we're along for the party. Maybe a smidgeon of bubbly after you guys have had a big win, but otherwise beer will be fine."

"For starters," Charlene emphasized.

"If we're into celebration mode at the end of the day, we might have to go with a *blanc de blancs*," I suggested.

*Blanc de blancs*, for the uninitiated is the form of champagne made entirely from white grapes, which would be of the Chardonnay variety. Lack of response suggested that the remark had gone straight over the audience's heads and was probably to be found nestled among the assorted detritus that had collected in the gutter beside the road.

"So," I turned in Bright Eyes' direction. "Have we got an investment strategy in mind? Or are we going to try to wing it like we did last Saturday?"

Bright Eyes laughed. "Lightning doesn't strike in the same place twice so I don't see much point in trying the same approach as last week."

"Wise move," Jeffrey observed.

"So I thought I'd hang around and see what you guys were up to and have a bet or two if I saw something that sounded interesting. I've got a hundred dollars to play with. What are you guys up to?"

I explained I was going to withdraw a thousand from the ATM and had eight conveyances I liked.

"Once I've been to the hole in the wall, I'll stash eight hundred in the left hand pocket, and that'll give me a hundred to put on each of 'em. The other two hundred goes in the right hand pocket. That'll be the drinking pocket as opposed to the investment pocket."

"And if you win?" Bright Eyes asked.

"Half the return goes in each pocket. As soon as you've had a collect it gives you leeway to have a go at a few others. Alternatively you can have more than the hundred on some of the later ones."

"Sounds good," Bright Eyes suggested as we pulled up outside the bank. "I might try something similar."

Once the transaction was complete and we were headed back out towards headquarters a thought crossed my mind.

"Bright Eyes," I suggested, "you do have a hundred to play with, don't you?"

She agreed that this was the case.

"As the designated driver," I went on, "you're not going to be needing all that much in the drinking pocket, are you? I mean you'll need to save a tenner for the odd soft drink, but it's not like you're going to be shouting too often."

"I don't know about that. You never know. I might have a big win."

A voice came from my right.

"Do not compute the totality of your poultry population until all the manifestations of incubation have been entirely completed."

"Precisely," Charlene observed. "Now what the hell does it *mean*?" Jeffrey repeated the sentence. There was silence until the penny finally dropped.

"I guess," suggested Julie Ann, "that you don't count your chickens..."

"Until all the manifestations of incubation have been entirely completed."

"In other words, they've hatched," Charlene concluded. "Right on. Though I think I'll be sticking with my original game plan."

"Which was?"

"Drink, drink and drink again."

We pulled in to *The Crossroads* Sandy and Hopalong climbed into the back seat while I raced inside and placed the cash card in a secure location. If I needed more than a couple of hundred to cover expenses I'd be able to put it on the tab at the Palace. If, on the other hand, the day turned out successfully, it was wise to avoid carrying anything that could be misplaced. With the preliminaries out of the way we set out towards the Royal and Ancient Denison Turf Club, with its 1800 metre circuit. It was just after one when we arrived.

Faced with a couple of two-year-old races we had discarded as betting mediums, and a need to quench the thirst built up through the effort of walking through the car park, there was nothing for it but to retreat to the bar. We also needed to secure an area large enough to entertain our guests, most of whom would be more likely to be interested in the bar rather than the bookmakers.

Experience suggested that the rules which applied to the side bar at the Palace also applied at the Denison races. A position beside the till was of vital importance if an adequate supply of liquid refreshments was to find its way into our hands and down our respective gullets.

Such positions need to be grabbed early and jealously guarded, since the bar inevitably became crowded as successful and unsuccessful punters concluded their activities, the one to celebrate their winnings, the other to use their remaining pennies or their colleagues' generosity to drown their sorrows. The smart operator therefore early, avoided the early races, grabbed a strategic position and waited for reinforcements to arrive before mounting expeditions into the betting ring.

Immediately on entering the bar, we saw the best position had already been snaffled, but a second glance revealed that there was no major problem. The occupant, drinking on his own, was the redoubtable Michael Brooks, wicket-keeper extraordinary and captain of the local cricket side.

When we'd met Brooksy the previous evening, the conversation had been dedicated to putting shit on everything that moved. Saturday afternoons, on the other hand, were dedicated to the serious discussion of sport. Remembering that Mr Brooks' network of acquaintances across the state made him one of Denison's more successful punters, there was an obvious need to join him.

We settled down at the bar, and once seating arrangements had been sorted out the afternoon continued with regular forays to the betting ring. During the afternoon our selections came home at frequent intervals. Jeffrey and I found it difficult to put a foot wrong.

Bright Eyes, flushed with her previous success, in attempting a repeat performance, however, made, a basic tactical mistake. Her first success had largely been due to total lack of knowledge about what she was doing, so the niceties of form study did not enter into calculations. This time, aided by the race book she'd bought as we entered the track, she approached the subject in a rational manner, considered form and subsequently failed.

Having moved beyond the beginner stage, beginner's luck was no longer a factor. Still, she had experienced a rather healthier dose than most. We were already well ahead when Bright Eyes, of all people, scanning the field for the last race in Sydney, pointed to a name at the bottom of the field.

"This one here, Le Ver Marin. That's one of Waddles' isn't it?"

"Should be. I don't think there's anyone else in Australia who names his horses after maggots. Why?"

"I think you'd gone to the toilet the other Friday, and Jeffrey was chatting up the barmaid. You remember he was quite active in that regard that afternoon."

"He's quite active in that regard most afternoons."

"Anyway, since the conversation had stopped I asked if he had anything running on Saturday."

"And?" A light-bulb was starting to illuminate itself somewhere above my head.

"He told me he didn't have anything running that day, but that there was a chance he'd have *a bit of a smokey* running the following Saturday. What's *a bit of a smokey*?"

In earlier research I had looked at this nag named Le Ver Marin, and guessed at its ownership. A brief glance had been enough to dismiss it from consideration, since the form could, in a word, be described as **dire**. One form guide had summed up its chances in a single two-letter word. **No**.

Given those factors, it was hardly surprising that the horse had been dismissed from serious consideration. Bright Eyes' report cast matters in a different light.

Waddles had frequently referred to some unfortunate chaff-burner, who had buckled under the effort of carrying both Waddles' impressive bulk and the impost assigned it by the handicapper, as *that maggot* (as in *dead as a*). Once he started to build up his stable, Waddles had deemed it necessary to find some name that would distinguish his runners from the rest, and since *maggot* was an integral part of his vocabulary, he decided that would be the most appropriate label.

There was, however, a hurdle that would need to be overcome. There was no way an attempt to register a horse as *Prince of Maggots* was going to be successful.

Early in his career as an owner Waddles had been sitting in the side bar at the Palace, a sheaf of paperwork in his hand, trying to figure out a way to register a race horse with that name. The solution presented itself as D'Artagnan entered the establishment before starting his culinary duties. I caught his eye.

"D'Artagnan! A moment of your valuable time! What is the French for *maggot*?"

"You mean the little white bastards I find in the bin? That maggot? You want some fink that you would use in polite society? Or something more, *err, vernacular?*"

Informed that such was precisely the creature, and that we needed something that would satisfy the requirement of those *picky bastards who register the names of horses*, we were informed that it could be best to use the word for *fly*, *le ver*, because if they look it up in the French-English dictionary, they will see **the fly**. *Straight forward, n'est ce pas?*

So each time a new conveyance entered Waddles' stables, the paperwork to include it in the *Maggot* family was despatched to the racing authorities.

*Prince of Maggots* appeared in the form guide as *Le Ver Royal*. *Le Petite Ver* (*Little Maggot*) came next, followed by *Le Ver Enorme* (*Huge Maggot*) before Waddles' success on the punt and the prize money the horses collected from time to time allowed him to start buying yearlings. There had been one by Bureaucracy, named *Le Ver Bureaucratique*, another by The Pug which was christened *Le Ver Pugiliste*. A Voodoo Rhythm filly was named *Le Ver Haitien*, and a Western Symphony became *Le Ver Symphonique*.

This latest addition to the string, *Le Ver Marin*, was by Flotilla, so Waddles had little choice but to name it *The Marine Maggot*. I guessed that he'd bought it as a tried horse, since it had something like a dozen starts under its belt without showing much. The previous owners had probably decided enough was enough but that left a perfectly valid question. Why had Waddles taken it off their hands?

Now, *Le Ver Marin* was in the forthcoming race. Decisions needed to be made, imponderables pondered, speculations drawn out to their logical conclusion. Should this thing be backed?

Further information was desirable, but where were we to obtain it in the twenty-five minutes before they jumped? Surely, if it was a goer, Waddles would have had the manners to call us.

We had changed the phone number at *The Crossroads*, since we weren't interested in fielding calls from people seeking accommodation. The new number was unlisted. The number at my old address lapsed when I moved out. Jeffrey had never had a listing in the White Pages.

If Waddles had tried to reach us with such important information, his only option would have been to call the Palace. In the pre-Lotto days, such a call would have been assured of success, since we would have been ensconced there for lunch before departing for the track.

If we hadn't called in at the Palace first, we would have expected to sight His Lordship and The Duchess at the track. Lord Edward was, an avid punter; and his consort would have found the swanning opportunities presented by a race meeting irresistible.

Since they were both absent, the next step was to call the Palace, since something had taken an afternoon at the track out of His Lordship's plans. Fortunately I knew the number by heart. Three calls met with an *engaged* signal, so it was obvious His Lordship was conducting his investments over the phone, and that avenue was unlikely to be productive.

So why not phone Waddles directly to gain the vital information? Simple. I didn't have his mobile number and he would be at the track.

Check with Hilda at home? Unlikely to meet with any success. She was, more than likely also at the track. Without anything great in the way of expectations I tried the after hours number on his business card. It was obvious that here was no one at home there. It was time to make up our minds.

To bet, or not to bet? That was the question.

I opened my copy of *The Sportsman* and turned to the relevant page. All twelve of Le Ver Marin's starts were listed, the last four in detail. Then I glanced at the details at the top of the entry, in the unlikely event that someone else might own the nag. The owner was listed as Ms H. Watson, rather than T. Waddington, or Mrs H. Waddington.

He'd registered it under Hilda's maiden name.

The trainer's name was there in black and white. Wayne Hart, better known as Captain Headrush. I turned to Bright Eyes' race book, which lay nearby. Who was riding the thing? There, sure as eggs, I found the name of Waddles' regular jockey when he was based in Denison.

Wally Matthews had been apprenticed to a local trainer; and though Waddles had placed his horses with Captain Headrush, he'd usually been able to get Young Wally to ride whatever nag he had going round. Now that he was out of his time Young Wally had relocated to further his riding career.

He'd been offered the rides on all Waddles' horses since the Big Fella's experience with Sydney jockeys had left him with a jaundiced opinion of their honesty, but this was the first time he had wielded the whip in anger on a Sydney metropolitan track. We already knew Captain Headrush had forsaken taxi driving and moved in the same direction, though he hadn't been spectacularly successful to date. I turned to Jeffrey. Once I had his attention I pointed to the name in the form guide.

"This one has to be one of Waddles'. Trained by Captain Headrush. The form's awful, Young Wally's riding it and it's registered in Hilda's name. The paper's got it at a hundred and fifty to one. What do you reckon he's up to?" I asked. We moved away to ponder the question.

"So, what do you reckon? We don't know anything for sure, but there's something fishy about this. We're comfortably up on the day, so it's not like we can't afford to have a go."

"Do it," Jeffrey had made up his mind.

"Tell the others? What if we're barking up the wrong tree?"

Looking back to the circle we had left, it was obvious most were there for the party rather than the punt. Apart from Bright Eyes and Brooksy, none, as far as I could recall, had ventured out for a bet. Brooksy was in the betting ring, and could be informed later.

Being responsible citizens, there was no other possible conclusion.

We were about to engage on a highly speculative venture, there was nothing to suggest it would finish anywhere other than at the tail of the field, and the investment was prompted by a chance remark to Bright Eyes. It would have been foolish to advise anyone else to invest on such a dubious conveyance. Informing our friends that we would be back in five, we headed towards the ring.

The innate conservatism of the Denison bookies meant that we knew that we would only be able to put fifty each way on at a time.

Regardless of the hundred and fifty to one in the paper, the best price I could see was eighty to one, which lasted as long as it took me to claim fifty dollars each way. Across the ring Jeffrey was able to invest another fifty each way at fifty to one.

From there the two of us worked our way around the ring, Jeffrey moving from north to south while I worked in the opposite direction. By the time we'd finished, there was no one in the ring offering odds over five to one, but I had tickets for \$4000 to 50 each way, 1500 to 50 each way, two of 1000 to 50 each way and finally one for 500 to 50 each way to finish off, so I hadn't gone too badly.

I saw Jeffrey pushing his way through the crowd, and waited near the tote. A quick comparison of notes revealed that Jeffrey had tickets that matched mine almost note for note, and we had, all up something like \$16,000 to \$500 each way, about as much as the betting ring could handle. The tote was a different kettle of fish. We had deliberately hit the bookies first, since an investment on the tote might have breached security.

With the larger betting pool, our investment would have only a slight effect on the dividend, so we put five hundred each way on the tote for good measure. This caused the operator to take notice. Keeping security, we explained that it was a bit of a hunch, which was enough to persuade her to have a little on it herself. Our business completed, we rejoined the group at the bar.

Waddles would find it amusing, should our investment prove successful, to learn that the local bookies had been taken to the cleaners through one of his pals without realizing whose it was. He had never been able to get a price about one of them here, a fact which prompted his move to the big smoke.

Five minutes before the race, the fluctuations came over Sky Channel and revealed that Le Ver Marin had shortened considerably on the NSW tote, coming in from 50s to 15s. This information, confirming our earlier suspicions, was enough to cause Brooksy to take notice. Since it looked like the cat was out of the bag, I casually remarked we thought it might belong to Waddles and we'd already backed it. Brooks departed to get on, prompting a huge plunge as he proceeded, his money safely on, to tell everyone he saw on the way back from the ring that it was on.

Five minutes later, we were leading the cheering as Le Ver Marin romped home down the outside, swamping the other runners in the last two hundred. Looking at the replay, someone ventured the opinion that there would more than likely be a positive swab result at some point in the future, but what the hell, we'd be able to collect in the meantime. After correct weight we wandered out to collect. Having done that, eyes shining and pockets bulging, we retired to the bar.

The plunge had been so large the local bookies did not have enough cash to pay out, and were forced to write cheques for the last to collect. As far as Denison was concerned, the meeting effectively stopped. In any case, everyone seemed to be too busy celebrating to want to give any of it back. Waddles would certainly have been amused.

The crowd gradually dispersed, and Jeffrey put the motion that the victory celebrations adjourn to the Palace, and, predictably, it was carried unanimously.

Circumstances indicated that various members of the party needed to relieve themselves, so while Bright Eyes transported the first load to the Palace, others could attend to the calls of nature. In Hopalong's case, the call was about to turn into a scream, and since Sandy volunteered to remain behind, Jeffrey, the Twins and I piled into the convertible.

On our arrival at the Palace, we found His Lordship behind the bar. He greeted us with an even bigger smile than he had been wearing the previous evening, and inquired whether we had been to the races, and, if so, how we had gone.

We replied that we had come out ahead, but neglected to mention that the *ahead* was somewhere to the tune of \$20,000. We, in turn, inquired whether he'd had a bet, since we hadn't seen him at the track.

His Lordship is quite adept when it comes to pouring beer, but, like most of his peers prefers to leave that activity to the underlings he hires to perform such menial tasks. If he stopped to give us an account of his afternoon activities, he would be acting the friendly host, would prevent us from escaping, and would have a perfect excuse to defer the task of maintaining the beer supply to Magpie, who had arrived on the scene around five, unless the demand for service escalated and there was no one else on hand who could be called on to assist.

So the saga started.

First up, the bar attendant rostered for duty that afternoon had phoned in sick. Unable to get anyone else at short notice, His Lordship had been forced to look after the bar himself. While this was a blow to someone who would rather drink beer than pour it, he could follow the races on Sky Channel and bet through his phone account. He was hardly likely to be rushed off his feet, since most of his Saturday afternoon crowd would be at the races and he thought he would have no trouble looking after the bar, and would save himself the expense of paying an underutilized bar attendant.

Around eleven, a call from her mother had diverted The Duchess towards Airlie Beach. D'Artagnan would be quite capable of handling the lunchtime trade without supervision, so she had departed around midday.

Around the same time Waddles had phoned to let his friends at the Palace know that Le Ver Marin had been set for a big win, and that he was planning a substantial plunge. The minor fact that there were local races in Denison and that, as a result, his friends would be at the track was so insignificant as to escape notice.



"I told him," His Lordship pointed out, "that while you'd usually be in here around lunchtime, you hadn't lobbied yet and I suspected you'd gone straight out to the track."

"Which we had," I agreed.

"So he pointed out that I could let you know when Betty and I got to the track..."

"Which, of course, you couldn't because The Duchess was off to Airlie for lunch and you were stuck in the bar. But never mind, we managed to sniff it out for ourselves."

His Lordship, of course, had no choice but to remain at the Palace, and passed the tip on to the two men and a dog in the public bar before returning to his usual Saturday afternoon activities, with occasional interruptions to serve a beer.

Using a scatter-gun approach, His Lordship likes to attack almost every race, taking one selection as a standout, with saver bets on assorted others, as well as a string of quinellas and trifectas. While he manages, as a result, quite a few collects, the incoming funds do not always balance the expenditure.

During the afternoon he succeeded in wiping out the balance of his account before Le Ver Marin's race, but with The Duchess away in Airlie Beach, he had thought there was no way he was going to be able to put some more in the account.

The cavalry arrived five minutes before they jumped. D'Artagnan had decided to present himself for work early.

More than likely he suspected The Duchess's excursion for lunch would render her unable to assist with the evening trade. When asked, he agreed that he could watch the bar for five minutes, so His Lordship departed TAB-wards in the pub truck just as The Duchess was pulling up outside the front door in her mother's Volvo. He'd stayed away just long enough to back the horse. Diplomacy suggested it would be wise to do that twice, once for himself and once for his spouse. That done, he was able to pass on the tip to anyone who was interested, and listen to the race, at the agency before returning to base.

Being the possessor of animal cunning above and beyond the usual allowance, when he knew the result, he dived into the truck with two successful betting tickets in his hand, roared around to the Palace, arrived in a swirl of dust and vaulted into the bar enquiring what had won the last in Sydney, claiming that a problem with the radio in the car meant he'd been unable to hear the call.

He was informed, by a railway worker who had just finished his shift, and was therefore unaware of developments earlier in the afternoon, that it had been Le Ver Marin.

His Lordship, of course, already knew the result, but feigned jubilation, informing The Duchess that he had backed it for her, and asking whether she would mind going up to the TAB to collect on these two tickets. He had, of course, also taken Le Ver Marin with the field for the quinella and had managed to sneak in the trifecta as well, but carefully neglected to mention these minor facts, and had kept those tickets in his pocket. They would be cashed in later.

The Duchess, figuring most of the town's punters would be at the track, gave proceedings there enough time to finish before heading to collect and remained on the premises long enough to receive congratulations on her investment, pocket the return from her ticket and snip off a substantial amount of His Lordship's before returning in a self-congratulatory mood, arriving just after His Lordship had finished recounting the afternoon's events.

The manner of her arrival, throwing her arms around His Lordship's neck and declaring that he was *such a sweetie* for backing the horse for her, indicated she might be more than receptive to amorous advances later that evening.

Having won on the day, with a substantial collect to be made next week, and faced with the prospect of *getting a shot away* later that evening, it was no wonder His Lordship was quietly jubilant. We had great difficulty persuading him to accept money in return for the brimming glasses he set before us.

As night fell, he was moved to suggest that nourishment was indicated, and that we might feel inclined to join The Duchess and himself for a meal. He bought the *first* bottle of wine and with a party of eight seated at the table, frequent replenishments would be required. Fortunately, table service and the boss's table meant that such replenishments were made with the minimum of fuss, while His Lordship was able to steer our attention towards the upper end of the price range, with enquiries whether we had tried the.....

After dinner it was time to discuss possibilities for the rest of the evening. Most of the party voted for an early night, but Jeffrey was inclined towards action. The only question was where such action was going to occur.

Remembering our friends felt like a quiet night, I suggested that two parties at the motel on successive nights was enough for the moment and that there should be a change of venue. Since Bright Eyes also felt the need of a quiet night, it appeared that, once she had transported us wherever we were going, it would be churlish to expect her to collect us.

"So where," I inquired, "are we headed? Personally I'm quite happy to stay here. Apart from the other pubs around town, there's only one option I know of that's likely to be open."

"*The Swamp*," Jeffrey greed. "So that's where we're headed." Located on the highway to the south of town, the Coral Coastline Cabaret was generally known as *The Swamp*, due to the belt of mangroves between the premises and the coast. It opened three nights a week to cater for the mating rituals of the younger set whose musical preferences were in the general direction of rap. Under normal circumstances we would have dismissed the place from consideration because it was *too far out of town, too noisy, and too young*.

When Jeffrey turned to enquire whether the Twins would be joining us the exact words they used to decline the invitation were *too far out of town, too noisy, too young and you're too pissed*. Since their accommodation was within staggering distance of the Palace the Twins departed for a restful night at home, threatening to establish contact in the morning.

Once they had gone, there was nothing to do but bid our hosts farewell and pile into the chariot. Ten minutes later; the vehicle glided to a stop in front of the Swamp, creating only a slight stir among the town's younger set, approximately half of whom I had met in my previous occupation.

As we alighted, Bright Eyes told us all we need to do when we wanted to leave was ring, since she intended to spend the night on the first draft of her assignment. The car sped off, and we turned to the entrance, casually acknowledging the greetings of former pupils gathered outside the door who regarded an entrance before ten as being *distinctly uncool*.

Needing liquid refreshment, we were unconcerned about coolness, or lack of it, but once through the door; the wall of sound hit us. As Jeffrey signalled that he was heading for the bar; I turned to look for a table, preferably close to the bar; with a strategic view of the entrance, as well as a panoramic view of

the room and the dance floor. From previous visits I knew where the best position was, but, the table was already occupied by three women, who had their backs to me but the table next door was vacant. I signalled to Jeffrey to indicate where I was going.

As I sat down, a glance across revealed one of the three neighbouring females was a certain former neighbour known as *Mangoes*, and with her was teaching partner; Melanie Maynard. The third member of the party was Sharon Quayle, another former colleague. *Mangoes* was allegedly keen on Malcolm, bar manager at the *Excelsior*; but her passion was unreciprocated, as the gentleman concerned had an unfavourable opinion of female schoolteachers and seemed unwilling to modify this opinion, regardless of how alluring the female in question might be.

Since the other two had regular partners, it was odd to see them out on the town without their better halves. As all this ran through my mind, *Mangoes* looked across and greeted me like a long lost cousin. Grabbing a chair that could be manoeuvred into a spot between Melanie and Sharon that would provide the panoramic outlook I had been after, I joined them.

*Mangoes*, seated furthest from me was virtually *incommunicado* amid the sonic maelstrom, but the others informed me their night on the tiles stemmed from *Mangoes'* decision to end her infatuation with Malcolm, who'd been found in the alley behind the *Excelsior* establishing relations with a waitress from the restaurant next door. *Mangoes* had held out hope that, as long as Malcolm lacked a permanent partner; his attitude towards her might become more accommodating, but, faced with the reality that some things were never meant to be had contacted her teaching partner in some distress.

Melanie, believing *Mangoes* needed to be persuaded there were plenty more fish in the sea but, in her current state, could not circulate through the flesh pots of Denison unaccompanied. Working on the principle that there was safety in numbers Melanie had enlisted Sharon's assistance so if *Mangoes* had a change of luck, she'd have someone to talk to.

Having found seats with a panoramic view of a place like *The Swamp*, you need to maintain a degree of vigilance. This is not, however, always possible. The volume level made communication difficult, and we were forced into a huddle around the table. I was too involved in the explanation for this *girls night out* to pay much attention to what was going on around me, and looked up with a start when I heard an *Aha!* somewhere near my right ear.

It was Jeffrey, bearing rum and coke. His decision to join us was not prompted solely by the need to deliver a round. He had been heard to remark that there was *an opening for a smart lad* where *Mangoes* was concerned, and Jeffrey had always been a bit of a lad. He grabbed the seat beside Apples and continued to lay on the charm in shovel loads.

For all his degenerate habits, when he decides to lay it on, Jeffrey can be quite the sophisticated gentleman. Within five minutes he appeared to be getting Apples' mind off recent disappointments. As the pair of them seemed to be developing their own private huddle, I was immersed in conversation with the others and after a few minutes headed off to seek replenishments for all concerned.

When that round had been emptied, I sat, continuing the conversation and waiting for Jeffrey to do the right thing. At the moment, he seemed oblivious to the need to shout anything other than sweet nothings in *Mangoes'* shapely left ear. Melanie stood up and looked about to gather up the glasses scattered around the table.

With Jeffrey apparently disinclined to remedy the situation, I pointed out there was no way that a few rounds of drinks, even at ridiculously inflated nightclub prices was going break us and was about to head for the bar when the music stopped. In the momentary quiet, above the general background

noise, I heard a cry of *Jeffrey!* coming from the general direction of the bar. I looked up, Jeffrey reacted the same way and immediately blanched.

There, across the room, was Olga. Having attracted our attention, along with everyone else's, she reached for her waist and, watched by some two hundred pairs of eyes, exposed her ample and unconstrained bosoms in Jeffrey's direction, to the joy of the multitude, who obviously felt that the presence of a well-endowed flasher was a development worthy of encouragement.

Behind her was Bernelle, carrying a tray of drinks. The pair started to move towards us, and as they approached, Mangoes, Melanie and Sharon decided to retreat to the powder room. Arriving at the table, Olga again displayed her ample mammary development.

While the initial incident had met with general appreciation, repetition attracted the attention of the management. Almost before she managed to sit down, Olga was joined by one of the bouncers, who appeared to be asking what she thought she was doing. She nodded in our direction and seemed to be indicating that she was rejoining us after a visit to the bar.

Mangoes, Melanie and Sharon were powdering their noses, and, without anyone to confirm our protestations that we were not associated with the flasher, our protests fell on deaf ears.

*The Swamp* may be a low dive, but Denison is a small pool and some forms of behaviour are frowned on. Ironically, the bouncer who ejected us happened to be Jeffrey's twenty-seven year old son, Justin. As he shut the door, with the four of us outside, I could see him shaking his head.

Obviously, getting away from a venue where we were no longer welcome was the next step. There were no taxis in the car park, so it seemed there was nothing for it but to dial *The Crossroads*, disturb Bright Eyes' reading, and ask her to get us, but despite repeated attempts, the phone was engaged.

Hopalong, I guessed, was in the process of talking to the Lovely Liz. After half a dozen attempts, feeling growing impatience beside me, I gave up.

As I was about to start trying the taxi service I saw that I had been beaten to the punch. A cab had pulled up and once he had deposited his passengers, the driver had opened negotiations with Olga, who was only too happy to offer Jeffrey and I a lift home with Bernelle and herself.

I toyed with declining, giving the cab enough time to deliver the two of them to their place, then calling another car, but the plan had obvious flaws. Supposing they didn't go straight home? What if they decided to head us off at *The Crossroads*?

While I was considering these factors, Jeffrey, smarting from the injustice of being ejected from the building by his own flesh and blood, spat his dummy. The toys flew out of the cot and he announced the rest of us could please ourselves but he was going to walk.

Faced with a quick decision, I balanced the bonds of mateship against the knowledge that an attempt to walk all the way back would involve covering considerably more ground than the shortest distance between two points and, as I watched Jeffrey's back heading in the general direction of town, accepted the offered lift.

At least, I reasoned, once I got to *The Crossroads* I would be able to save Jeffrey most of the walk by asking Bright Eyes to get him. Olga sat in the front seat, talking to the driver, so I was forced to join Bernelle in the back, and as soon as I climbed into the back seat, the cab sped off. The speed as the

driver negotiated the turn out of the Swamp's car park onto the highway was sufficient to throw Bernelle, unconstrained by a seat belt, in my direction.

In a reflex action, my arm, which had been extended along the top of the seat, closed around her, leading to the discovery that seat belts were not the only form of constraint her torso lacked. She seemed disinclined to move, and with a hand full of compliant flesh, I pondered my next move.

The best bet was to quietly suggest that after the cab dropped me at the motel, she should drop her mother at home and come back.

Those deliberations proceeded well below optimum speed and I was about to make the suggestion when the cab swerved, entered the motel car park, and screeched to a halt.

Before I had time to make any suggestion, or start getting out of the cab, Olga decided she had been invited in, handed over a ten dollar note and was standing outside.

Presented with a *fait accompli*, I opened the door, mumbled *thanks* to the driver, and got out. Bernelle followed.

While Olga and Bernelle disappeared towards the Ladies' I found Bright Eyes emerging from her room, car keys in hand, with Sandy and Hopalong also heading towards the red chariot.

It didn't take me long to discover Hopalong had just received a call from his intended, calling to let him know she had fantastic news, but unfortunately, despite repeated pleas, she was unable to say anything apart from speculating that she might be joining him much earlier than expected.

This news was, they felt, worth celebrating, so were on their way out to join us. Hearing Jeffrey was in transit somewhere between the Swamp and home base, and not wanting to *disturb* Bernelle, Olga and I, they thought it best if they continued on their present course while I would be better off staying where I was. For some reason, concern for my well-being failed to move me.

The Mercedes receded into the distance, and I was left alone with Bernelle and Olga. Following recent traumas and indignities, I needed strong drink, and, accordingly, headed towards the rum dispenser. It would have been extremely rude to ignore the guests, however unwelcome one of them might be.

Although she had been at our previous *soiree* as I filled three beakers with ice, added a generous tot of rum to each and opened a fresh bottle of Coke, Olga requested a tour of the establishment, so we set off, glasses in hand, on a circuit of the premises.

Having requested the tour, however, Olga showed little interest in minor details. What she was interested in was the exact location of Jeffrey's *boudoir*. Although she had attempted to break down the door the night before, short term memory loss required a refresher course in the local geography.

When we reached Four, Olga grabbed the handle, expressing an interest in the interior; but Jeffrey had become cagy in the recent past. Possibly as a result of the need for security on our overseas tour, for the first time in living memory, he had left home after locking the door behind him.

Having concluded the tour, the poolside area beckoned. Out to the table came the rum bottle, and a soft esky containing ice and bottles of Coke. Having settled the guests onto a couple of banana lounges, I headed indoors to do something about music.

Selection of the soundtrack was something I took my time over; I had a hunch that selecting the appropriate soundtrack was of supreme importance. I had just finished selecting the disks which would find their way into the CD player when I heard the door close.

"What are you putting on?" I heard Bernelle's voice ask. "Don't make it anything too loud, she's asleep."

It appeared that, under the influence of a combination of overabundant rum and under-abundant action, Olga had dozed off. As I went on inserting the disks into the player, Bernelle squatted down beside me. It was obvious that she was feeling the pace.

As the sounds of *Moondance* wafted across the courtyard, I stood up and started to move into my living quarters. Bernelle followed, and as I sat on the edge of the bed she sat beside me. I lay back momentarily, and found that Bernelle's arm had somehow found its way under my back.

I lifted myself to give it a chance to disengage itself only to find it closing around my neck.

From where I was, the temptation was too great. In between clinches, Bernelle explained that they had ventured down to the Palace for lunch, thinking that Jeffrey and I would be there. Normally, we would have been.

Not being addicted to the punt, the significance of a local race meeting had escaped them. It seemed, after lunching, they had sat around till three, then strolled home, where they followed Southern Comfort and coke with a cask of Chateau Cardboard Riesling. Olga, apparently, felt the need to drown her disappointment at not finding us at the Palace.

Bernelle, with the benefit of solid training, as well as the benefit of youth, had handled the pace, but Olga faded around six. After resting her eyes, she had resurfaced at eight, announced that The Swamp was on the agenda and stated that Bernelle was going to accompany her.

According to Bernelle, she fortified herself for the ordeal throughout the process of bathing and dressing, and managed a couple of quick scotches while waiting for a cab. Now, it seemed, Olga was out for the count.

Bernelle's apparent desire to use her lips for purposes other than imparting information was too much for me. Under the influence of alcohol and well stacked blondes whose appreciative comments on my musical preferences showed signs of conversion, common sense lengthened in the betting market as my remaining scruples flew out the window, closely followed by inhibition and propriety. In to replace them came sheer unbridled lust.

Rolling her over so she now sat astride me, I reached behind, and untucked her top from her jeans. Two pairs of hands found their way to the edge of the garment, and lifted it over the head. As it reached her neck, I found my face greeted by the unconfined cleavage.

To my right, the door of the music room opened and through the door connecting it to my living quarters burst Jeffrey, demanding to know *what the fuck is that fucking bitch doing here, goddamit!*

In an instant, the intimacy present only seconds before vaporized.

Rolling sideways off me, Bernelle attempted to regain some degree of modesty, while Jeffrey's diatribe about *fucking bitches* and *evil sluts* continued unabated.

Her clothing rearranged, Bernelle, apparently believing the comments were aimed in her direction, fled. By the time I reached the door, she was waking her mother and announcing she wanted to go home.

When Jeffrey and I reached the area beside the pool, Olga was awake, though leaving was obviously the last thing on her mind.

Jeffrey, however, was feeling distinctly inhospitable, and as Olga got the hint that her physical advances were likely to meet with complete and total rejection, Sandy appeared at my side.

"He's a little upset," Sandy intimated.

"So I fucking see," I replied.

The trauma of recent minutes had removed any inhibitions in my speech. I could still feel the lingering aftereffects of recent desire.

"Bright Eyes brought us back from the Swamp. We missed him on the way out, but we found the Twins outside the Swamp, wanting to know where he was, so we got them into the car and found him on the way back. He must have been having a piss behind a lamp post or something when we passed him on the way out. He's got them in his room, but they were very upset that Olga is here."

Olga's continued presence, it was obvious, was getting in the way of Jeffrey's cosy little *menage a trois*.

As he continued to communicate his displeasure at her presence, the unlikelihood of success on the sexual front dawned on her; and she yielded to her daughter's insistence that they head towards the car park. As they departed, Jeffrey turned towards his room, vowing to attend to unfinished business.

As the crowd dispersed, I stood, wondering which way to turn.

Sandy headed indoors, and I was left alone. An attempt to entice Bernelle back towards my room seemed futile, but it had to be made.

I had just reached the car park when, as if on cue, a taxi pulled up. By the time I reached it, Bernelle and Olga were inside, the door was slamming and I was left pondering the injustices of the world.

Through no fault of my own, after temptations such as a saint could have scarcely avoided, I had weakened and, moments short of fulfillment, had the object of my attention snatched away. I was devastated. At moments like these, there is no substitute for strong drink, and the rum bottle was still on the table beside the pool. I turned my head in that direction, seeking solace.

## BUT WHERE IT'S GOING

I awoke with the morning sun in my eyes and Sandy and Hopalong nearby. I had evidently fallen asleep beside the pool, and my friends were discussing the glass they were sniffing.

"At least," Sandy commented, "Jeffrey only wastes one tin of Fosters at a time. This would have to be a triple. There's got to be a good ten dollars worth of rum in there."

Thoughts of the previous night's events came flooding back.

"Don't mention that arse-hole," I muttered, gathering whatever dignity was available as I staggered room-wards.

*Why*, I wondered as I went, *should people hang shit on me about what happened last night? What had I done? Stuff it* Sleep in a proper bed was on the agenda, and would be forthcoming forthwith.

SAfely in my room, I ensured I would not be disturbed until I wanted to be disturbed. Hanging inside the wardrobe door were a pair of earmuffs liberated from an airport worker by a flat-mate from the distant past.

Log Boy's unannounced departure, owing a fortnight's rent, meant he had not been able to fit everything on the back of the motor bike. Having given him twelve months to come good with the rent and make some arrangements for his remaining possessions to be shifted, anything of value had been liquidated at the pawn shop.

A few odds and ends escaped the clean out, and the earmuffs had proved handy in situations where a *Do Not Disturb* sign would have been ignored.

I was soon asleep, and stayed that way until the bladder needed to be emptied. The need was urgent, so headed towards the bathroom, and with that business concluded decided headphones and music were indicated. The visit to the bathroom gave me enough time to ponder disks that would be, shall we say, *rest-friendly*, and I grabbed a substantial chunk of Miles Davis, a fair proportion of John Fahey's works and the four Nick Drake disks, picked Miles Davis' *In A Silent Way* out of the pile, inserted it in the bedside player and, pressed *play*.

I was about to lock the headphones into place when I was disturbed by shouted enquiries whether I would be joining an expedition to the pub.

I looked at the bedside clock. It was just after eleven.

I was not feeling sociable, and my liver and I were disinclined to engage in alcoholic activity, so I responded with a few well-chosen words. I heard laughter filtering through the music as I attempted to drift into a totally justified snooze.

As I lay there, I also became aware of a gnawing in the stomach, which reminded me I needed breakfast. As I pondered these matters, a further knock on the door was followed by Hopalong's advice that they were leaving in five minutes.

I enquired who was going, and the reply suggested that I was the only one required to make a full suit. *Five minutes!* was the cry. They could leave in five seconds for all I cared.



Some sort of ceasefire would be negotiated in the future, but it could wait. If *everyone* was going to the pub, I'd be able to eat undisturbed and spend a few hours pottering around my living quarters, doing the laundry and generally settling back into *home* mode.

When Sandy knocked on the door with the news that they were going *now*, I replied that any attempt to wait for me would be fruitless and they would be far better heading pub-wards immediately.

"I think he means it," I heard Hopalong remark. The voices receded. Silence followed.

I waited five minutes and continued to the bathroom. Standing in front of the wash basin, I considered the situation. Hearing no sign of life outside, I turned the tap on splashed water over my face, turned off the tap and listened. Silence.

A further couple of minutes passed undisturbed, and since the party had departed, it was safe to have a shower. I emerged from the cubicle somewhat refreshed, dressed, and headed towards the kitchen cautiously, in case there should be someone around the ridges to break the solitude. My suspicions proved groundless, and I arrived without meeting a soul.

Checking out the car park on the way revealed the Mercedes was gone and in its absence, apart from the other residents' vehicles the area was deserted. From that, I gathered, unless they'd arrived by taxi or shanks' pony, there were no visitors on the premises

Passing Reception I paused. Should I check inside in case there were any messages?

It took no more than a few seconds to decide that, if ignorance is bliss, a lack of awareness of communication, as in, for instance, a message on the answering machine, would be close to ecstasy.

I turned into the kitchen. Everyone else had breakfasted recently, as I could tell by the stack of plates around the sink rather than in the dishwasher. A brief search revealed the utensils I needed to prepare breakfast were available, so, as the ingredients passed through the microwave, I showed my community spirit by filling the dishwasher.

By the time the dishwasher was humming contentedly to itself, my breakfast was ready, and I took it across to the table, where I found Bright Eyes, had been to collect the Sunday paper.

Turning to the sports pages, I settled down to breakfast. In the distance, I could hear the phone ringing, but ignored it. Whoever it was could always leave a message on the answering machine if the matter was important.

Breakfast finished, and the sports pages digested, I turned towards my room. I was enjoying the solitude. It was time for a bit of domesticity as a change from social and alcoholic engagements.

Grabbing a couple of bottles of mineral water to stave off dehydration and assist with the recovery process I headed back, placed the mineral water in the fridge, found the laundry basket and lugged it to the laundry. Placing assorted items in the machine I turned it on

Locking the door as a security precaution, I set about restoring order. In the process of tidying the premises, I succeeded in locating items of underwear and socks which, having separated themselves from their peers, appeared to be making a run for it.

The ability of socks to metamorphose is one of the great mysteries of life. An inspection of the sock collection invariably involves the discovery that what had previously been a collection of matching pairs has mysteriously become an array out of which anything resembling a pair was difficult to isolate.

An attempt to sort out the jumble would be made after the laundry was dry. Satisfied that the feral footwear had been rounded up, I grabbed the duster and gave the shelves and benches the *once over*, before unaccustomed exertions took their toll.

Fortunately, there were other tasks available, some of which could be undertaken sitting down.

While they'd been placed on the shelves, the pile of assorted vinyl, CDs and DVDs I had accumulated in New Orleans had to be catalogued and filed and there were still a couple of boxes of odds and ends in the room next door which needed to find their way onto the shelves.

After a breather and a beaker of mineral water, I ventured next door, ferried the remaining boxes into the music room and set about placing the contents on the appropriate shelves. Half an hour later, with the physical exertions finally out of the way I sat down to think things over.

The acquisitions needed to be added to the existing catalogue, so reaching for the card index and a biro, I grabbed a handful of disks from the shelves, slipped a vinyl LP onto the turntable, sat down and set to work.

Absorbed in the task of recording the details of these recent additions, and considering the possibilities of organizing a better form of catalogue, *perhaps in a database?* I paid no heed to what may have been a tap on the door of the living quarters.

Investigating the matter would involve revealing my presence to whoever might be outside and while the stereo meant anyone outside would have been aware I was there, as far as I was concerned ignorance of external presences was bliss and I intended to stay, if possible, totally contented.

A glance at the clock a while later indicated that the time had rolled around to a quarter to one, so there was every possibility the mob would be back on the premises in the next half-hour or so. If I wanted to remain undisturbed the washing machine needed to be emptied, items placed on the line, the door locked and the headphones back in place without much further ado.

Remembering there might well be someone outside, I considered my options.

My quarters were at one end of the main wing, and the laundry, tucked behind Reception and the kitchen was at the other. If I moved sharply enough I could dodge around the back of the building, make my way to the laundry, do what needed to be done and wend my way back without meeting anybody who wasn't right outside the front door.

I unlocked the door and prepared to turn left to head around the back of the building. Sitting on the edge of one of the planters occupying what had been the car park, was Bernelle, who looked up as I emerged.

An awkward silence ensued as I reviewed the options. Sneaking around the back was no longer viable, so I started to turn to my right.

"Laundry day, Had to be done eventually. How'd you pull up this morning?" I enquired as I started moving in the appropriate direction.

Bernelle stood up and started moving in the same direction. It was best, I thought, to avoid any reference to the circumstances under which we had parted, at least for the time being.

"I was pretty good, I didn't really drink *that* much. What about you?"

"A bit on the ordinary side of ordinary. I think it might have been something I didn't eat"

We reached the laundry door. The washing machine had reached the heat of its spin drying passion and was now subsided quietly. Idle chat followed as Bernelle helped me hang out that load and pile the remaining contents of the basket into the machine.

The atmosphere was lightening all the time, and somehow, on the way back to the room, her hand had slipped into mine.

Reaching the room, there appeared to be no alternative but to go inside. There was still *no one but us chickens* on the premises, and there was something in the submissive manner in which my companion entered the room which suggested that a certain spring chicken was about to be plucked.

Placing the laundry basket on the floor beside the door, I turned towards her as her arms found their way around my neck. Reaching behind, I turned the lock on the door. The way things appeared to be developing, this was not the time to be leaving doors unlocked. I had learnt that lesson last night.

"I'm sorry about last night," she murmured. "I shouldn't have left like that."

"Couldn't be helped. I should have locked the door. Bloody silly of me not to."

Her head half turned towards the door.

"Already done," I reassured her as we settled down to unfinished business. Things had reached an interesting situation when there was a knock on the door.

"Ignore it," I told Bernelle. "They'll get sick of it before we do."

I slipped my hand under her top and found compliant flesh.

"Herston!" Sandy called. "*Stop that!* We ran across Boris at the Palace. We're all going out his boat for a trip across to Gloucester. Are you coming?"

To be totally honest, the only coming I was interested in at the time was totally physical, but as Sandy finished the sentence, Bernelle extricated herself from my clutches.

"Some other time," I replied. "I've still got a few things to do around the place."

The statement met with a chuckle from the outside. Looking around, I could see Bernelle was a little put out.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"I was supposed to ask you about it before they got here," was the reply as she headed towards the bathroom. I unlocked the door and stuck my head outside. I knew when I was beaten. Sandy had a grin on his face.

"We thought you needed a little cheering up," he said. "We thought you'd be ready by now. Bernelle was supposed to get the message to you. Have you seen her?"

"She hadn't mentioned it," I replied. I thought it best to leave the question of her whereabouts unanswered.

"Five minutes," retorted Sandy, turning towards the driveway. "Jeffrey and the Twins are already aboard. Hopalong and Bright Eyes are just making up a picnic basket. See you in the driveway."

Placed in a position where lust was rapidly getting the better of me, this suggestion was not one I particularly favoured. Turning back to Bernelle, who had finished adjusting her clothing, I saw that I was about to be overruled.

Murmuring that a day on the water would be *lovely* she started towards the door, so I had no choice but to follow. Outside, I found she had paused, and as I headed towards the car park her hand again found its way into mine.

Hopalong had positioned himself in the front seat beside Bright Eyes, Sandy, Bernelle and I climbed into the back, and the Mercedes sped off towards the harbour, where Boris the Backdooring Bastard's family maintained the family yacht.

On the way, during the conversation that passed the time, I deduced that Bernelle had wished to *make it up to me* after the previous night's fiasco, formed the opinion that I could be found at the Palace, and had directed her footsteps there.

Arriving at the Palace, she found Jeffrey, Sandy Bright Eyes and Hopalong in conversation with Boris and his charming companion, Ruth. Boris had dropped by on the way to carry out maintenance on the family yacht and was in the process of buying takeaways when he spotted Sandy and company seated at the bar and decided to be polite.

Boris lived next door when Sandy and I were in teacher accommodation and achieved notoriety around the village due to amorous exploits, which usually involved the seduction of someone else's partner, though these arrangements seldom developed to a point where a new relationship was established.

He had, however, recently changed his spots after he'd met the lovely Ruth. A relative lack of sightings could, according to Jeffrey, be attributed to the likelihood that Denison's former backdooring champion was living in dread that he would end up being backdoored himself.

That hypothesis may have originated from Jeffrey's warped sense of humour rather than reality, but it was obvious when the two of them were seen in public, that Boris became distinctly uncomfortable when anyone looked like they might be sniffing around his companion.

After graduating from university, Boris found himself in Denison where his family had property and business assets. He collected rents, supervised commercial operations, undertook maintenance on the beach house south of town and looked after the yacht moored in the small boat harbour. The family was fond of cruises around the Whitsundays, and Denison was within cooe of Hayman Island at the top of that well known archipelago.

Boris' position on the family payroll and the benefits that came with it enabled him to maintain himself in the lifestyle to which he had become accustomed, driving a sports car we'd christened *The Vibrator* since it was all-electric and made him feel good.

The house he selected from the family's holdings had undergone extensive renovations, including a sauna beside the spa and swimming pool. According to popular belief, the house was chosen because proximity to the teachers' quarters would guarantee Boris access to a constantly changing array of potential partners. It was also within convenient cooee of a certain water-hole.

Tall, dark and handsome, Boris wore the latest gentleman's fashions and held down a position on the wing of the Crustaceans - all of them factors with benefits when it came to pursuing the lusts of the flesh, which, as indicated, was a pastime he had only recently relinquished.

When Bernelle arrived at the Palace, she assumed that, since the rest of the group were assembled there, I was momentarily absent in the gents. She joined the group, anticipating my return and would have been waiting for some time, had Sandy not been gentleman enough to inform her that I had remained at home *sulking*.

By this time, the party had decided once Boris had carried out the maintenance, an afternoon jaunt around the bay was indicated.

Boris and Ruth moved off towards the Small Boat Harbour; Bright Eyes had offered to drop Bernelle back at *The Crossroads* so she could entice me into joining the party; but, having driven as far as the pub and sat on a couple of soft drinks, the proposal was countered with the suggestion that she could make her own way back to *The Crossroads* while Bright Eyes began ferrying the rest of the party to the Yacht Club, where Boris would meet us.

Once she'd accomplished that mission Bright Eyes would divert to the supermarket to pick up a supplies for the afternoon, head back to base to pack the picnic basket and collect Bernelle and I.

By the time we arrived at the Yacht Club at the end of this series of journeys, Boris was bringing the vessel up to the pontoon, where Jeffrey, Sandy, Hopalong and the Twins were waiting for us. With the picnic basket stowed, the only task that remained was to buy a carton of beer and assorted wines and spirits from the Yacht Club. In the process we were forced to have a quick rum or three while stocks of grog and ice were mustered.

An afternoon on the water; with Jimmy Buffet on the CD player is a pleasant way to pass the time on Sunday. Smoked salmon, olives, and cheese were consumed as the vessel performed an anti-clockwise circuit of the bay. The beer was cold, the white wine chilled, the conversation witty. Reaching the resort opposite Denison, we tied up at the pontoon and wandered up to the bar for a couple.

An hour later, the approach of the resort's launch meant that Boris needed to move the vessel, so we headed back. Consumption continued unabated, and when we arrived at the pontoon everyone on board except Boris and Ruth were well and truly *on the way*.

As we were about to step onto the pontoon I asked for suggestions about future movements. I had fairly strong expectations as to the most likely course, but thought that the suggestion might as well come from someone else.

"Stuffed if I know," Jeffrey responded. "Might as well call into the Palace and think things over."

"The Sunday arvo roast would take care of the dinner arrangements," Sandy suggested.

In keeping with her view of herself as the lady of the manor, The Duchess had begun spit roasting quantities of beef each Sunday afternoon, weather permitting, which she distributed to the masses in

return for a small financial donation. The value for money on offer ensured that the Palace was well attended each Sunday evening, but it should have been early enough for us to obtain a table.

"Sascha and the Butch will be on in the beer garden. Wouldn't mind giving them a listen. It's been a while," was my contribution to the developing theme.

"Really?" Bernelle interjected. "I certainly didn't expect that."

"Nobody," I replied, "expects..."

"The Spanish Inquisition," Hopalong completed the Monty Python quote which sailed over Bernelle's head and landed somewhere on the grass in front of the Yacht Club.

"That's not what I meant," she replied. "It's just that I didn't think you listened to normal music."

"You should have noticed by now," Hopalong suggested, "that the bastard doesn't do *anything* normal."

"Actually," I pointed out, sensing the opportunity to slip in an obscure quote, "we're all normal."

The suggestion brought forth a scoffing snort from a predictable direction.

"It's just that some of us want our freedom. Did you notice back there when we were out on the bay? When the Jimmy Buffet tape started? Did I say anything like *turn that shit off*? No. I don't mind Jimmy Buffet. *Why Don't We Get Drunk and Screw* is a great song, but do I own any of the albums? No way. If I want to hear Jimmy Buffet Hopalong's got a couple of his CDs, right? If I'm going to buy ten disks I'll buy ten interesting ones that aren't likely to be in every Tom, Dick and Harry's collection."

By this time we'd reached the car park and decisions about transport arrangements needed to be made. Bright Eyes had limited herself to two glasses of white and was, more than likely, under the limit and capable of driving, but a certain red vehicle was likely to prove to be, in Jeffrey's words, *a copper stopper* and he questioned the wisdom of placing her behind the wheel.

Boris and Ruth, on the other hand, were respectively totally and more or less sober, and volunteered to attend to the driving duties.

So, once the vessel was safely moored, we decanted ourselves into the vehicles and headed to the Palace. Boris, for once, surrendered the Vibrator to Ruth, and suggested that once he'd dropped us at the Palace he'd put the Mercedes to bed for the night, take over at the wheel of the Vibrator and return to the Palace.

As the vehicles sped off down the road, we entered the beer garden, where The Duchess, who steered us towards a table and joined us. The spit roasting had been delegated to Porthos the assistant chef.

The beers continued to flow, and when Bernelle remarked favourably on the white wine she had enjoyed on the bay, The Duchess, with a *Darling! We've got much better whites than that!* and switched from beer to white, setting a pace Bernelle was forced to keep up with. As Bernelle became very merry indeed, I looked forward with considerable anticipation, to our return home.

After a substantial roast meal, it was a matter of kicking back to enjoy the music provided by the duo under the shade cloth. As Sascha and Butch worked their way through *Moondance*, *Brown Eyed Girl*,

and their reworking of *Under the Boardwalk* (*Under the Shade cloth/Down at the Palace*) we enjoyed several digestifs.

Sascha, known around town as the *Purple Passion Prince* had arrived a few years before when a Crustacean of Kiwi extraction mentioned he had a mate who had just graduated from Agricultural College, had been an All Blacks triallist, would fit nicely into the team at fly half, and was looking for suitable employment.

Since the Crustaceans had supporters in the farming community and ancillary services, it had been relatively easy to find Sascha employment, but several things became obvious.

First, he seemed to have difficulty finding a sustainable niche, and seemed to change jobs every couple of months, gradually moving around the circle of Crustacean supporters who could offer him work. Fortunately, his football skills were such that most agreed it was worth keeping him in town.

Once he had circumnavigated that group he had moved into the wider community, until he had, it seemed, tried every available source, without managing to find a suitable full-time sustained occupation.

Second, like most New Zealanders whose family origins lay in the Pacific Islands, he had a pleasant tenor voice admirably suited to reggae and rhythm & blues, considerable skill as a guitarist, and a relaxed and easy stage manner.

After a number of jam sessions, he linked up with the Butch, who played saxophone when he was not slicing rumps in his father's shop. He'd started his musical career in the town brass band, and apart from his sax playing could work his way round a variety of other brass and woodwind instruments since he was currently also responsible for the initial education of recruits to the band. His versatility meant that the duo soon established themselves as the regular musical accompaniment for Sunday afternoon sessions at the Palace.

Sascha picked up solo work around the ridges, and the money he pulled in from casual bar work at the Palace, the proceeds of the regular duo gig on Sunday evenings and the odd show on the outside was enough to keep him going as long as the third factor worked to his advantage.

He'd found that the resemblance between himself and a certain musician who'd changed his stage name from a six-letter word to a squiggle ensured a steady stream of female admirers. By moving from one admirer to another he had no need for a permanent home, so provided his income covered the cost of meals, clothing and alcohol, there was no need to seek permanent employment.

Each Sunday afternoon from around four Sascha and The Butch worked their way through an extensive repertoire. Since it was getting close to seven-thirty, although they had not, by any means, run out of material to play, Sascha was ready for a break.

Shortly after we arrived in the beer garden, Carole Kensington and her two companions from the night before had arrived. Mangoes had clearly recovered from recent heartache, and, by the look on her face was ready to offer Sascha refuge should he feel so inclined.

The look of would-be devotion I noticed had not, it seemed been picked up by Sascha. His attention was more focussed on our table, and it was obvious that Sascha had intentions of adding Bernelle to his lengthy list of local conquests.

It was about the time of the evening when an invitation to someone in the audience to sing a few would give him a break, provide the Butch with an opportunity to experiment and allow Sascha to chat up a potential playmate. Sandy, who had been known to strum the odd guitar, was seated on the other side of Bernelle when Sascha turned towards him and asked if he felt like singing a few.

Sandy, being the unassuming gentleman he is, declined, but, under pressure of popular acclaim relented and joined the duo on stage. After a quick *Moondance* Sascha slipped away for a quiet couple of drinks. Once he'd visited the bar, he sat down on the seat recently vacated by Sandy.

As Sascha turned his charm in Bernelle's direction, I noticed that his advances were not being greeted with the attention they usually received. Two minutes later he was excusing himself to *catch up with a few other people* and headed towards the table where Mangoes and company were seated.

Looks of would-be devotion had evidently been noted.

As Sascha sat down on the other side of the beer garden, Sandy, glancing in my direction, announced that he had a few surprises for a few people.

Without further ado, he launched into the opening track of Love's ***Forever Changes***, which I had frequently claimed to be the greatest album in the history of recorded music. There seemed to be a twinkle in his eye as he reached the chorus of *Alone Again Or* (*And I will be alone again tonight, my dear.*)

If that was a surprise, the next song was a revelation.

With a comment that *here's a lovely (grin) song from the same album* he went on to play a faultless *Andmoreagain*. Bernelle, along with everyone else who hadn't heard the track, was stunned by the stark beauty of the song.

Familiar with the tune, I was stunned by the way Sandy navigated the instrumental break in the middle of the song. The boy had obviously been getting some serious practice in while we were away overseas.

The effect on the crowd was sensational. The song finished to a wave of applause.

"What song was that?" Bernelle asked.

"An old one by a West Coast band called Love, Play you the original version when we get back."

The reaction suggested that the task of enticing her into my sleeping quarters would be accomplished without difficulty. Sascha, aware that the reaction threatened to undermine his position as the star of the show, excused himself from Mangoes' table and was moving back towards the stage.

"Just one more," said Sandy. With a big grin across his dial, Sandy looked directly at our table and said, "Here's one for my mates over there."

*Will there be any bartenders up there in heaven?  
Will the pubs never close, will the glass never drain ..."*



As I recognized the song my jaw dropped. It was Richard Thompson's *God Loves a Drunk*, well on the way towards becoming the unofficial anthem of Moderation and a personal favourite ever since I'd bought *Rumour and Sigh*. I looked over to Hopalong.

"How long has he been playing this?"

"Never heard him play it before, but he's been shutting himself in his room a lot during the week, and I've heard it a few times on his stereo."

When he had finished, Sandy handed the guitar back to Sascha, acknowledged the applause, and rejoined the table. "Thirsty work, that," he remarked as he sat down. "Whose shout?" Hopalong was despatched to the bar to remedy the temporary beer shortage.

"How long have you been playing those three?" I asked.

"I've been playing a few albums I borrowed from your collection quite a bit. Since I knew how much you liked those tracks I just thought I'd see if I could work out the chords, since they might make a little *welcome home* surprise. So I waited until Hopalong wasn't around and no one could hear me working on them and had a go. Took a bit of doing, but I got them eventually."

"You got them, all right," I commented as Hopalong returned with a fresh round. "Why the secrecy?"

"Well," grinned Sandy, "I thought that if you and Jeffrey knew I was working on them, you'd put the weights on me to play them. I didn't want to do that until I was sure I could play them properly. That instrumental break in *And more again* sounds easy, but it's bloody tricky to get the timing right. I was able to work on that one while Hopalong was around because he'd never recognize it on its own."

"Brilliant job," I said, and I could see from Bernelle's face that she seconded the emotion. "What're you going to have a go at next?"

"That would be telling," smiled Sandy with an admonishing finger wagged.

After those surprises, Sascha's efforts fell a little flat.

Not that there was anything wrong with the songs they were playing. Sandy's three great songs no one had heard him play before had left everyone stunned. Sandy, having satisfied his thirst, looked around the table.

"I've just about had enough for today and I've got to teach tomorrow. I think I'll call a cab. Anyone going to join me?"

The motion to adjourn was passed unanimously, despite The Duchess pointing out that there was still just over half a bottle of perfectly good unfinished Riesling. It was the second bottle opened since Bernelle had remarked on the quality of the previous white she had been partaking of.

As we were leaving Bernelle, who had not previously been on the receiving end of The Duchess's generosity, thanked her for her wonderful hospitality. In keeping with her role as Lady of the Manor, our hostess waved her hand, saying, "Take the bottle. I've had enough for the night. Besides, I've a little appointment with His Lordship tonight."

She delivered the news in a tone that suggested the poor lad would be likely to find difficulty in walking tomorrow morning.

Arm in arm, Bernelle and I weaved our way to the entrance, where we found the rest of the party waiting. As the *maxi taxi* pulled up, we turned, waved farewell to our genial hosts, and directed our thoughts to the rest of the night.

Alighting at the motel, Sandy insisted on paying the fare, commenting that he *didn't get to pay for enough round here*.

Despite protests that his performance earlier in the evening warranted someone else paying the fare, Sandy's position in the seat beside the driver was difficult to argue with, so we left him to sort out the financial arrangements while the rest of us wended our way to our rooms.

There was no suggestion of further festivities and rest seemed to feature prominently on most agendas.

Locking the door as I ushered Bernelle into the room had, by now, become a reflex action and I looked forward to the uninterrupted fulfillment of my less than honourable intentions. As Bernelle filled a glass, she enquired about the origin of *those two songs*. As I headed towards the collection to find the album, I ticked off the possible sources of disturbance that had been accounted for.

Jeffrey had safely ensconced himself with the Twins. It was highly unlikely he would be going anywhere.

Sandy, Hopalong and Bright Eyes had all indicated that sleep was a high priority.

Earlier in the afternoon, when Jeffrey had expressed concern her mother might appear on the scene and disrupt proceedings, Bernelle had informed him Olga was working all night in her regular role as short order cook at the all-night road house.

Confident that we would not be disturbed, I slipped the CD from its jewel case, dimmed the lights, and went into seduction mode. There seemed no possible way that my intentions could be thwarted. Half way through the album we had passed the stage we had reached the night before, and as her jeans slid floor-wards it was only a matter of time before the relationship was consummated.

Having been liberated from most of her clothing, Bernelle sipped from her glass while I extricated myself from most of mine. With only a pair of jocks to be disposed of, I turned to resume the more physical aspects of seduction when Bernelle placed the glass on the table.

"I don't feel so well. Excuse me."

She rose unsteadily to her feet and moved rapidly to the bathroom. The sounds that issued from the bathroom about thirty seconds later indicated that, while The Duchess was able to sock it away with the best of them over an extended session, Bernelle had not developed the same degree of alcoholic staying power.

I waited until the sounds had ceased, and ventured towards the bathroom to offer assistance and do whatever I could to restore the situation. I was promptly told to make myself scarce.

Half an hour later a much-shaken Bernelle emerged, obviously still unwell and in no state to be receptive to any amorous advances, so I did what I could to ensure her comfort, putting her to bed

with suitable medication and a jug of water conveniently placed within easy reach, then went to move into the other side of the bed.

From the reaction the move provoked, it seemed my physical proximity was unlikely to prove comforting, so, heading for the couch, I did what I could to make myself comfortable and settled down for the night, wondering what turn of events the morning would bring.

It was unlikely that the opportunity to complete unfinished business would present itself, but then again, stranger things had been known to happen.

## NO ONE KNOWS

As expected, the morning saw Bernelle the worse for wear; disinclined to indulge in physical activity.

After a shower, she took a couple of vitamin B tablets, remarked that she doubted her ability to make it through the day, thought her toothbrush might not be up to the job of cleaning up her breath and, as she'd cleared her stomach, a couple of hours should have been enough to clear her bloodstream, so she was now able to drive home, a judgment seemingly inconsistent with previous conclusions.

Previous events suggested her judgement was not a reliable conveyance, and I suggested it might be better to get a taxi home. I pointed out my suspicion our return to town would have attracted the attention of the constabulary and you never knew where a police car might be lurking.

Not that my suggestion was, in any way motivated by the thought that leaving her car here would require her return to the premises in the afternoon.

When the taxi arrived, I headed back to the room. It was early, and there were no signs of life, though I was sure Sandy was quietly preparing himself for a week at the coal face.

If I couldn't assuage the lusts of the flesh, with no one around to talk to, I might as well indulge in the pursuit of sleep. It was well and truly midmorning when I arose. There seemed to be activity in the courtyard, and I paused to consider the cause. There were voices and footsteps where all should have been quiet. The voices seemed familiar.

I ran through the list of likely suspects.

Sandy would have long since gone to work at the High School.

I'd seen Bernelle off the premises.

The Twins would be engaged in gathering content for Wednesday's paper.

Hopalong and Jeffrey would be around the place somewhere, but neither of the voices were theirs. There was a knock at the door:

"Herston!"

It was Jeffrey with a tone to his voice that indicated news of some importance.

"What is it? I'm just about to get in the shower;" Actually, I was considering a return to bed, but that was obviously out of the question. A shower seemed advisable before I faced the world outside.

"You'll never guess what's *waddled* in! Catch you after your shower."

With sleep out of the question, I headed for the shower, noting remarkably little evidence of Bernelle's distress the night before. The girl had obviously been well-trained.

While I stood under the shower, I considered the possibilities. The emphasis placed on the *waddled* in Jeffrey's statement must signal the arrival of Waddles, although when we had last seen him there had been no indication of an intention to return to Denison in the near future.

Emerging from the shower, I dressed, and wandered out to see what was going on.

I was partly wrong. Entering Reception I beheld the awesome figure of Waddles, and beside him, the diminutive figure of Wally, his stable jockey. Over the next five minutes, I learned the unexpected pleasure of our friends' company had been prompted by fear in the wake of a certain race result.

Le Ver Marin's effort had incurred the wrath of high profile crime figures of Italian extraction.

Over the years I'd heard the odd rumour suggesting the proceeds of criminal activities were being legitimized through betting, and, it seemed, the last race in Sydney on Saturday was intended to launder a large amount of drug money.

It wasn't too hard to guess how these things worked. A mixture of cajolery, financial inducement and intimidation would arrange a result to allow a substantial plunge. There had been a shortener when the fluctuations came through, and it had run second. That was obviously the horse.

"Straight after we'd passed the winning post, before the Clerk of the Course got anywhere near me, the bloke riding the second horse was heading towards me. Thought he was going to congratulate me, since I thought it'd been a good ride, but when he got about a metre away from me, he was straight into me. *What the fuck do you think you're doing? Can't you ride to instructions? Course I can.* That's what I said. *The trainer told me to get him back in the field and bring him home down the outside. And that's what I did.* Then he muttered something about a grand and reckoned I'd better be careful crossing the road. By that time the Clerk of the Course was there and he didn't say any more," was Wally's description of the minute or two when he should, by rights, have been over the moon having ridden his first city winner.

"I was on my way down to the Mounting Yard," Waddles took up the narrative, "feeling good since things had worked out exactly how we figured when this bloke stepped out in front of me with his hand out. Thought he was going to congratulate me on the win, but he said something about my shoe size that I didn't quite catch."

"When you asked?" I inquired.

"He suggested that I'd be taking that size in concrete boots. Strange thing is it's the guy you two were drinking with at the bar that Saturday."

"And?" I asked.

"Anyway when we had correct weight and I'd collected on the bets I said to Wally, *Mate I think we're just about outta here*, and we headed off towards the cab rank. On the way another bloke suggested t'd better be making myself scarce, so when we got into the cab I thought pretty quick and headed back to the yard to clean out the safe since we'd be needing plenty of cash."

"What about Hilda?" Jeffrey asked. "Where's she?"

"Called her from the yard. Listen, I said, *you're going to need to get out of town for a while. Got any relies you haven't seen for a while?* Turns out she's got an aunt in Perth she hasn't seen for years, so I told her to grab her purse, passport and credit card, don't worry about packing, get into the car and head straight for the airport. Leave the car in the long term car park, that's what I told her. That's where we headed, see, and once we'd cleaned out the safe."

"That's where you headed too. How'd you get there? Same cab or did you call another one?"

"That's when I started thinking. Knew that we might need to get out of the country, that's why I told her to grab the passport. Had mine in the safe, so I grabbed it as well. I figured anyone who was after us would be able to track us as far as the yard, so it was time to start muddying the waters a bit."

"So you didn't take a cab," Jeffrey guessed. "You took one of the cars from the yard?"

"Figured there's no way they'd know the rego numbers of the cars in the yard, so I grabbed the keys to the one Wayne'd have the most trouble getting rid of and headed for the airport. Figured they'd guess where we were going, but you don't want to make things too easy."

In between his training commitments Captain Headrush was pulling in extra money as an assistant used car salesman.

"So when you got to the airport you bought three tickets," I suggested.

"That's when I started thinking, so I bought one ticket for Hilda, used her maiden name, 'cos that's the one on her passport, see. Thought that'd be safe enough since they wouldn't be after her. Told her to buy whatever she needs with the credit card but make sure it's nowhere near her aunty's or wherever she ends up staying. Got her aunty's phone number and said I'd be in touch and left her there to catch the next plane to Perth."

"Where'd you go?" Jeffrey asked. "If you didn't buy a plane ticket you must have."

"Caught the train. Thinking about it on the way to the airport, I asked Wally to ring and see if there's an overnight train from Melbourne to Sydney, which there is as it turns out. In case you're interested, they don't ask for ID on the train, so we left Hilda at the airport and headed into Central, booked two seats on the train to Melbourne and parked the car where it'd be towed away Monday morning. Wayne'll report it stolen, so there's no hassle there, and we pissed off to grab a feed while we waited for the train to leave at eight-forty."

"In the morning, when you got to Melbourne," I surmised.

"We got off at Southern Cross and caught the airport shuttle. When we got there I booked two seats to Hobart and got onto my mate who's got a car yard in Launceston. He got onto a mate of his in Hobart who met us at the airport with a car from his yard we could borrow for a week and headed up to Lonnie, where my mate met us at the airport after he'd booked two seats to Adelaide for him and his offsider."

"After the check-in he handed you and Wally the boarding passes, so there's no record of you two leaving the island," Jeffrey concluded.

"So with a bit of luck they'll track us as far as Hobart and think we're hiding out somewhere in Tassie, and since there won't be any record of Wally or me leaving Tasmania, I figured we'd be reasonably safe using our real names the rest of the way."

Waddles seemed confident, but I had my doubts. Their journey had taken them through Alice Springs, Perth, Darwin and Brisbane, stopping in each place long enough to get onto the next flight to somewhere else. The final leg took them to Mackay where they'd borrowed a set of wheels from one of Waddles' contacts in the *motor vehicle industry* and headed for Denison, planning to lie low until things quietened down.

"So," I asked. "Where are you off to now?"

"Nowhere. We figured we could say here."

"Not a good idea," I countered. "A certain well-dressed gentleman of Italian extraction with a keen interest in your shoe size has the phone number and..."

At this point the phone rang, and I left them to their deliberations.

When I picked up the receiver, I thought the voice at the other end of the line was familiar, but it was not until it offered me a little information for Wednesday's races in return for information of interest to the caller's *friends* that I realized it was the cooperative gentleman who had organized the final stages of our Sydney betting coup.

I could guess what was coming and tried to sound as noncommittal as possible.

"At the races the other day, you were talking to a bloke by the name of Waddington," the caller observed. There was no point in denying that.

"Yeah," I replied.

"Know him well, do you?"

"He had a car yard here, but he packed up and bought into a place in Sydney. Don't hear a lot from him these days, but he rings from time to time. Why?"

"Ring you last Saturday, did he?"

There was little point in denying that either. Anyone who interviewed people present at the track on Saturday afternoon would have shot us down in flames. Likewise, The Duchess's excursion to the TAB would have been very difficult to cover up.

"Yeah, that's right. Gave us a good tip."

I hoped there was no hint of my alarm in my voice.

"You haven't heard from him since."

"Not a word. I was going to give him a call at the yard later today to thank him for the tip. Could have done it yesterday but we were having a bit of a celebration."

"Well, I don't think you'll catch him there, and if you're thinking of ringing him at home, don't bother. The phone isn't answering. If you happen to sight him could you give me a call? Some of my friends are interested in talking to him about a conveyance."

Somehow I had the impression that the friends were not in the market for a used car.

"No worries. I wouldn't be expecting him up this way though. He left town because he wanted to be able to get a decent bet on and swore black and blue that he wouldn't be back."

"You know what they say about used car salesmen. Most of them couldn't lay straight in bed. If you happen to see Waddington, or his jockey, be sure to give me a call. You've got the number?"

As it happened I didn't, but within a minute it was prominent on the Reception whiteboard. I thought it was a good place for it, particularly while certain accommodation arrangements were up in the air.

"Good. You seemed like a nice bloke. Be a shame to see something nasty happen to you."

"For sure. As soon as I hear from the big bastard, I'll give you a call."

That had been a little close for comfort, and the cat was well and truly among the pigeons.

I walked back into Recreation, musing that we had landed ourselves in a Chamozzle. There had been a particularly well-named horse a few years, *Rumpus Room*, by *Chamozzle* out of *Downstairs*. As I entered our equivalent of a rumpus room, three faces looked up.

"Who was that," they asked in unison. Something in my face must have showed concern.

"A certain well dressed gentleman from Sydney. Bloke who seemed to be able to get fairly big bets on easily. Seems like you're definitely not going to be staying here."

"What'd he want?" The question was again, almost in unison.

"He's very interested in locating you pair, I don't think we've heard the last of him."

"So, what do you reckon?" Jeffrey asked.

I looked at the two fugitives. "Have you stopped anywhere else around town?" I asked.

"Nope. Straight off the highway into your car park. Right Wally?" Wally verified that this was the case.

"You wouldn't have noticed by any chance, whether the sign outside the Shoreline had a No in front of the *Vacancy*? No? I thought not. Excuse me for a mo."

Our new home was on the outskirts of town, but it would be impossible to hide them on the premises. Both were sufficiently distinctive and well-known to create difficulties should we try to hide them in downtown Denison.

There was a motel on the outskirts of town, perched on top of a hill looking over the bay, much favoured by commercial travellers. There were a dozen rooms, so it was a husband and wife operation. If they could be sworn to secrecy, there wasn't much chance of someone breaching security.

The business had changed hands, and I knew the new management from the time their son had been in the district schoolboys' cricket side. I'd managed to wangle him a spot in the regional team, and they'd told me that if there was anything they could do, all I had to do was ask.

It was time to call in a few favours.

A call was enough to slot Waddles and Wally into the room at the back of the building furthest from the road. There were a number of other matters that needed attention, but we'd made a start.

There wasn't much chance the car they were driving would be known to pursuers, but in case the two of them were tracked as far as Mackay, it would be better off out of town. Jeffrey volunteered to



return it to Mackay and suggested if someone was to drive it to Townsville and back before that, the waters might be further muddied.

The first step was to transfer Wally and Waddles to their new refuge. If we were going to keep them out of sight we'd need to provide entertainment, but, fortunately, there was a spare DVD player on the premises that had come with the buildings, so assuming we could grab a pile of suitable movies, we'd be able to keep them amused.

Breakfast and diner could be provided onsite, and I was disinclined to vary routine at the Shoreline by imposing on them for lunch. Ferrying supplies should be assigned to someone reliable, and Hopalong was the obvious choice, since Bright Eyes and the red convertible would be too conspicuous.

Checking with Waddles and Wally revealed that they hadn't sighted him since they arrived on the premises, and a quick check of the car park revealed that he was out and about somewhere.

"And Bright Eyes?" I asked, as I checked off people who might be aware of their arrival in town.

"The phone rang while I was seeing the Twins off. The High School needed her for a day's supply work, so she was gone well before nine."

"The best thing about Hopalong," I pointed out, returning to the main issue, "is that he looks like an honest bastard. Of course, we know he's a low-down scoffing mongrel, but he's the sort of bloke who looks as honest as the day is long. We've just got to make sure that all the deliveries go to Reception, rather than the actual room itself, and since most of the customers out there are sales reps, there's hardly likely to be anyone apart from Ron and Bev on the premises around midday. So if a certain well-dressed Italian gentleman lobbed on the doorstep and asked if he'd seen Waddles."

"And he had," Jeffrey interrupted, "he wouldn't be able to hide the fact that he was lying. But if he hasn't actually seen you pair."

"It'll look like an honest answer" The penny inside Waddles' skull had dropped. "That's good. I like it. Now if we can get out of here without him spotting us."

Jeffrey accompanied them so he could bring the car back before giving it a run around the countryside, while, armed with a pen and a sheet of paper I started preparing the shopping list. About half an hour later Hopalong arrived on the premises inquiring about the unfamiliar vehicle in the car park. Jeffrey had returned and was making preparations before he set out on what looked like being a seven or eight hour road trip.

Bright Eyes could be detailed to collect him from Mackay when she returned from her day's supply teaching and the story I'd come up with to satisfy Hopalong's insatiable curiosity would probably suffice if an explanation was required.

A scrawled note before he left would provide extra cover. Something like *Unexpected trip to Mackay. May need Bright Eyes to collect tonight. Will explain later.* Jeffrey would probably do. Alternatively, he could head back on the bus.

"Ask no questions," I informed Hopalong, "and you'll be told no lies. We've got a shit-load of things that need to be done. One question though. It's one that you might be hearing over the next few days, so you'd better get used to answering it. You wouldn't, by any chance, have spotted Scott Waddington during your recent travels?"

"Not since he sold the car yard and moved to Sydney."

"Good. If you wouldn't mind making sure you don't there'll be a few people who'll be breathing much easier. You might be interested to know that a certain race result has incurred the wrath of members of an Italian crime organization."

"The Mafia?" Hopalong suggested.

"The same. Since Waddles and his stable jockey are disinclined to accept an invitation to be measured for concrete boots, they've been forced to make themselves scarce till things quieten down."

"So they're here," Hopalong suggested.

"Have you seen them? *No*. Have I told you they're here? *No*. So do you *know* they're here?"

"No," was the response.

"We're going to ensure that remains the case. However there are a few things that need to be done, and you're the one who's going to have to do them."

"Such as?"

"The list here starts off with buying a couple of prepaid mobile phones, a couple of bottles of Jack Daniels, about ten litres of Coke, a couple of cartons of beer, two days worth of assorted DVDs from the video library and some fish and chips for lunch." It was an impressive list, and brought a predictable response.

"Who's that for?"

It was a thorny question that I had anticipated. The truth would hardly be a satisfactory response.

"A couple of my cricket mates have hit a spot of bother."

"Like Waddles and Wally?"

"Exactly. The two sets of circumstances bear remarkable resemblances. I'll let you know the full story when things quieten down, but for the time being all you need to know is that these blokes are on the run from an outraged husband and an irate father who happen to be the same gentleman."

"Pardon?"

"While Buckets was carrying on with his missus, Knuckles was getting the daughter up the spout. So they're holed up out at the Shoreline. Now, obviously, I can't do the supply run to pick up the stuff they'll be needing."

"Because you don't drive."

"That too, but what is more important because I promised Razor that I'd call him if I spotted them..."

"So that was their car in the driveway," Hopalong guessed.

"Exactly. They turned up while I was asleep, and persuaded Jeffrey to drop them out at the Shoreline. Couldn't wait till I woke up for reasons that will soon become obvious. Called me from there to ask for help with supplies and so forth. The phones have been running hot over the past hour or so, I can tell you. Just after Razor's call when I promised that I'd call as soon as I saw them."

"If you were to go out to the Shoreline with the stuff you'd be likely to spot them."

"Exactly. In any case I need to hang around here and take care of any phone calls. I'm not expecting any more, but you never know in times like this."

"So where is Jeffrey going with the car?"

"Razor's best mate happens to be the head of the Traffic Branch in Townsville. Jeffrey's going to take the car for a spin around the countryside. Apparently the cameras that the cops use to catch anyone running red lights gather more data than everyone thinks, so the car needs to have a run around Townsville and then take a little trip around Mackay so that anyone checking over the video footage..."

"I get the picture, and the mobile phones will keep you in touch with them in case the cops are monitoring the phone lines here."

"Right on. If they're asking about the one call from the Shoreline that has already happened, I can explain it away as Ron and Bev calling to see how the overseas trip went. Now, when you get the phones, there'll be some paperwork involved, so we're going to need a cover story. You wouldn't happen to have a couple of nephews and nieces with birthdays coming up?"

The Cassidy clan had produced numerous offspring, and I figured that there'd be a couple of kids with birthdays coming up in the not-too-distant future.

"I can check. It'll be on the calendar in my room."

While that task was attended to I scanned the shopping list. With renovations complete we'd redefined Hopalong's area of responsibility to encompass the regular run through the supermarket. Since that was the case, supplies he bought for Waddles and Wally while substantial, could be merged into what was needed to maintain our household, but we'd need something to hold supplies once they were sorted into *Ours* and *Theirs*.

By the time I'd fetched a box from the bathroom behind the music room Hopalong had returned. His researches had established his sister's twins, Justin and Jaymee had a birthday in six weeks' time. They were turning eleven, so supplying them with a prepaid phone would be a sensible precaution.

"If they're your sister's kids their surname's not going to be Cassidy, right?"

"That's right," was the reply. "It's Maher. You know, like the cricketer."

"Even better. That way if you have to fill out any paperwork in their names you can make a joke about their lives being *marred* by the lack of a mobile phone. Might be handy to have those sorts of details in people's minds if there's anybody sniffing around."

Once the shopping list had been prepared and Hopalong despatched on his round of errands there was nothing to do except keep to something approximating a regular routine.

I remembered there was a load of washing in the machine, and since it had been there since the previous day it might be best to give it another run through the cycle.

From there, I went on to retrieve the washing Bernelle and I had placed on the line yesterday, separated the wash-and-wear items from those that would need ironing and spent half an hour slaving over the ironing board.

By the time I'd finished, so had the load of recycled washing, so that went on the line before I headed back to the room to stow away what I'd ironed.

With the laundry out of the way, I wandered into the kitchen to fix brunch. While I was in the process, Hopalong returned bearing fruit, vegetables and mobile phones, and accepted my offer of something to eat before he made the first delivery to the Shoreline.

As we ate, we discussed the need for security, suggesting everyone else in our community should know as little as possible about arrangements that had been made.

Bright Eyes and Sandy were not to be told anything that they did not absolutely need to know. I was careful to ensure all references were to Buckets and Knuckles rather than Waddles and Wally.

Once Hopalong left, I placed the dishes, cooking utensils, pots and pans in the dishwasher and made a quick call to our butcher to request a delivery before I resumed cataloguing the music purchases.

After about an hour, a knock at the door indicated that the meat had arrived. Once the supplies had been placed in the fridge, I thought a change of activity was indicated, so taking the latest James Lee Burke and a glass I wandered to the pool for a read while I awaited the return of the rest of the crew.

As the afternoon wore on, I rested my eyes, and regained consciousness just after four to find Sandy and Bright Eyes had returned and were concerned as to the whereabouts of *everybody*. In the interests of security I explained that I had slept in, and gathered that Jeffrey had gone to Mackay for some reason or other, but that I wasn't sure of the exact details when he'd left since I'd been half asleep when they were detailing their plans.

"There's a note on the counter in the office," I explained. "Doesn't say anything other than he's gone and Bright Eyes might need to collect him from Mackay. Mind you, knowing Jeffrey there are some things that it's best you don't *actually* know about, if you catch my drift."

Their response suggested the drift had been caught so I explained Hopalong had been coming and going on unspecified business, and I was unaware of either the nature of such business or his current whereabouts.

I'd been reading until I'd needed to rest my eyes for a while, which accounted for my lack of knowledge of Hopalong's whereabouts.

A phone call despatched Bright Eyes in the red chariot to collect Jeffrey from the pub nearest to Mackay's main shopping centre. The vehicle had been left in the car park, and Jeffrey had come up with a story that would explain his excursion.

"Whatever story you come up with, it's probably best if you don't say anything unless specifically asked. If you're definite about having to leave before I surfaced this morning," I suggested, "that'll tie in with the note in the office."

When the phone rang again just after five I thought it was best to leave Sandy to answer it, since he was closer to it and since, should the caller have any questions about Waddles' whereabouts he would be able to honestly say that he didn't have a clue.

When he emerged from the office, it was to indicate Bernelle was on the line, and wanted to know if it would be all right for her to pick up her car. On reaching the phone, I discovered that one of her work mates had offered to drop her at *The Crossroads*, so I suggested she might, perhaps, be interested in joining me for dinner.

There was recently arrived rib fillet in the fridge, and Hopalong had replenished the supply of vegetables, so I suggested that she might fancy a pepper steak, potato casserole and sautéed greens for dinner; and there was a red in the cellar which would make a suitable accompaniment.

While unenthusiastic about the wine, Bernelle agreed dinner sounded *nice* and would be happy to stay *for a while*, though she was intending to drive herself home later in the night, which would place limitations on alcoholic consumption.

We would, I thought, see about that.

There were a couple of late appointments at the salon, but thought she'd be arriving somewhere after six. Five minutes later I was knocking on Sandy's door and suggesting that he might be interested in joining us for dinner; since Bernelle had been persuaded to dine on the premises. When Hopalong pulled up in the car park I extended the same invitation before heading into the kitchen to start preparations.

With a bottle of Cabernet opened and decanted and another opened and breathing, I was just placing the potato casserole in the oven when Bernelle walked through the door; accompanied, as it turned out, by Gloria, who immediately accepted an invitation to stay for dinner.

That seemed to provide a suitable excuse for a drink, so I opened a Semillon Sauvignon Blanc from Eden Valley. I suspected it might not be a good idea to suggest a Riesling, since one had brought her undone the night before. I suggested that they might like the tropical fruit flavours in the wine, and suggested they swirl the wine in the glass and have a good sniff before tasting, since the nose on this one was *rather interesting*. Since this seemed outside their repertoire, I demonstrated the technique with the first glass I had filled.

If we were going to overcome intentions to limit her consumption for the evening, some distractions were going to be required, and the finer points of wine tasting would provide a suitable smoke screen. The fact that Gloria was a fresh starter unaffected by recent alcoholic excess would not exactly hinder the scheme.

Sandy and Hopalong arrived as I was filling the other two glasses, and once each of them had been given a glass, that was the end of the bottle, which meant that a second needed to be opened while the two of them entertained our guests and I finished preparing the meal. Having planned for such an eventuality, it was easy to select a suitable wine.

Having hit them with tropical fruit with bottle number one, it was obvious that a different flavour was needed in the second bottle, so I selected a Hunter chardonnay, opened the bottle, placed it in an ice bucket, since giving it a little time to breathe would be helpful. Not that the breathing time was going to be too lengthy. In case reserves were needed, I checked there was a second bottle in the fridge.

Ten minutes later I was grabbing fresh glasses, and suggesting our visitors would find the nose an interesting contrast to the previous wine, and suggesting that they give their palates a good go at the wine since *the malolactic fermentation had left it with a buttery taste* and explaining the secondary fermentation that transformed the nasty malic acid into the much more pleasant, buttery lactic acid, thankful we'd taken the time on a quiet Monday in the Hunter to allow a winemaker to talk us through the details.

The need to explain the intricacies of the winemaking process meant the reserve bottle would be called into play since my explanation had conveniently taken us about as long as it took to finish our glasses and I'd need a refill before I moved off to attend to dinner. Once my glass was recharged, Bernelle invited herself into the kitchen to watch while the steaks were done, the pan de-glazed with brandy, and a pepper, cream and mustard sauce prepared.

She seemed impressed with the process, and while I put the finishing touches to the meal and tackled the *plating up* I explained I'd always been interested in food, and it was a case of learning to cook or spending a fortune on counter meals.

My explanation that, despite the economies of scale on offer at a commercial establishment, I figured it was still cheaper to cook at home was acknowledged to be sensible, as was my explanation that I'd found if I cooked a sufficient quantity on Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday nights the leftovers covered dinner on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

I'd also benefited from discussions with The Duchess, D'Artagnan and Porthos, which had been the source of useful tips, one of which involved the sauce I'd just prepared.

"You should recognize it. D'Artagnan doesn't realize it but I conned his secret pepper sauce recipe out of Porthos one night when he'd had a few too many."

Like many chefs, D'Artagnan kept a range of items, his *mise-en-place* above his cooking station. These were colour coded and arranged in a particular order, but none of the containers were labelled, so while it was possible to see what he was doing, unless D'Artagnan was to identify each of the items in his *mise* and you were able to guess quantities used, it was unlikely that you'd be able to reproduce some of his trademark dishes.

D'Artagnan had been persuaded to reveal the recipe for this pepper sauce to Porthos since, should some accident prevent D'Artagnan's attendance in the kitchen when his *mise* was not *en-place* or it ran out during proceedings it was important to have someone on hand who could prepare one of the establishment's trademark dishes.

I'd wheedled a written copy out of Porthos one night when he was the worse for drink, and though the scrawl had been almost illegible, experimentation eventually produced an accurate reproduction.

Serving complete, Bernelle helped me deliver the plates to the table, where a fresh set of glasses had been placed beside the decanter of red that had been quietly breathing for the past two hours.

Over dinner, the conversation turned to the lack of fine dining facilities in town. Apart from the Palace there was one notable restaurant and the consensus was that while the Palace offered exceptional value, the popularity of the venue and the size of the kitchen meant compromises were inevitable, regardless of The Duchess's higher intentions.

From there the conversation moved to my recent overseas excursion, and the possibility of preparing some of the dishes we'd encountered some time in the future.

There was a strong possibility of Cajun seafood dishes appearing on the menu once I'd had the chance to visit the fish market and when I mentioned that there were a couple of oyster dishes of particular interest, the news was greeted with considerable enthusiasm by Bernelle, while Gloria suggested that she would be declining invitations in that direction because she *can't stand them*.

"Even Sydney rock oysters? The ones they get at the Fish Market every week?"

"*Particularly* Sydney rock oysters. I got sick after eating some when I was little and I can't stand them."

I filed this bit of useful information in the memory bank and suggested one of the benefits of living where we do is the availability of abundant fresh seafood.

That gave Sandy the opportunity to suggest my next visit to the Market might allow him to prepare his trademark raw fish, *though you'll need to make sure that it's really fresh*.

Bernelle and Gloria's reservations about the dish prompted the explanation that it wasn't *really* raw, being marinated in lime juice for at least twelve hours and looking at it the chemical reaction gave the fish the appearance of having been cooked although it had been nowhere near a stove.

That discussion, along with some of my reminiscences about Cajun *dirty rice* pushed the conversation to a consideration of some of the more exotic dishes we'd met, and once dinner was out of the way, the five of us adjourned to the pool with the remains of the second bottle of red.

We'd had the juke box operating in the dining room, but once we'd moved outside it was time to source the background music from my room, so I headed off to look after a suitable soundtrack. **Forever Changes** would be a good starter; then it might be best to keep things low key. If I followed Love with something bluesier and female, the right mood might be established, and from there we could move into something jazzier.

As I made my selections and placed the disks in the changer, I continued thinking ahead.

It was obvious Gloria was not going to be able to drive herself home, so she would be needing somewhere to crash for the evening, and when I rejoined the group, I was quick to make a suggestion to that it might be in Gloria's best interests to avail herself of one of our spare rooms because *situations like these were what they are there for*.

While she didn't accept the invitation immediately there was no indication of an intention to drive home, so it seemed Bernelle would be remaining on site. I had been careful to get the suggestion in before the subject of phoning for a taxi had come up.

There was something else that would, if I had anything to do with it, be coming up a later in the evening.

With that detail attended to, I suggested coffee and, perhaps, a liqueur Muscat. Sandy volunteered to operate the percolator, and once he returned it was nearly nine and the red Mercedes was pulling into the driveway. The travellers had been delayed by the need to pick up a pizza, and while they ate, the conversation turned to events of the weekend, which Gloria found interesting before indicating that she was ready to take advantage of our hospitality and avail herself of the offered room.

With a substantial day's driving behind him, once the pizza had been disposed of, Jeffrey announced an early night was indicated, and toddled off towards his room. I was sure the absence of the Twins was a contributory factor to this gross form reversal.

Sandy announced that pressure of work would require his departure as well, and when Bright Eyes indicated that her studies were calling, Hopalong departed to call his intended in London, or wherever she was based. News she would be joining him earlier than originally planned obviously needed further elucidation.

Which left Bernelle and I seated beside the pool. The night was cool and still, the level of the Muscat bottle, opened some time in the recent past, was steadily moving downwards, and, as the CD player shuffled on to Nick Drake's *Bryter Layter* I reflected that it was likely that the prospects for later in the evening were definitely becoming brighter.

"That's nice," said Bernelle. "Who is it? The last one was nice too. You've certainly got some nice music. I'll have to get to know these people."

I was sure that the next few weeks would provide her with plenty of opportunities to explore my collection, but I had other explorations in mind and suggested that it might be time to adjourn indoors. After all, she had to front for work in the morning.

"I'll just check that Gloria is all right. I'll be right there. It was Number Ten, wasn't it? It looks like the lights are still on."

She disappeared towards the room, leaving me to wend my way towards my quarters, contemplating a certain number, coincidentally ending in nine. Everything was working out fine. I heard a tap on a door, and a whispered inquiry as to the well-being of the room's occupant as the door opened. It was only a matter of time, I decided, leaving the door open as I lay back on the bed. We did not want anyone to be accidentally locked out.

An hour later, with the door still open I opened my eyes. The clock indicated it was eleven-thirty, and an investigation of the area revealed a total absence of Bernelle. Moving to Ten, I discovered the door was locked, although the lights were still blazing. As I stood outside, I could discern two separate sets of snores. Curtains prevented further investigation, so there was little else I could do but turn in myself. Despite careful and detailed planning, the prey had slipped through my fingers.

I turned towards my room, resolving to be more careful next time.



## FURTHER COMPLICATIONS

A flurry of activity woke me the next morning, and I discovered, as I left my room, that there was considerable movement afoot. Bernelle and Gloria were heading towards me, and before I could ask what had transpired, Bernelle explained when she asked about Gloria's well-being the response had prompted her to *pop inside* where she had *fallen asleep*.

Waking some time after two she tried my door, found it locked, and had no choice but to spend the rest of the night in Number Ten. For a moment I considered doors that managed to lock themselves, but decided it would be unwise to mention them. Bernelle had indicated that she intended to call in after work to *listen to some more of that music* and suggested I would be unwise to make alternative arrangements such as dropping in to the Palace.

Once Bernelle and Gloria left, Sandy emerged, suggesting he would have to take it easy during the week because of the need to rise early to catch up on his marking. It seemed he was doing everything in his power to improve my chances in the evening.

"I've got a shitload of marking that's going to need to be done by tomorrow, and there's no way I'm going to be able to get it done in the morning."

"Especially if you sleep in. Been there, done that, got the shirt, waiting to star in the movie."

"Even if I don't sleep in there's about six hours of the bastard, so it'll be a case of getting up around one-thirty or starting when I get back from work and going to bed after it's been knocked over."

"So we won't be seeing you poolside this afternoon?" I suggested.

"Not unless you catch me on my way to the fish shop. I think I'll play it on the safe side and go for fish and chips tonight, and that might have certain advantages as far as you're concerned."

"Such as?"

"If I ask Hopalong if he feels like fish and chips he'll be in it like a shot." I found the assumption quite reasonable. "Jeffrey has arranged to meet the Twins at the Palace when they've finished the print run for tomorrow's paper; and they're going to want a quiet night tomorrow night since Thursday's their busy day, so I think that will remove Jeffrey from wider circulation tonight."

"Sounds likely," I agreed.

"If Bright Eyes drops him there she'll probably come straight back here and go back to that book she's buried herself in. I doubt she'd be a starter for fish and chips since she reckons she's putting on weight. If she goes into the kitchen at all, it'll be to whip up a salad or something, which should take no time at all. Should leave the kitchen clear if you wanted to put together a little intimate dinner for two, should you feel so inclined."

Once Sandy had gone and I'd helped myself to toast and tomato juice, I sat down to ponder the possibilities. After the wine had flowed to excess for the last few nights, Bernelle would be disinclined to sign on for another evening, so the wine would have to be limited to one bottle.

Or two, at the most.

The shot would be to steer right away from wine, and as I took another sip of tomato juice I realized a pitcher or two of Cajun Bloody Marys would be a suitable starter. Perhaps a vodka based gazpacho?

*No, I thought. Go with the pitcher of Bloody Marys with another one ready to go in reserve. Since it's Tuesday, they'll have a fresh shipment of oysters at the fish market, so if I was to pick up, say two dozen, we could have them with a couple of different toppings. Since we'll have a couple of different flavours we should be able to get the best part of two dozen away while she decides which one she prefers. So, we can hit her with the old familiar Kilpatrick and give it a Cajun twist the way they do over there, then maybe Rockefeller, Bienville or, err, Rousseau should get things started nicely. and we should only need a main course and a dessert. Now, fish or chicken for the main?*

Working through my cookbooks took a while, but eventually I decided to follow the oysters with a boned chicken with oyster stuffing, a scalloped onion and almond casserole with dirty rice. We'd been avoiding dessert for the past few nights, but a bittersweet chocolate cake loaded with Grand Marnier might finish things off nicely.

I'd started on the shopping list when Hopalong strolled in, asking if there was anything that needed to go out to the Shoreline. A call revealed Waddles and Wally were running low on liquid supplies and needed a restock of the video collection. Something to eat would be handy, although the meals provided by the proprietors were perfectly acceptable. I added prawns, mud crab and videos to my list and suggested we might be wise to start the expedition as soon as possible.

After a quick visit to Bright Eyes to let her know our plans we grabbed a couple of eskies and a supply of cooler bricks from the freezer, piled into Hopalong's vehicle and headed off. We were two hundred metres down the road headed towards town, when Hopalong glanced into the rear view mirror:

"That's strange. There's a black car I don't know turning into the driveway back there."

"In that case, maybe you'd better drop me in town once the shopping is done. I'll get a cab back. Keep an eye out for black cars, by the way. I'd be happier not to be seeing too many. If there is one behind you, do a couple of laps of the nearest roundabout the way they do in the spy stories when they want to check whether they're being tailed."

"Why should I be worrying about black cars? I thought that it was the cops that were after Buckets and Knuckles and the Mafia were after Waddles and Wally."

"There are two possible explanations for black cars. It could be the Mafia looking for Waddles and Wally, of course. You'd guess that if Waddles and Wally are on the run they'd be likely to head for home. Personally, I'd have hoped they'd have enough sense to steer well clear of here, but..."

That was true enough.

"The other explanation?" Hopalong's insatiable curiosity was getting the better of him again.

"When Razor called, he suggested that he'd be perfectly happy if Buckets and Knuckles came to a bad end, so I wouldn't be the least bit surprised if, once the cops have tracked down their whereabouts, Razor was inclined to take out a contract on them. His family come from the Burdekin and it's not like he doesn't have contacts in the Italian community."

Our first stop was the supermarket. Hopalong drove to the bottle shop, where he grabbed a couple of bottles of bourbon, a carton of premixed rum and cola, a bag of ice and a carton of beer, placed them in one of the eskies and looped back to collect me in front of the supermarket.

Next stop was the fish market, and three dozen oysters, two kilos of prawns and a couple of cooked mud-crabs were placed in another esky. We definitely didn't want any contamination of the ice that Waddles and Wally would be using to chill their drinks. I retrieved the oysters once we were back in town, hoping the taxi sitting at the rank would be there when I crossed the street and reminding Hopalong to exercise vigilance

"Remember, when you get out there, go straight to Reception and let them know their order has been delivered. Just carry it in and leave it with them. Remember, if anyone asks you, you haven't seen Waddles or Wally since they left town."

The taxi was still on the rank when I had crossed the street, so it was a matter of minutes before I was alighting, noting an unfamiliar black vehicle parked beside the red convertible. Caution was definitely indicated.

As I walked towards the kitchen, I noticed three gentlemen around the pool. One was seated close to Bright Eyes, chatting comfortably as far as I could tell. Despite the dark glasses, fedoras and black suits, I doubted they were a blues band in between gigs. I paused, decided the need to get three dozen oysters into refrigeration was paramount and had turned towards the kitchen when Bright Eyes called my name.

"Back in a minute. I've got three dozen Sydney rock oysters that need to get into a fridge ASAP."

I had just accomplished that feat when I was joined by one of the three suits. Behind him I could see the other two still standing by the pool.

"Mr Waddington," the visitor started.

"Not me, boss not guilty. Haven't seen the bugger."

As the sunglasses came off, I realized that it was our acquaintance from Randwick.

"Sorry mate, Didn't recognize you with the shades. No, haven't seen him since you called. Still need to thank him. You might not have heard, but thanks to his tip we cleaned out the local bookies on Saturday"

"We still need to talk to him. We won't be offering him any thanks. It's like this. My friends have money that needs to be *legitimized*. We do it by organizing a win at the races. Never mind how, that's what we do. Every so often we make arrangements that allow a betting plunge. We had one organized for Saturday. The oil we had for the rest of the meeting was good, so we thought that once we were sure of the winner of the last we could have a good day on the punt, plunge on the last and if the tax man comes around asking tricky questions we can explain things away because we had a big win."

"Waddles brought that unstuck?"

"Exactly. We arranged things with all the jockeys we know, and we know *all* of them."

"With an obvious exception."

"Right. Our people who watch the provincial meetings reckon the guy can't ride to save himself."

Wally, I guessed, would be very interested to hear that evaluation of his skills.

"Waddles and Wally know you're looking for them?"

"I guess so. There's no one home and his trainer is looking after the car yard. As far as we can work out he's in Tasmania."

"But you're here."

"I had other matters to attend to up this way, so I thought I might check things out. You probably appreciate in circumstances like these we're going to be very careful to check all the possibilities."

*And, I thought, there'd be a strong possibility that you'd be maintaining some sort of surveillance, just in case. There were matters I would be raising with Bright Eyes in the not-too-distant future.*

"Mate, I'm sure if he was round here, I would have heard. If you're going to check on things, I'd start at the Palace. If the big bastard was in town he would have been down there big noting himself. I haven't been down there since Sunday so he could have slipped through town without my knowing."

"Even though he knows we want to catch up with him?"

"You could be five yards behind him and he'd want to stop in there to grandstand. He wouldn't be able to help himself."

"You're sure?"

"Trust me. If he hasn't been there, there's no way he's in town. Ask Betty and Bryan, they'll tell you the same thing. Ever since he went out on his own, that was his headquarters."

"Okay. You'll be in touch if he turns up?"

"After what you've told me, I'd be silly not to. You can fix the races? Don't the bookies get a bit tired of paying out all the time?"

The time had come to try to deflect the conversation away from particulars. I hoped our visitors would be gone before Hopalong returned.

"We can always arrange to look after them. Many people have money that needs to travel down paths where it is safe from the tax man."

I thought I'd found the way to end the conversation.

"Well, if you can do all that, you're way out of my league. If he turns up I'll be in touch."

As the car pulled away, Bright Eyes joined me. From her remarks as we wandered into the office I guessed that there was no way she had broken security.

"What did they say they were doing here? I asked.

"They're checking up on some farming business. That's what they said, anyway. They asked about you two, and what you were up to, and they're looking for Waddles for some reason."

"You couldn't help them on that last one, could you? I mean it's not like he's called in here while I've been away or otherwise occupied, is it? I think you'll find, if you *did* happen to run into Waddles in the near future, not that you're likely to, of course, you might find he's hoping *they* don't find *him*."

I grabbed a handy scrap of paper and jotted down a registration number. With that minor task accomplished, I thought a little further explanation was required.

"In case they didn't make it clear, there's a race result that didn't go down too well with some sectors of the Italian community."

"Le Ver Marin?" Bright Eyes asked.

"The same. Those gentlemen had a swag invested on the nag that ran second and made arrangements to ensure their investment was successful. Now, just to be on the safe side, you haven't sighted Waddles at all since we got back from the south?"

I had a suspicion some form of surveillance had been introduced to REception. The office, after all, contained the phone, and if the implement itself wasn't being tapped, a bug would be handy when it came to monitoring incoming and outgoing calls. Fortunately, we had a secure mobile option.

"You know I haven't. Unless he got here while I was away at the pub on Sunday morning, you've been here more than I have, and..."

Since the purpose of the exercise was to let interested parties who happened to be eavesdropping hear what they wanted to hear, I thought it was time to change tack and avoid mentioning that Bright Eyes had been away from the premises for a substantial chunk of the previous day.

"So unless he got here while we were out on the bay on Sunday, if he'd landed on the doorstep someone would have spotted him." There was no way I was going to mention someone *had*.

I started moving towards the door. Bright Eyes moved in the same direction.

"Anyway, if he's got any sense he'll be making sure that he keeps his head well and truly down. If he does happen to lob here, I've assured Punter Dude, did you notice that he's been very careful not to mention his name? that I'll be in touch. Now, while they were here."

"Yes?"

"They didn't go anywhere other than here and the pool,? When'd you notice they were here?"

"Well," Bright Eyes explained, "I was reading beside the pool when I heard the car. At first I thought it was you and Jack back from the supermarket run because you'd forgotten something, but when I heard the voices I knew it wasn't you pair; so I thought I'd better check who it was."

"And?"

"When I spotted them they were just walking into the office."

"So they wouldn't have been down that way at all?" I suggested.

By this stage we'd reached the pool gate. I waved my arm towards the accommodation wing.

"No. Once I'd met them at the office we headed out here, and while we were waiting for you to get back the three of them didn't go anywhere outside the pool fence. The other two were looking around the garden beds while they were here, but no one went out the gate till you came back"

"While Punter Dude was talking to me in the office, his mates were still beside the pool?"

Since the response indicated that was the case I suspected bugs introduced to the premises would be poolside or in the office. Still you couldn't be too careful in cases like this, so on my way back to my room I ticked off a couple of precautions to take before a phone call that needed to be made while Bright Eyes went into town to post her assignment.

Inside my quarters I selected the nearest approximation to extreme heavy metal I could find, switched the speaker system to external mode and turned the volume up to a mildly earth-shattering level and closed the door. It took a minute or so before the call was answered, and when it was, I was mildly surprised to find Wally on the other end of the virtual line.

"Sorry I took so long," he apologized. "I was in the bathroom..."

"What about His Nibs?" I asked. "Where's he?"

"Went outside for a walk. You want me to get him?"

"If you wouldn't mind. It's a mobile, so it's not like you need to put the phone down."

"What the fuck," I inquired in my politest tone once Waddles had been located and the transfer effected, "do you think you're doing? I thought the idea was that you stayed out of sight."

The response suggested boredom had set in and Waddles had taken a stroll from the room at the back of the motel down to the rest area on the other side of the highway.

"During your travels, which, of course, would have taken you across the highway," I inquired, "would you have noticed a black sedan, rego number 359 GMT? Or Hopalong Cassidy? Listen, get your arse back indoors and if I find out you've been rambling 'round the countryside again there's a mobile number that's written on the whiteboard in the office."

"You wouldn't," Waddles suggested.

"Trust me, *I would*, I promised the bloke who left here about five minutes ago that if I happened to see you in the near future I'd be in touch. If you want to stick your neck out, that's your business, but I'm sort of attached to mine. So, have you seen Hopalong?"

"The Scoffmobile pulled into the reception while I was down at the rest area..."

"So you immediately headed over to say *G'day*," I suggested.

"Do you think, I'm stupid?"

Under the circumstances I felt obliged to reply affirmatively. The response indicated deep hurt as he pointed out that he'd remained in the rest area till Hopalong's chariot was pointed towards home.

"On your way back across the highway, there's no chance that some bastard driving past would have spotted you and decided to drop into the Palace, where three heavies from Sydney are probably

discussing your whereabouts with the proprietors as we speak? You can just imagine it. Bloke walks into the bar and says *You'll never guess who I saw out on the highway just now. Bloody Waddles. How long's he been back?* Nice kettle of fish. No, you get your arse under cover and if I hear..."

"OK," was the response. "I get the picture."

With one task out of the way, it was time to turn my attention to the next matter:

A quick tap on Jeffrey's door was enough to ascertain he'd been in his room when the visitors arrived, and, hearing voices took a look through the curtains before making a more detailed investigation.

"When I saw the black suits I figured they were either coppers, tax inspectors or the Mafia. No way I want to talk to any of those bastards, so I made sure the curtains were closed and stayed put until just now. Wouldn't have opened the door if you hadn't asked if I was in here."

After hearing the news, he seemed happy with his decision. Leaving him to the Lotto research that had been the focus of attention when I knocked, I headed towards the car park to interview a certain one-legged messenger boy. Five minutes later, Hopalong pulled into the driveway and wasted no time in reassuring me that he hadn't seen Waddles or Wally.

When I described the visitors who had just left and asked whether he'd sighted them, the answer was negative. He had scarcely finished those assurances when the phone rang. Vaulting into Reception, I hoped matters were not about to be complicated by the intrusion of further variables into the mix.

"Moderation. Herston speaking,"

"So who the fuck are these three bastards you sent round here, arsehole?"

It was an agitated Duchess calling from the Palace. This was a definite variable. I would need to word my responses carefully.

"These three heavies just walked in here and the temperature dropped about twenty degrees in three-fifths of a second. Who are they?"

"The short one is the bloke who helped us out at Randwick the other Saturday. The other two, I guess, are the muscle."

"They're asking about Waddles. What's this all about?"

"You know the money you collected on Saturday from Waddles' tip?"

"Of course. What have these three got to do with that?"

"They were on the one that ran second. Waddles upset their apple cart, and they're out to square things. The little bloke phoned here yesterday looking for him, and when they turned up here ten minutes ago I told them if Waddles turns up in town he would make the Palace his first port of call."

"But he hasn't been here."

She seemed far from convinced.

"Which would tend to suggest that he's not in town. Listen, do what I just did. Take the guy's phone number and reassure him that if Waddles turns up you'll definitely call him to let him know."

"What if he turns up here? What if he walks through the door in five seconds' time?"

So many questions. So few explanations that can be offered....

"Look, as far as those three know, Waddles and Wally are somewhere in Tasmania. That's what they just told me, anyway. They're in the area on other business. They reckoned they had farming interests and were looking in on the off chance that he'd turned up here. Personally, if they've been able to track Waddles to Tasmania they should be able to find out if he tries to leave the island."

I hoped, if anyone was listening in on the conversation, my suggestions would reassure them of our ignorance of the gentleman in question's whereabouts. Buying mobile phones had been a stroke of genius. The Duchess expressed doubts, but agreed to go along with it.

"In any case," I went on, "if Waddles was to walk in the door, you could always warn him they're on his trail before you call them. He obviously knows they're after him, otherwise he'd be at home with Hilda, swanning around the *Wagon Wheel* or looking after the car yard. Relax. If he's hiding out, he must be somewhere he thinks is secure. If you haven't seen him up to now, you won't be seeing him any time soon. The sooner you give them the message the sooner you'll be rid of them. I don't think having them hanging around the bar would exactly be good for business."

That settled the argument, and The Duchess rang off, though she obviously had reservations. There was no way I would be directing the fugitives towards the pub, and they knew the heavies were in town, so they wouldn't be raising their heads above the parapet, but there was no further reassurance I could offer without threatening to undermine my story. As I walked outside, the paranoia took over.

Would they be likely to call back on the way out of town? Could they have introduced some bug onto the premises? Might they have been able to pick up my end of my recent conversation?

I headed back to Jeffrey's room to call a conference. Once Jeffrey had been dragged away from Lotto research we found Hopalong in the kitchen, stowing recent purchases in the storage facilities.

'Grab your keys,' I instructed. 'We're going to need to go for a quick drive. Don't say anything.'

As we reached his car, I noticed he had left it unlocked. *Bugger*, I thought, *another security breach*.

While the car had been elsewhere while the visitors were on site, there would be nothing to prevent an interested party from surreptitiously introducing a tracking device at some point in the future should he or she feel so inclined.

"Where to?" Hopalong asked as we headed out of the driveway.

"Beacon Hill. Too early to watch the submarine races, but there's something I want to have a look at."

The journey was completed without further conversation. When we reached the summit, I indicated Hopalong should lock the car, and gestured to follow me as I retreated to the windward side of the hill and found a convenient boulder. With the town on the other side of the hill and the car a good hundred metres away I guessed that there was no way that our conversation could be monitored.

"What's up?" Hopalong asked.



As the others listened, I ran through a detailed explanation, of the circumstances that had resulted in our current predicament without identifying Waddles and Wally as the fugitives at the Shoreline.

"So as things stand, we've got Buckets and Knuckles holed up at the Shoreline hoping that Razor doesn't track them down, and if he does, there's every chance he'll take out a contract on them."

"Right," came two simultaneous responses. Jeffrey already knew the cover story that explained Hopalong's deliveries to the Shoreline. He'd broken the code almost immediately, *Razor* referred to a Sydney punter's well-trimmed moustache, *Buckets* referred to a used car salesman's consumption of bourbon and cola and a jockey's grip on the reins accounted for *Knuckles*.

"If that were to happen, there's every possibility that the job would be delegated to some subsidiary of the organization that just lobbed three heavies on our doorstep."

The responses indicated substantial agreement with my line of reasoning.

"Since there's every likelihood that one of them has placed a bug or something like that in the office and, more than likely, somewhere 'round the pool, it'd be highly advisable for all of us to avoid mentioning any of those names. No Waddles, no Wally and definitely no Buckets or Knuckles."

"If someone else does?" Hopalong asked.

"The only people who know about Buckets and Knuckles are the three of us, so those two names aren't likely to turn up in conversation. Unless it's in another context, of course. You might be looking to wash the car and be asking where the buckets are kept, for instance."

"Or you could have scrape marks from dragging them along the ground," Jeffrey suggested, glancing towards Hopalong. "You should know all about that."

"There's only one troglodyte in this neighbourhood," came the response. He glanced in my direction and modified the assessment. "Sorry, two. And if someone mentions Waddles or Wally?"

"We give them the standard response. *Sorry, haven't seen 'em*. I assume that's still the case? You haven't spotted them during your travels today, for instance?"

The reply indicated that my supposition was correct.

"So we don't say *anything* about Waddles or Wally unless it's to confirm that we haven't seen them, right? When it comes to Buckets and Knuckles, anything that needs to be discussed gets written down. There's a shredder in my room, so we can destroy the notes that way and the scraps can go into Sandy's worm farm. Got it?" They nodded agreement.

"If we need to call Buckets on the mobile we do it offsite, OK? Otherwise it's text messages. One more thing. As far as I can make out your car should be secure, but you keep it locked until further notice, and just in case they do manage to plant something on it, whenever you've got stuff that needs to go out to the motel, you drive your car round to your uncle's place, borrow one of his and use that one for the drop."

Hopalong's uncle had spent his retirement restoring vintage vehicles to their original state, and would have a variety of cars on site for Hopalong to choose from.

Having worked out security arrangements and contacted Waddles/Buckets to explain the changes, we headed home, and were greeted by Bright Eyes, washing the convertible. All was quiet apart from a call from Bernelle, who wanted me to call back at my earliest convenience.

Fearing the worst, I picked up the phone, but once contact was made learned that her call had been prompted by the need to remind me she would be coming around later *to listen to some more of that nice music* and ask whether I wanted her to pick up a takeaway for the two of us on the way.

"I've made an executive decision on the dinner front for the evening. You wouldn't mind a feed of oysters? There was a fresh shipment when we lobbed at the Fish Board this morning."

Reassured by the implication that a discreet dinner for two fitted her plans, as I hung up, I was quietly optimistic about the chances for the evening, and headed into the kitchen to begin preparations for dinner. Once the basic preparation was complete, I spent a couple of hours in my room preoccupied with the intricacies of cataloguing a music collection,

Jeffrey's arrival on the doorstep just after four to report imminent departure for the Palace indicated things were developing as Sandy suspected and reminded me there was preparation to be done. A question about joining the expedition was declined on the grounds of Bernelle's impending arrival and a suggestion that my presence might cramp his style once the Twins appeared on the horizon.

In any case, I pointed out, I had things to do to a couple of dozen oysters, and I expected to have a reserve supply under refrigeration for later use, if he knew what I meant.

"Say no more," he responded, turning and calling for Bright Eyes and her burnished chariot.

Arriving in the kitchen by way of the lime tree beside the back door, my first task was a couple of pitchers of Cajun Bloody Marys, with the best part of a bottle of vodka as the base. Once they were in the fridge, I placed a supply of ice in a suitable container, ensured that there was a scoop handy and prepared some celery sticks to stir the glasses.

Having looked after the liquid refreshment I turned my attention to the main course.

Once the bones had been removed from the chicken, the oyster stuffing was inserted, and the roasting tray placed in the preheated oven, along with the onion and almond casserole. With some dirty rice simmering away nicely, I had just finished garnishing the remaining oysters when Sandy and Hopalong appeared, asking whether I was interested in joining them at the Palace for a couple.

"I thought you were getting your marking up to date," I remarked.

"That was Plan A," Sandy replied. "When I got home and discovered we'd had visitors, I thought it might be a good idea to head down there to see what was going on. We're only having a couple and we'll be picking up fish and chips on the way back. You won't be needing any, by the looks, but I thought we'd ask anyway."

Once they'd gone, I completed the preparations, took four trays, covered them in rock salt, placed half a dozen oysters on each, covered them with shrink wrap and set them aside until it was time to place them under the grill. Two would do for starters, and once we established someone's favourites, the remaining trays could be rearranged to allow a further half dozen of the ones she really liked.

For my part, I liked all the variations, and would be quite happy to finish off whatever was left. After a check on the other dishes there was nothing left to do but grab a beer; select an appropriate playlist on the jukebox and await Madam's arrival.

Bernelle walked through the door twenty minutes later; which was two minutes after I'd opened a second beer. In reply to my question about something to drink, she indicated she'd like *something different* so, fetching a pitcher of Bloody Marys from the fridge and the ice bucket from the freezer, I filled a glass with ice cubes topped it with liquid and grabbed one of my celery sticks.

"You'll find this refreshing. The celery's a bit better than a swizzle stick, since you can crunch into it when you've finished the drink. Healthy, eh? I'd be having one myself if I hadn't just opened this."

Any reservations based on the tomato base soon disappeared and the celery stick was being crunched before I was half way through my beer. I refilled the glass, supplied another celery stick and directed her attention to the juke box, where Aaron Neville was wailing away.

"Who's that?" was a predictable reaction, providing the chance to identify Mr Neville as one of New Orleans' premier vocalists, suggest he possessed a unique voice, and suggest the choice of material did not always do the voice justice.

As I spoke, we moved, glasses in hand, from the kitchen towards the entertainment area, where a divan seemed to be beckoning. I heeded its siren call, and was just finishing my explanation as we sat down. *My Greatest Gift* finished and *Tell It Like It Is* started up. For the next three minutes we lay back as the music washed over us.

"That's so beautiful. You said he used to work on the wharves?"

"Exactly. When we get back to my place I'll give you a look at the CD case. You'd never guess that a voice like that would come out of a guy who's built like a brick outhouse. When you see his photo you'd pick him as the kind of guy you wouldn't want to run into on a dark night in a back alley"

"He's got a voice like an angel."

"Ironical, isn't it? Sort of like Flukey Lukey," I said, dropping the name of her first boyfriend from years ago. He'd had all the girls and the female teachers eating out of his hand, starred in all the school sporting teams, and ended up as a gay rights activist. It would have been easy to remain where we were, but the need to replenish a glass prompted a return to the kitchen.

"Anyway, what's for dinner?" she asked, accepting another Bloody Mary. I was pouring one for myself, thinking that this would allow me to influence the rate of consumption. "When I called at lunch time you said you were making something special."

The inquiry was, the signal to remove two trays of oysters from the fridge.

"I thought we might start with these. There's a Cajun take on Oysters Kilpatrick. I thought we'd have some of them as a sort of point of reference. The ones with the bread crumbs are Oysters Bienville, and the green ones are Oysters Rockefeller. The green stuff is spinach. The name must have something to do with all the greenbacks the Rockefellers accumulated. Ten minutes in the oven and they'll be done. If you've got a particular liking for one of these, I've got a reserve supply in the fridge."

To make way for the oysters, I had to remove the chicken and the casserole from the oven.

"Here we've got a deboned chicken with oyster stuffing and a little onion and almond casserole. There's some dirty rice over there on the stove. Anything left over will get demolished over the next couple of days."

The Bloody Marys continued to flow while we attended to the oysters, and once the main course hit the table a bottle of Verdelho appeared. With the meal out of the way, the leftovers in storage, and the verdelho vanished it was time to head along the accommodation wing with a slight diversion to join Bright Eyes, Sandy and Hopalong beside the pool, where they were recuperating from a battle with a mountain of fish and chips.

Sandy reported our visitors had departed from the Palace shortly after my conversation with The Duchess. His Lordship had been directed to tail them to ensure that they left town. He had followed their car as far as Merinda before turning off the highway to call in at the pub.

Once the report was complete, it was necessary to explain the visit to Bernelle, assure her we were totally in the dark regarding the whereabouts of Waddles and indicate that we believed there was no immediate danger. Along the way we noticed movement in the vicinity of Number Four, seemingly involving a figure intent on inserting itself into the interior ASAP.

The end of the explanation, some six or seven minutes later, had Sandy stating he'd love to stay pool side and be sociable, but there was a pile of books in urgent need of a rendezvous with a red biro. Hopalong Hopalong, still in need of enlightenment regarding his lady's travel plans and estimated time of arrival, followed a while afterwards, and a further couple of minutes saw Bright Eyes, predictably, return to her assignments.

Without company there was nothing for it but to resume our progress towards the nest.

Once inside, Bernelle excused herself, and I listened for signs of gastric distress, or anything that might affect my plans as I ensured the door was locked and, for good measure, attached the security chain. Dimming the lights I turned to the stereo. Having selected a suitable soundtrack, I cranked the volume to a level that would drown out any tapping on the door and made myself comfortable.

I was forced to leave the bed when Bernelle reminded me that she needed to view photographic evidence to back up my assertions about *that guy with the voice*. In my absence she had changed from her work clothes and placed herself between the sheets. My return with assorted Aaron Neville and Neville Brothers CDs may have failed to convince her of the accuracy of my previous statements but it provided an opportunity to develop an intimate atmosphere, and as one thing led to another....

"Wait," said Bernelle. "What's that knocking noise?"

"Something in the rhythm section," I suggested, mindful of the need to develop certain rhythmic activities of my own. "they use all sorts of effects in this stuff."

"No, there's someone at the door. See?"

While lack of x-ray vision meant I couldn't see anything through the door; as she spoke the music stopped. In the few seconds between that track at the next, it was evident there was someone outside, and a female voice was indicating a desire to establish communication with my companion.

"That's Mum. Get your pants back on and open the door. She sounds upset."

Once the door opened there was no way that any doorstep interviews were going to be conducted. A force of nature appeared to have entered the room, and raged for several minutes, incoherently at first, but as the verbal torrent continued, I was able to fill in the missing details of recent events.

Jeffrey had established his rendezvous with the Twins as planned, and settled in for the evening when Sandy and Hopalong arrived. His Lordship and The Duchess had joined the party and described the visit they had received earlier in the day.

Revelations of the appearance of organized crime on our very doorstep, of course, was enough to send the Twins into a frenzy. Had they been allowed to do it, details of race fixing, money laundering and the local connection would have made the front page of Friday's paper. That, the rest of the party ensured them, *might* tie in with the general public's *need to know* but would endanger the welfare of the journalists concerned, as well as members of their social circle.

"So," The Duchess pointed out, "if you publish a single word about any of this, you'll be looking for somewhere else for your little drinkies. I can guarantee you that you'll find yourself barred from every other pub and club in town as well!"

Sandy and Hopalong had supplied the details up to this point, and things had been fairly subdued until a certain lady of northern European extraction appeared on the scene.

The reaction to Olga's arrival was mixed.

Sandy and Hopalong announced that they would be departing for an appointment with crumbed fish and deep fried potato chips, phoned an order and contacted Bright Eyes who, informed of their plans when she delivered them to the Palace, volunteered to collect them when they were ready.

Once Bright Eyes was on the scene, having allowed time for their order to be prepared, the three of them were about to leave when the Twins, sculling their drinks, requested a lift home.

The casual observer might have formed the impression the request involved transportation to their bijou residence, which was only a short stagger away, but as the party departed Bright Eyes was informed that they would be spending the night in Jeffrey's room, producing his key as verification that the arrangement had the requisite seal of approval. When the car arrived home, I guessed, they had ensconced themselves in Jeffrey's boudoir and waited for him to return.

Once the convertible had pulled away from the kerb, Jeffrey, from what I gathered, invited Olga to join him for dinner; ordered the meal and accompanied her to a table in the dining room. Once the meal as finished they had been joined by His Lordship, and Jeffrey departed to the bar.

Evidently, in his travels, he had done more than collect His Lordship's bottle of red, a tin for himself, and a glass of white for Olga. Once the drinks had been delivered, he had excused himself, headed towards the conveniences at the back of the beer garden and had failed to return.

His Lordship was joined by his Lady, and though Olga gained the impression the horse had bolted, she had not actually seen him pass through the dining room, or down the footpath outside. it was ten minutes before she was able to extract herself from the table, head towards the Ladies' inside the building, and quiz Magpie about the whereabouts of a retired dishwasher. Jeffrey had, Magpie advised her, emerged from the passageway that leads from the public bar past the office and headed out the front door to a taxi conveniently waiting outside,

"When Olga attempted to organize similar transportation, she was informed there had been a sudden and unexpected flurry of activity associated with the fishing industry and it would be a good hour before a taxi would be available, so she decided to walk.

Her temper was not improved when, passing the taxi rank, she noted two cabs parked there, and no sign of any activity. When she sought an explanation from the drivers who were sitting in the office playing cards she was informed a gentleman had offered them fifty dollars apiece to ignore phone calls attempting to arrange for a cab to collect females with northern European accents from the Palace.

An attempt to persuade them to transport her away from the rank, would, she was informed, be successful provided her destination was nowhere near a certain building that had once been a motel.

So she had decided to walk, and had arrived at *The Crossroads* more than a little peeved. Her attempts to gain admittance to a certain room had been unsuccessful and she had apparently been directed to the other end of the building where she would, she was informed, find her daughter.

"Then, he said that if I was lucky David would get both of us up the spout and that we could have half sisters who were each other's aunt and niece and enter them in the Guinness Book of Records or something. You wouldn't do something like that, would you David?"

As I assured her the possibility would never have crossed my mind, my thoughts suggested successful participation in any activity related to human reproduction seemed about as likely as a self-powered flight to the moon.

Despite my reassurances, however, there was no way, Olga was going anywhere. Once she had calmed down, she had climbed right into the space I had recently vacated and promptly went to sleep.

My suggestion that Bernelle might join me on the couch were met with the observation that it wouldn't feel right to *do that sort of thing in front of my mother. Even if she is sound asleep.*

Blood, it seems, is thicker than water. So, I reflected is soup.

Which was approximately where I'd managed to find myself once again.

## WEDNESDAY MORNING 6 A.M.

I awoke the following morning, having spent the night on the couch, somewhat less than grunted. Not quite disgruntled, but not in blissful harmony with the universe either. On waking, my first instinct had been to turn on the radio to catch the morning news and weather, but second thoughts prevailed when I saw Bernelle and Olga sound asleep.

I paused to consider options.

Activity within the room would probably wake people up and there was every chance that awakening might be followed by discussions I was not inclined to engage in. I decided the best move was to quietly remove myself, so I could place myself where I was less likely to become embroiled in intrigue or negotiations between potential bed partners in or around the vicinity of Room Four.

Besides, I needed time to think.

There was a radio on the bookshelves, so I grabbed it on my way out the door. As I walked to the kitchen, it was obvious six o'clock was too early for the other residents. It would have been too early for me if the previous night had been spent in anything approximating comfort on something that allowed me to sleep with a pillow.

It only took a minute or two to make a cup of industrial-strength coffee with enough sugar to cut the caffeine edge and supply an energy hit.

Cup in hand, I retreated to the pool, taking great care to choose a chair where I would not be immediately obvious and where I would be able to see what was going on without being seen myself.

I turned the radio on, lowered the volume to a point where anyone more than ten metres away would be unlikely to notice once the noise along the highway set in and sat back, deep in meditation with one ear loosely tuned to the radio and one eye scanning the various doorways.

Several things seemed obvious.

In spite of recent events the chances of seducing Bernelle seemed relatively good, but, given the fact the wheels seemed to fall off the conveyance before the act could be completed I started to wonder whether the effort involved was worth it. While she was easy on the eye, there were issues relating to the longer term that needed to be considered.

Would success in *Operation Bed Bern* be followed by a series of nonnegotiable demands that could well include substantial changes to the lifestyle? Would words like *wedding* and *kids* start to figure in conversations? Would there be suggestions that I forsake the current accommodation and set up housekeeping in more conventional circumstances?

It seemed there was a definite case for inserting a sunset clause in current plans to prevent things from meandering into the indefinite future. If there was no successful coupling by Friday morning, the weekend's cricket activities would provide an excuse to extract myself.

In the meantime, it was imperative not to become caught up in the vortex of Olga's attempts to inveigle her way into Jeffrey's affections. Success with Bernelle could well result in emotional blackmail where her mother's activities were involved. The matter would need to be handled carefully.

Bearing those things in mind, it would be best to confine efforts to entice Bernelle into compromising positions to nights when her mother was unlikely to upset the apple cart. I had established, over the past few days, that Olga's roster at the roadhouse was a *two days on, two days off* affair; and she worked from four in the afternoon until four in the morning.

Since Olga had worked Sunday and Monday nights, yesterday had been a *day off* and she would be likely to be on the loose tonight as well. Thursday and Friday nights would, on the other hand, be less likely to be interrupted. Friday night was going to involve serious degeneracy as the Dipsomaniacs descended upon the town, so unless things shaped in a positive direction tonight, I would make one more attempt on Thursday and, if that failed, abandon the campaign altogether.

Given recent events steps would need to be taken to ensure mother and daughter were kept well apart tonight with some sort of fall back position in place should it be required the following night.

The Olga question also needed careful consideration.

She was more than likely going to be out and about tonight, while the Twins would probably be lying low since Thursday was a day for serious effort while Friday's newspaper was compiled. Olga *might* attain her targets tonight, but her roster would rule out repeat performances on Thursday and Friday.

Perhaps Jeffrey could be prevailed on to organize a roster to share himself around.

Hanging over everything else was the question of what to do with Waddles and Wally, who'd be starting to go stir crazy. There must be limits to the number of bottles of bourbon you can demolish and the number of videos you can watch while confined to a motel room. I suspected the numbers would be reached by the end of the weekend, so I ran through various possibilities without coming up with an obvious solution.

When the first cup of coffee was empty, I decided a second was indicated. Fetching it would involve abandoning my vantage point, but there no signs of life, so if I moved fast enough I could, more than likely, be back beside the pool before anyone stirred in Rooms One, Three, Four or Nine.

As I headed towards the kitchen, Sandy's door opened, and the occupant emerged, dressed for work and headed in the direction I was already taking. The response to my greeting indicated the day's game plan involved an early departure for work.

"If you wouldn't mind hanging off heading to the Palace this afternoon, at least I assume you'll be going tonight since you missed last night."

*Mate, I thought to myself, you may not know how true that statement is.*

Sandy, on the other hand, may well have been involved with paperwork well into the night and may have been only too aware of certain shenanigans outside Four and a subsequent ruckus around the door of Fifteen. He could well be regretting his choice of a location in the main wing rather than joining Bright Eyes and Hopalong in the relatively quieter rooms on the other side of Reception. A slight increase in background noise from the main highway would have more than compensated for the sudden uproars caused by frustrated females.

"I've got a full day today, no spares. It's staff meeting afternoon as well," Sandy went on. "They've got some inservice bullshit as the main item on the agenda, so it's going to be a long meeting and I'll be needing strong drink afterwards. With your previously undisclosed Italian heritage in mind, I ought to



remind you that the Duchess is running an all-you-can-eat pasta night on Wednesdays, so that'll take care of the catering arrangements for tonight as well."

"Sounds good to me."

Pasta night had been a relatively recent development and I hadn't had the opportunity to avail myself of the Duchess' version of *pasta fresca* and *I maccheroni*. Assuring him that I'd remember his request, I left him to his breakfast. Sandy emerged from the entertainment area five minutes later, diverted to collect his briefcase and a box of books which had attracted his attention and his red pen earlier in proceedings, and departed.

When his car started to reverse out of its position in the car park, a flurry of activity saw each of the remaining rooms divest themselves of their occupants in the space of five minutes.

Hopalong emerged, heading, as if guided by radar, straight to where I was sitting beside the pool. Unfortunately, when he'd arrived the seat he chose was more conspicuous than mine. Hopalong, had, he explained, overheard my greeting to Sandy and had guessed that I would be unlikely to return to my room.

"I heard Olga carrying on last night. First she was outside Jeffrey's room trying to break the door down, and then she started on yours. That didn't last as long, and since I didn't hear her leaving, I guessed she spent the night in your room."

"That's right. Aren't you glad you didn't end up getting a shot away the other night? The thought of that mad bitch and Liz up against each other for exclusive access to your dick is enough to make anybody shudder. Mind you, I know which of the two I'd be backing to win."

As Hopalong agreed with my assessment, Jeffrey's door opened, and the Twins emerged. It was obvious they had only just succeeded in rousing themselves after their efforts arousing Jeffrey the previous evening.

Their departure for work seemed imminent, though I thought they'd be well advised to make an appointment with the shower first. They paused outside the door, Jeffrey emerged at the same time as my door opened and Bernelle appeared with Olga in her wake. Looking at Jeffrey, the casual observer would have been inclined to suspect that he had been the victim of a lengthy physical ordeal. As he staggered into the daylight, the Twins turned towards Olga.

"You can have him tonight, but after the workout we gave him last night, you'll be lucky if he can get it up," Jools bragged, patting him on the back.

"Still with a good day's rest and plenty of vitamin E the old goat might be OK" Char suggested. "You'd better drop in to the medical centre to get that Viagra prescription renewed, old boy. At least you'd better if you're wanting to make sure the old boy doesn't run out of puff."

They headed towards the car park giggling as they contacted the taxi service. For his part, Jeffrey retreated indoors. Discretion was obviously the better part of valour.

Olga and Bernelle, having sighted Hopalong beside the pool, surveyed the area, seemed to have noted my presence and started to move towards me. Noting their course, Hopalong decided the kitchen was the place to be, and exited, announcing he had an appointment at the TAFE College and he would catch up with me later.

I gathered this development had something to do with his fiancée's imminent arrival and the subsequent necessity of finding gainful employment.

Once he had gone, Bernelle and her mother sat down. It was obvious they would be departing once the Twins had left the premises. There was an apology from Olga for making me sleep on the couch, and an expression of regret that she had ended up on my doorstep. With the preliminaries out of the way, Bernelle took up the reins.

"I'll be around after work this afternoon. You won't be going to the pub this afternoon, will you?"  
*Hullo*, I thought, tracking back to earlier meditations. *Here's the first of the nonnegotiable demands, and it's coming before the deed's been done.* It was obvious that I was approaching extremely thin ice.

"I think we'll be definitely be heading out to the Palace this afternoon. I saw Sandy before he headed to work and he reckons he'll need a drink after his staff meeting this afternoon. On top of that after I've cooked for the last two nights I'm inclined to give myself the night off."

I thought bringing up the catering issue was the diplomatic way to go. After all, I was addressing someone who had not only enjoyed the fruits of my labours but had been on hand for a substantial chunk of the preparation time and would have been aware of the effort involved.

"From what I hear pasta night seems like the way to go as far as dinner is concerned. I haven't been there to try it, but Sandy reckons it's value, and he's got a good idea of my tastes when it comes to Italian, so I think anyone who turns up here looking for company is going to be very disappointed."

While Bernelle's reaction suggested this was a development she did not approve of, she seemed to accept it. The sound of car doors in the car park suggested the Twins were departing the premises.

"Anyway, it's time to take Mum home. In that case I'll catch you at the Palace after work. I might go home for a shower first, but I'll be there by six."

As they started to move towards the car park, politeness demanded I should accompany them. There would be a number of issues to be considered later and they would best be addressed away from prying ears. I waved farewell and headed back to my room. There was a pressing need to hurl myself at the shower. I was passing Four when Jeffrey's door opened. He shuffled furtively across the space between the doorway and the spot where I'd momentarily paused.

"Have they gone yet?"

"Elvis has left the building. They waited until the cab came for the Twins, then left."

"So, what's happening?"

"Sandy's at work and Hopalong's scoffing breakfast as we speak. Claims to have an appointment at the TAFE this morning. Something to do with a teaching qualification. Haven't sighted Bright Eyes, but I think she'll be working on an assignment. Apart from that, ain't no one here but us chickens."

"Plans for later today?" Inquiring minds obviously needed to know.

"Would centre around a visit to the Palace this evening? That's Number One on Sandy's Hit Parade anyway. He wants us to hang off and stay here till he gets back from work. I guess Bright Eyes and Hopalong will be wanting in for the pasta night as well."

"Your girl and the Old Chook?"

"Well," I countered, "it's not actually certain that she's *my girl*, as such."

"Looks like it from where I'm sitting. But, in any case you will have boned Bern with the beef bayonet?"

"What? What chance have I had? Friday night Mum gets pissed off and pisses off with daughter in tow. Saturday night Mum gets pissed and daughter needs to piss off to make sure he gets home all right. Sunday night, with Mum out of sight daughter gets pissed and spends a big chunk of the early hours making long distance calls on the big white telephone."

I paused to gather breath, allowing my companion the chance to comment. When none was forthcoming I went on.

"Monday night with Mum out of the way again daughter ends up crashing in Room Nine with her mate and last night right when Percy's poised for the plunge Mum's back outside the door before the deed can be done. That's the story to date. Makes me wonder what's likely to go wrong next. In any case, I think they're going to turn up at the Palace this arvo. Bernelle will, at least. The old chook will probably be there as well, I guess. The Twins?"

"Will be resting quietly this evening. They reckon there's a big news story coming up tomorrow and they'll be needing to be right on the ball to cover it."

"Which would allow you the opportunity to take care of the old chook tonight. At least, if you do, it should mean she won't come banging on my door again. You wouldn't read about it, that makes, what? Five nights I've been on the verge of a root and every time something happens. And you, you bastard, you're getting more than..."

Jeffrey's suggestion that it was advisable to *take it while it's there* was scant consolation.

"Mate, do me a favour. If you're not going to give her what she wants occasionally, do something like take out a restraining order so she doesn't turn up out here. Maybe you should work out a roster."

From the reaction, it seemed the suggestion had been taken on board, so I expanded on the idea.

"The Twins are out of the question Monday and Wednesday. Give Olga the option those nights, and if she's working I'm sure you'll be able to find another playmate if you need one. The only one who seems to be missing out around here is me."

Had Sandy and Hopalong been there the last statement would have been contested, but they weren't and I was more concerned with making the point that it would be nice if some people's amatory adventures were conducted in such a manner that other people got a fair go.

While further discussion would have been useful, the sound of a mobile phone ringing gave Jeffrey the opportunity to escape while I took the call.

Reaching into my pocket, I extracted the phone and started to head for the cricket field, where there was less likelihood of listening devices picking up the conversation.

"Go ahead," I said. "What can we do you for?"

It seemed that we could do them for quite a bit, but how that was to be managed without breaching security was another matter entirely. Cabin fever had struck and the pair of them were going stir crazy. While I'd suggested contact should be made by text message so I could move away from the premises before establishing verbal contact it seemed cabin fever had caused the suggestion to be ignored. I was not a happy camper.

"You're stuck there as long as you're in town. Whatever you do, don't contact anyone like Hilda or Captain Headrush who's likely to have their phone tapped. If you need to contact me, for fuck's sake make sure you text first so I can piss off somewhere I can be confident is away from any listening devices. Having those heavies back on the doorstep is the last thing I want. Hopalong can keep you plied with piss and videos, and at a stretch he could get you out of town if we have to move you, but remember that as long as you're here, everyone's in danger. Don't do anything stupid."

I was assured actions likely to attract unwanted attention were the furthest thing from Waddles' mind, but wondered where he was going to go from here. I noted their requirements and assured him Hopalong would deliver them when he was free from appointments at the TAFE College.

With that attended to, I turned my attention to bathing and breakfast, and once the fast had been broken, Hopalong's continued absence meant that there was nothing to be done but to get a little rest. I did, however, take the precaution of attaching a note to the gentleman's door requesting that he let me know when he returned from his appointment.

An hour later, a knock signalled Hopalong's return. As I ushered him in, he explained he had heard over the grape vine that courses at the TAFE College were to be expanded, and a range of subjects relating to the building trade were likely. Someone would be needed to supervise students on those courses, so he had decided to check out the qualifications he would need to fill such a position, and had enrolled in the relevant courses.

"Liz? Any news in that direction? You said she might be turning up here earlier than you thought."

"Well, that's all up in the air. I've had to call a new number at definite times to talk to her, and I never get to talk long. All I know is that she's involved in something big and when it's over they're going to discharge her from the Forces."

"So, some sort of undercover job?" I speculated.

"Dunno. That's what it sounds like, but all I ever get out of her is *you don't want to know the finer points of it all*."

"In which case you definitely don't want to be asking any questions beyond the sort of general inquiry about her health you'd be expected to make. You know, all that kind of *I could tell you, but I'd have to kill you afterwards* scene."

It was a blessing Hopalong could be relied on to accept virtually anything he was told as the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. If Liz was involved in some undercover operation, she would be able to rely on him to maintain security.

Considerations of security, and tissues raised by recent phone calls prompted me to turn our attention away from Hopalong's private life towards resupplying Waddles and Wally. I had just finished writing out the shopping list when a knock at the door suggested there was someone who needed to speak to us.

Opening the door, I found a somewhat perturbed Bright Eyes.

"Switch on your TV. Turn to BBC World on the pay TV."

We had inherited the previous owner's satellite subscription and while we didn't watch much television, it was nice to have a broader range of options than those on free-to-air. With that in mind, we'd tailored our subscription to channels likely to attract our attention, and, at Hopalong's insistence, had included BBC World, along with predictable sport and racing options.

"What's up?" I asked, as I hastily followed directions.

Bright Eyes explained she had been channel surfing as a break from study. She had flicked past BBC World when there was something familiar about a face on the screen. Skipping back, she was alarmed to see someone bearing a remarkable resemblance to Hopalong's fiancée, although the name associated with the face was not the name we knew her by.

The resemblance had been strong enough to send her to Hopalong's base in Three. Hopalong, predictably had been absent, but the note still attached to the door had redirected her to Fifteen.

A British newspaper had uncovered details of a terrorist plot in London, claiming links between members of the British armed forces and the terrorist cell. The group had been rounded up, and their identities revealed. Five British-born males, allegedly recruited by a fundamentalist with links to terrorist organizations allegedly planned to use equipment from military sources in attacks on targets around London and the source enticed to provide them with weapons and explosives was a member of the British military named Elaine Forsyth.

Looking at the faces on screen, the male suspects looked like what they were claimed to be, young men of Middle-Eastern origin, who probably checked *Islam* in the space on documents where indications of religious affiliation were required. The woman looked like any number of English girls who had meandered through the local backpacker establishments and bore a remarkable resemblance to the woman we knew as Liz Fothergill. Strangely, both our Liz F and this Elaine Forsyth were members of the British military, though the TV channel was not forthcoming with more specific information.

Faced with such a development, it would have been understandable if Hopalong had chosen to stay to watch developments but, commendably, he picked up the shopping list and headed towards the door.

"I'll just get this out of the way. Might be better to do it now rather than wait till later. I won't know anything definite until I call Liz tonight. Keep an eye on things and I'll be back ASAP."

"Where's he going?" asked Bright Eyes. "What's so important?"

For a moment, I considered whether I should break security and put Bright Eyes into the picture. No, I thought, *she isn't the sort of person who makes a convincing liar*. If anyone turned up asking questions it would be better if she could honestly say she had no idea where certain gentlemen were.

As we watched, further details unfolded.

One of the members of the group, according to reports, lived next door to the house that Elaine Forsyth's family moved into about two years previously. Over the next twelve months this bloke had apparently become a close friend of the family.

Elaine was, at the time, on active service in the Gulf region and had become disillusioned with British policies in the Middle East. Home on leave she expressed these views in discussions with the neighbours before the demands of the service called her back to active duty.

Strangely, the period associated with that return to active service neatly with Liz Fothergill's visit to Denison and subsequent involvement with a gentleman named Cassidy.

From the Middle East Elaine Forsyth had relayed a quantity of sensitive and highly embarrassing information to the neighbours, who passed it on, in turn, to Islamist media, resulting in a substantial ruckus in the upper echelons of the British Government. Questions had been asked in the House of Commons. Departmental inquiries had been launched. Ministers had been called on to resign, and Elaine, having completed her tour of duty had returned to her homeland.

That return fitted snugly into the expiry of Liz Fothergill's visa and subsequent return home.

Developments in the Middle East, including the derailing of the peace process that would supposedly resolve the Palestinian question increased Elaine's disillusionment with British foreign policy, to the point where she had, allegedly, volunteered to provide the hardware for an attack on a site in central London. One of the British tabloid papers had become aware of the plot, but neglected to clear the story with the security agencies.

If they had done so, a British Government representative informed us (and the world at large) the paper would have learnt the authorities had been informed of the threat and Ms Forsyth had provided the security forces with full details of the plot. Her involvement allowed her to infiltrate a number of groups with links to those under arrest, but the publicity generated by the news report came before the authorities had enough evidence to put everyone in the networks behind bars.

It seemed a number of attacks were planned, but most were aborted because the authorities, aware of what was afoot, were able to arrange things so the intended target was unavailable, failed to arrive where it was supposed to be, or turned out to be covered by unexpected *random* security check.

From time to time the plotters managed to place a bomb, but when that happened the device in question had usually failed to explode.

There had been at least one case where an explosion had taken place, but having done minimal damage had been explained away as the result of a gas leak.

When Hopalong returned from his errand Bright Eyes filled him in on details from the news reports, and once developments had been passed on the pair of them departed, leaving me to my pondering.

There was, as far as I could tell, nothing to suggest Elaine Forsyth and Liz Fothergill were the same person, but, on the other hand, there was nothing to suggest that they weren't. There was even a possibility that Liz Fothergill could be a convenient attempt to build a new identity for Ms Forsyth after her involvement in the murkier realms of international espionage was finished.

A random thought crossing my mind sent me to the computer in the music room, and an internet search for *Royal Marines recruiting requirement* informed me that recruits, and I quote, *must be male and a member of the Commonwealth or Irish Republic*. Liz Fothergill, in other words could not have been a member of the Royal Marines. I paused for a moment to consider the ramifications of this discovery.

Should, for example, Mr Cassidy be informed of this minor detail?

The suggestion was quickly dismissed. I was certain that if Liz Fothergill and Elaine Forsayth were the same person, Hopalong's calls to her would be subject to surveillance and raising the subject of someone's true identity could have unfortunate ramifications.

*No, I thought. Leave sleeping dogs lie. We've never seen anything to support the suggestion that she's a bona fide member of the Marines and if anyone were to raise the issue we'd probably get an explanation that she wasn't an actual member of the Marines. Seconded from some other branch of the military, that'd be the most likely explanation. And there'd be some sort of justification offered.*

Getting recruits to tackle a female who could look after herself meant they'd be less likely to underestimate an opponent when the excrement was in proximity to the fan. On the other hand, Liz could have been using the alleged position as a convenient means of deflecting unwanted attention.

*So what, I pondered, do we say if anyone remarks on the resemblance between the girl on the TV and Liz? With a bit of luck there'll be a couple of backpackers in the bar this evening, and maybe we can deflect attention from Liz by suggesting that a couple of them bear some resemblance to this Elaine Forsayth. Ever noticed how all these young Pommy backpacker shielas tend to look alike? That'd be the way to go."*

In any case, now that Bright Eyes had raised the issue I thought it best to hold a conference to coordinate the versions of the truth to smother any speculation that might pose threats to our own security. It was time to consult with Jeffrey and run through my conclusions to check whether the thought processes had overlooked any significant issues.

A quick tap on the door of Four was followed by an indication the occupant should follow me. On the other side of the cricket field Hopalong had constructed a shelter that could serve as a pavilion. Since the location had been chosen to minimize the risk of impressionable minds being exposed to evidence of degenerate behaviour it would probably be far enough from listening devices that may have found their way onto the premises.

"What," my colleague inquired as we made our way around the boundary line, "the fuck is going on?"

"Interesting developments overseas, which mean it's going to be important to make sure we've got our stories straight, so we don't attract unwanted attention."

By the time we'd reached the shelter I'd been able to outline the developments and had noted that the phone in the office appeared to be ringing. I added disconnecting the bell that alerted the entire neighbourhood to the presence of incoming calls to my *To Do* list.

"So, in other words we're likely to be fielding questions along two broad themes when we get to the pub this evening and it might be an idea to make sure that we're all singing from the same hymn sheet if you catch my drift. How much speculation we get about Waddles and Wally is going to depend on how much the Duchess has had to say about her visit from the heavies on Monday."

"A subject that wasn't sighted on the horizon last night. I would have expected something, even a passing question about whether we'd heard from a certain used car salesman."

"Which is good to know, but we need to make sure Sandy and Bright Eyes have the Buckets and Knuckles story in case anybody's noticed Hopalong heading in and out of the Shoreline." I glanced across the cricket field and spotted Bright Eyes making her way towards us. "Which we should be able to accomplish over the next few minutes, at least as far as Bright Eyes is concerned."

"If you take a glance over your left shoulder, you'll notice that a certain member of the scoffing fraternity is on his way to join us. You do the talking and I'll throw in a comment here and there."

While Hopalong parked the Scoffmobile, Bright Eyes arrived o alert us that while there were no new developments overseas there had been a phone call from a gentleman in Sydney who'd appreciate a call back at our earliest convenience.

She had been scouring the neighbourhood to establish my whereabouts when Hopalong had returned from his morning errand, wanting to know where I was.

Once Jeffrey and I had been sighted making our way around the boundary Bright Eyes had set out in pursuit. Since a brisk walk over a couple of hundred metres poses certain problems for the one-legged fraternity, Hopalong was unable to accompany her, but an access road lead to the parking area behind the shelter, so Hopalong chose to make his way there by car. When he joined us I was ready to expound the *New Orthodox Version of Recent Events*.

"It's like this," I started, intending to offer a systematic analysis of the issues before us. "We've got two lots of people looking for two pairs of people already, and if Bright Eyes is right and this bird in London does bear an amazing resemblance to Mr Cassidy's intended there's every chance that we'll have Osama Bin Laden and his mates on our doorstep to ask about the whereabouts of certain members of the British military as well."

"So if the shit does start heading in the general direction of the fan, Herston thinks that we'd better all have our stories sorted out. He's quite right, of course. Since he's the only one who knows all three subjects of interest."

"We're all in the picture as far as Waddles and Young Wally are concerned. The Mafia are after them after the Le Ver Marin result. They've been traced to Tasmania, where we think they've..."

"Actually," Bright Eyes interrupted, "that's what the phone call was all about. Our friend in Sydney seems to think they've left the island, possibly *via* Launceston."

I shuddered internally. Hopefully there was no external indication of concern.

"That's as maybe. In any case, both of you can vouch for the fact that you haven't sighted Waddles or Wally, right? That's still the case?"

Having confirmed that minor point I went on with the cover story.

"Meanwhile I've got two mates holed up at an unspecified location on the run from an outraged husband and father who wants a chat with the bloke who's been carrying on with his missus and his mate who's just got the daughter in the family way."

Bright Eyes looked dubious, but I went on.

"The father of the bride-to-be recently remarried without knowing his new missus, who's a fair bit younger than he is, had been having it off for years with my mate Buckets, and while that's been going on his mate Knuckles has been seeing more of the daughter from the previous marriage than Dad would like, so they'd lobbed here on Monday morning looking for somewhere to hide."

"Herston wasn't up and about when they called in, but they left a note with me and asked me to pass it on when he surfaced,"



"So, when Razor, who also happens to be a mate of mine, calls I can honestly say I haven't seen them, since the job of looking after them is being looked after by Hopalong. Razor has contacts in the Italian community, so there's every possibility when certain gentlemen were arriving on our doorstep yesterday morning they were out to kill two birds with one stone. Not that they came out and stated they were after anyone apart from Waddles and Wally, but it wouldn't surprise me."

A quick glance around the circle indicated the drift had been grasped.

"As far as you know, Waddles and Wally are somewhere in Tasmania, regardless of what recent phone calls might have suggested. If that changes, I'm sure they'll let us know. Since neither of you two would recognize Buckets and Knuckles if they came up and bit you in the leg you should be safe there."

The reaction suggested that all present found this to be a perfectly reasonable conclusion.

"On the other hand, this news from London is going to really put the cat among the pigeons. If Bright Eyes has been able to spot a resemblance between Elaine Forsyth and the Lovely Liz it's safe to assume others will do the same. You did," I turned to Hopalong, "manage to talk to Liz last night?"

"She couldn't talk for long, though. Something about a problem with the network on the base."

"So there's no way to verify that Liz and Elaine Forsyth are the same person, unless Liz comes out and admits it. Mind you, there are some interesting parallels there. When we're in the pub tonight if anyone asks, all we know is what we've seen on TV. If anyone keeps wanting to go on about it, we do everything we can to change the subject or get into a conversation with someone else, right?"

"Anyway," Jeffrey remarked, turning to Bright Eyes, "since we've got that sorted out I've got about fifty Lotto tickets that need to be filled in and deposited at the newsagent, so if you wouldn't mind dropping them in later this afternoon."

Once the two of them were out of earshot on their way back to the main complex I turned to Hopalong for a report on the morning's travels. The news was not good. Remembering Hopalong was under strict instructions which would enable him to honestly say, if questioned, he had not actually seen Waddles and Wally, the presence of two people who bore a remarkable resemblance to the gentlemen in question seated on deck chairs beside the motel pool was cause for concern.

"Anyway, as I was on my way in to Reception I couldn't help noticing this big bloke on the deck chair. Have you got any idea how difficult it is to drive along a curved driveway and park a car without looking over your right shoulder? Then I had to drive out without looking to the left. It wasn't easy."

Hopalong had, however, managed to make the delivery without meeting the gentlemen, and, when pressed on the identity of the two figures beside the pool, was unable to give a positive identification.

"One of the two was definitely big enough to be Waddles and the other guy was definitely about the right size to be a jockey."

"You couldn't be certain unless you'd caught sight of their faces, and you didn't have time to do that."

"That's right. I made sure I didn't look anywhere I might be able to recognize anyone."

"There could be a couple of other guests at the motel who might be the same size as Waddles and Wally, couldn't there? So if anyone was to ask you whether you've seen them, that should mean you can honestly say that, *to the best of your knowledge*, you haven't seen them. Right?"

We were, of course, drawing a rather long bow but, I figured, if we could persuade Hopalong that was the case, he'd be unlikely to make any compromising statements. As he headed back to his own room I was reasonably satisfied, but if security was to be maintained, I decided it was imperative that I establish immediate contact with our leviathan punter. Out came the secure mobile.

"Listen, you bastard," I started when there was someone on the other end of the imaginary line, "if you want your friends from the south to spring you why don't you just flounce into the Palace and ask Lady Liz to give them a quick call? She's got their number. What were you and Wally doing sunning yourself beside the pool this morning?"

It was obvious that the party on the other end of the connection had not expected a call of this nature. Flustered explanations were offered, along with an attempt to divert the subject away from a certain party's indiscretions.

"Yeah, I can picture what it looked like when Hopalong was on his way in trying not to look in your direction. So you waved? Don't you realize the risks that the rest of us silly bastards are taking on your behalf? What do you mean you've got the shits with sitting around indoors? Listen. Do what you like during the day provided it's indoors or otherwise out of sight. If you want to work on your tan take the deck chair somewhere you won't be visible to the general fucking public. Remember I've got our mate's number as well. Any more of this and I'll call him myself."

As I clicked the appropriate button to end the call a thought crossed my mind. There was definitely one disadvantage to the mobile phone.

You can't slam down the receiver at the end of a call.

It was clear Waddles would continue to throw up difficulties and the only way to resolve the threat to our well-being would be to persuade Waddles and Wally to relocate. As I wandered back I decided the best avenue for transferring them would be to borrow Hopalong's vehicle and drive them to Townsville or Mackay. The convertible was too conspicuous, and *borrowing* it would probably mean Bright Eyes would be more than slightly miffed if her place at the wheel was usurped for unspecified purposes.

If Jeffrey and I accompanied them, we could use our own identities to get boarding passes for the flight to wherever they were going. If we were to continue in that direction, all that was needed was to work out how to persuade them to move, though cabin fever would make that relatively easy. The difficulty would be finding a location where they would feel secure.

That problem lacked an obvious solution and would best be left to the gentlemen in question. In the meantime there was a phone call that needed a response, so I headed for Reception, grabbed the regular phone and dialled the number written on the white board.

"Mate," I apologized when a certain punting acquaintance was on the other end of the line, "sorry I missed you when you called. I was out the back checking the cricket field. Got some mates from Townsville coming down for a two-day game this weekend. I presume you were calling to check whether I'd sighted Waddles."

Like much of the rest of the conversation it wasn't the exact truth, but it was as close as we were likely to get to it.

The voice on the other end indicated my surmise was correct and investigations in Tasmania had failed to produce a satisfactory result. There were reports of people resembling Waddles and Wally in the departure lounge of Launceston airport, but their names didn't appear on the flight manifest so it was difficult to know which names on the list had been used to conceal their identities.

"We're working on it. We've got the details of the incoming flights after that flight left, so that if there was someone who popped across to Melbourne to do a bit of shopping and come back, we can cross them off the list, and if there's someone on the list who's home at the moment, that's more than likely the person who might be able to help us track this pair down."

"Well, mate," I replied, "as I told you when you were here, I'll call as soon as I sight the big bastard. I've been confined to base since you were here yesterday but we're off to the pub this evening and I'm sure that if he's been in town that's where he would have lobbed. Lady Liz hasn't called you?"

The response indicated I was, again, correct.

"Well, I can assure you when I sight the big bastard on the doorstep, I'll be in touch," was the promise that concluded the call before I headed back to my cave, aiming to spend an hour or two working on the music collection.

I managed an hour before Jeffrey wandered through the door, having completed the administrative procedures associated with the Lotto draw and handed the forms to Bright Eyes for delivery to the investment agency.

We took a stroll around the boundary of the cricket field while I outlined my latest thoughts on certain issues. Back at the shelter I ran through the options I thought might be employed and we were just about to head back to our rooms when vibrations from my pocket indicated an incoming call on the secure mobile. I flipped it open and pressed the appropriate button.

"Go ahead," I instructed. "It's your money."

"Herston." It was Waddles' voice that responded. "I've been talking things over with Wally and we both reckon it's a bit unfair putting you guys' necks on the line by staying here. Wally reckons he can find somewhere to hide around the Gulf. His cousin's got a trawler up there, and he reckons he wouldn't have any problem getting a job on board."

"Sounds good to me." I neglected to add the mental *so far* to the spoken word. "What about yourself?"

"I reckon I could get myself over to Perth and meet up with Hilda over there. I'll be getting in touch with Captain Headrush and asking him to put the horses up for sale and my partner will probably buy out my share of the car yard, so that would give us a bit of cash to set ourselves up over in Sandroper country."

There was, I felt, absolutely nothing wrong with the suggestion so far.

"What about getting there. How are you going to do that? I guess you'll be needing us to get you to an airport or something." I used my politest, most non-pressing tone, though I was unable to see any way of avoiding involvement with their relocation.

"No," came the reply, "I figure we've got that covered as well. I was down in the bar here last night."

"What?" I almost exploded. "What happened to staying in your room and laying low? What if somebody spotted you?"

This casual disregard for basic security was starting to stretch frayed nerves towards breaking point.

"I was taking a stroll around the back of the motel and stuck my nose in the bar. There was no one local there, so I thought it'd be safe enough to sneak in there for a few provided I stayed near the back door and bolted if anyone I knew came in the front door. I figured I would be safe."

I wasn't quite so sure about that, but decided to reserve my judgement.

"I was half way through my first drink when this sales rep walked in and sat down beside me. We got talking and I spun him a line about how my mate and I were hiding from the Family Law Court. Mentioned something about owing money for maintenance we couldn't pay because we'd gambled it away on the pokies. Told him our car had broken down in Airlie and we'd caught a bus here. I reckon we could probably bludge a lift to Townsville with him."

"Where is he now?"

"In Airlie. He's a rep for a steel company. Does local calls here one day, goes down to Airlie and Prossie on the second day and heads out to Collinsville on day three. I reckon he could pick us up on the way back from Collinsville tomorrow afternoon and drop us in Townsville tomorrow night. That way you and Jeffrey won't have any link to us once we leave. If I keep hold of this mobile."

"Which is, remember, registered in Hopalong's name."

"I'd forgotten about that. Anyway I reckon if I'm discreet enough about it I could use the phone to tie up a few loose ends, then ditch the thing."

"What about flights? How are you going to get a boarding pass without photo ID?" That had been the reason Jeffrey and I had felt our presence at the airport would be required.

"Haven't you seen the latest check-in system? You check yourself in at a computer terminal at the airport. All you need is your booking number. I reckon we can book whatever flights we need, use a couple of fictional names, check ourselves in and no one would be any the wiser. I'll talk to Bill and Marge here, see if I can use their computer to do the bookings, pay for it through their credit card - I'll give them the cash to cover it, of course, and Bob's your uncle."

I cast my mind over my family tree. Try as I might, I could find nothing in my memory concerning the existence of an Uncle Robert.

"Anyway, keep me posted," I replied. "If you need Jeffrey or me to get you out of town, just call. If you need to get onto us tonight we'll be heading down to the Palace for the pasta night."

Turning to Jeffrey, I informed him that the problem might have resolved itself, but advised him that holding his breath would be inadvisable.

A glance around the cricket field suggested the grass would need trimming before the weekend, so I handed Jeffrey the mobile, observing vibrations from an incoming call might be difficult to pick up

while riding on a lawnmower. So, with phone monitoring duties delegated, I spent a pleasant couple of hours riding in circles as the mower reduced the sward to a respectable length.

## FEZ PLEASE!

Since the outfield had been laser levelled, mowing was a matter of steering around a diminishing spiral and the activity gave me time to ponder the Bernelle situation. There were two more nights before the weekend, and if things had not reached a satisfactory conclusion by Friday morning it would be time to give her the *old heave-ho*.

Her mother was a major part of the problem and would have to be considered when strategic decisions were made. That was unlikely to be a problem on Thursday night, but it was better to be safe than sorry.

Since we'd be heading to the Palace for dinner, I expected we'd come across both of them, and what happened over dinner and afterwards would influence my chances of success in the bedroom stakes. If things didn't work out, I would need to have a plan in place for tomorrow evening, and the best chance of success would lie in withdrawing from anything that could be a distracting influence.

A move away from headquarters, but that would pose problems should someone need to contact me about the weekend. On the other hand, that sort of interruption was precisely what I was trying to avoid, so departure to Airlie Beach had definite merit. A quiet dinner? There was a restaurant in the main street which would be more than adequate, and there was a resort within easy staggering distance. Sounded good to me. Sounded better and better all the time.

That assumed my intentions would be thwarted tonight, and although recent form suggested that was likely, but I decided against specific plans for tomorrow until tonight had unfolded. If necessary, I could make a *spur of the moment* decision tomorrow afternoon and suggest we travel to Airlie in Bernelle's car.

Those considerations took a while to work through, and by the time I'd finished mowing it was four o'clock. Parking the mower, I headed to the cave for a shower and a change of clothes before Sandy returned from his staff meeting, since there would not be a suitable envelope of opportunity with an impatient and thirsty high school teacher standing on the doorstep, tapping a foot and feigning acute dehydration.

There was also the advantage of being able to await the gentleman's return with a glass in hand, and the possibility of keeping an impatient and thirsty high school teacher waiting while I finished my glass.

Emerging from the shower, I selected something from the wardrobe and wandered towards Jeffrey's room to suggest Sandy would prefer not to be kept waiting. That done, the same message was passed on to Hopalong and Bright Eyes, who assured me they would both be showered, shaved and shampooed well before five o'clock. In one case, of course, the shaving would have been redundant.

Passing the bar, I grabbed a beer and headed for the pool, where I could chill out while the others finished their preparations. I had just finished the beer when Hopalong arrived, asking if I needed a refill. Jeffrey emerged soon afterwards and wended his way pool side, bearing beer for myself and Hopalong into the bargain.

Since we were both barely halfway through the current one, this complicated matters, so when Sandy strode into view, expressing the observation that a man was *not a camel* we had to delay our departure until one beer had been drained and the other started. We would not, of course, be permitted onto the premises at the Palace with an unfinished drink in hand.

While Sandy set out to rouse Bright Eyes, Hopalong and I took our time on our beers, and, around ten minutes after Sandy's arrival we were able to move towards the chariot and depart. When we arrived at the waterhole, we found the *Reserved* sign in our favoured spot. Jeffrey indicated that he had been in communication with His Lordship, who was becoming concerned that our return from overseas had not resulted in the anticipated increase in his cash flow.

While we had been out in force on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, our absence from the bar for two whole days was not a development His Lordship considered auspicious. As he joined us he asked whether we'd be joining the throng for the pasta night. As he did, I noticed a surreptitious exchange of envelopes between Jeffrey and His Lordship. I raised an eyebrow, but said nothing as they disappeared into the respective pockets.

With the preliminaries out of the way, the conversation turned to recent events, the contents of the local paper, activities of local identities, and prospects for the weekend. His Lordship was anticipating a busy few days, and showed great interest in the personalities of the Dipsomaniacs who would be landing on his doorstep.

"Well, you can never tell who'll be in their side until the bus turns up at the ground. Depends on who's still talking to who, who isn't talking to one of the regulars and who's had dry out for a bit."

"You would have some idea?" His Lordship suggested.

"All things being equal, you would. Of course all things *aren't*, so with those blokes you can never be sure. If their side includes more than half a dozen of the most likely suspects, you'd better make sure you've got a good-sized reserve of practically everything you keep in stock and a fair supply of some assorted exotic, particularly if the punters in the crew have a good day on the punt."

His Lordship expressed some reservations, so I was forced to elucidate.

"It's like this. They're all definite on what they'll drink. If you run out of VB, for instance, the VB drinkers won't change to XXXX. If you tried to slip a pot of the other brew into their hands you'd more than likely end up being accused of trying to poison them. Spirits? They could attack any of the regular ones, but there's one bloke who won't drink anything but Bloody Marys. There are a couple who are likely to start from *that end* of the liqueur lineup and have one of everything down to *there*, and then go back in reverse order. How are you on mixing cocktails?"

"Not one of my strong points."

"In that case get Curtis to sit down on Saturday afternoon with the cocktail bible and make sure he has an idea of what he's doing. They're particularly fond of ones that burn."

"Meaning?"

"A couple of them love those cocktails you set alight. There's one bloke who'll more than likely try to *flambé* his arms. You can usually pick him if he's had a session recently. He's the one with no hair on his arms. First time because someone bumped him and spilled his drink over his arms. He decided he liked the effect and from now he does it deliberately. Make sure you have a fire blanket handy if he starts that shit."

It was obvious from their reactions that my companions thought I was exaggerating.

"You don't believe me? I had a couple of years going on trips with those bastards umpiring games. Trust me, I saw more serious degeneracy over the course of a weekend than the Crustaceans could manage in a month."

Everyone present had seen the Crustaceans in action in their post-match celebrations. Bus trips after away games were the stuff of legend. Hopalong was the first to suggest I was exaggerating.

"Sure, we've seen the Crustaceans in action here. Do you see them on a big night out here the day before a game? No. They'll have a few quiet ones while the goose club's running and then piss off home. They won't drink before the game and once they've made it to full time, *then* they go at it like a bull at a gate. If you're lucky a couple will keep going till the afternoon session on Sunday before they head off home to sleep it off. You know who I mean?"

There was general agreement about the most likely suspects.

"With the Dipsos it's different. Whoever's coordinating the trip will collect the bus Friday afternoon. He'll have the team list, and they'll stock the eskies with one tin of his preferred brand per man per fifteen minutes of the trip, and that'll include an extra quarter hour's piss break time per hour of travel. I've done enough school excursions to know that Townsville's two and a half hours from here on a coaster bus, so travelling time will be more like three hours when you allow for piss stops, right?"

The consensus was that this was an accurate estimate.

"So that's a dozen tins per man before they get here. While that might be enough for ordinary people like you and me..."

"Normal?" interjected Jeffrey. "Don't try to tell me that there's anyone here that's *normal*. All the world is mad except thee and me, and even thee is a little strange."

"Exactly, but thee and me would be starting to slow down after a dozen tins in three hours, but not these bastards. When they arrive, they'll hoe into the piss like they've been stuck on a desert island for three months without a drink. By the way," I turned towards His Lordship, "make sure you've got a huge supply of chips in the kitchen. Friday they'll go through about two plates of blotting paper each."

"They're playing the next day?" His Lordship seemed unconvinced.

"Yeah, but they'll party on till midnight, crash for eight hours and when they surface, after a shower they'll hit the kitchen big time for breakfast. If they win the toss, they'll bowl, believe it or not. They'll have three or four hairy quicks, a trundler or two and a spinner; so the plan will be to bowl first before the quickies have time to get on the grog. They'll hit the grog during lunch, then try to knock the rest of the batting over quickly after that. Once they've finished in the field, the quickies will reckon their part of the trip is over and get into *serious* drinking, while the batsmen, who've probably spent most of the day bludging in the slips while they get over their hangovers, try to wipe out as much of the deficit as possible before stumps."

"Saturday night?" His Lordship had evident misgivings about stamina.

"Repeat of Friday night's performance except that if they know they're not going to be doing anything too strenuous next day they won't collapse into bed until around three Sunday morning."

"So it would pay," His Lordship mused, "to rig the result of the toss."



"It could, depending on whether you prefer to face their pace attack when they're relatively fresh or you'd rather take your chances with them when they're hung over and not feeling well disposed towards the world and that bastard at the other end who's just hit them for four. I'd go with the fresher option, but I don't know how Brooks'd feel about it."

His Lordship's reaction indicated he thought the avenue was worth pursuing.

"If they've bowled first they'll make a point of getting the opposing bowlers legless if they can. You'll probably find them carting a couple of eskies away when you close the doors Saturday night..."

"Which won't be till midnight. I've already arranged that one," His Lordship pointed out. "Will that make a difference?"

"Not much. In the morning they'll front up for a huge breakfast, head out to the ground, drink through the day until the innings is over, have a couple for the road before they leave, and just before they head off they'll stack the eskies with exactly the same ration per man as they did on the way down. They'll leave here about three-thirty or four. Get home around seven and there won't be a single unopened can on the bus."

"They'll do all that drinking here?"

His Lordship, it seemed, could not believe how lucrative the weekend was likely to be.

"Provided you've got what they want, they'll stay here. If their punters' club has been doing OK, you'll probably have the treasurer wanting to run a tab at the bar for anyone wearing one of their shirts. They'll probably want you to run one till set up so anything ordered by someone wearing one of their shirts goes into it and they'll want you to let them know when you hit whatever amount they specify. I've seen them run up a thousand dollar tab in a couple of hours."

"You're kidding," seemed to be the general opinion.

"Nope. Anyway you'll probably get a phone call tomorrow about all this shit."

It was almost possible to see the dollar signs lighting up in His Lordship's eyes, but the appearance of two familiar figures in the doorway suggested that we were in for a change of subject.

As Bernelle and Olga seated themselves, The Duchess emerged from the kitchen, announcing preparations were under control. Pasta night was a development which had sprung up while Jeffrey and I were overseas, and I was intrigued. As The Duchess pulled up a pew and surveyed the rest of the congregation I asked.

"So how does this little operation work? Same as the Sunday Roast?"

"Exactly like the Sunday Roast. Unlike Sundays when we can get away with just offering the roast, we're forced to offer the standard menu as well..."

"So if I wasn't a pasta eater, I could order, say, the coral trout in beer batter?"

"You *could*, but you wouldn't want to be dying of starvation. As you'll see tonight, once the horde descends the kitchen will be flat out keeping the pasta and sauces heading out to the *bain-marie* in the

Dining Room so they're not exactly going to have much time to worry about orders for anything else. Not, you understand, if they're going to do a proper job on your coral trout with beer batter."

"Which you'd of course insist on," Jeffrey remarked. "So this pasta night gets them in? Bigger than a Friday night?"

The Duchess glanced at her watch. It was five-forty-five, give or take a minute among friends. She looked across to her former kitchen hand.

"Darling," she said, with a look that suggested the endearment was far from genuine, "if you were still doing the dishes in there you'd be *working your little freckle off*, I can tell you."

I attempted to divert the conversation slightly.

"So how does it work? You hand over your eight dollars..."

"Magpie or whoever gives you a ticket with *One Pasta* printed on it. We've had to have them printed, since writing two words takes up too much time."

She reached across to the bar and, as if by magic produced something that looked remarkably like a book of raffle tickets.

"You order one pasta, you get one ticket. You want twenty-seven, you get twenty-seven tickets, *capiche*? Then you wander into the Dining Room and get on the end of the queue that'll more than likely be half way out the door. When you get to the *bain-marie* you point out what pasta you want..."

"The choice is?"

"One long round, one long flat, one hollow round and one of something else..."

"So," I suggested, "spaghetti, fettuccine, penne and farfalle or something."

"There's a ravioli or a lasagne if you're into that sort of thing as well. We vary them from week to week so that it doesn't get boring. Same with the sauces. You've got to have a Bolognese, of course. Don't know why, but people expect it."

"On top of that?"

"A vegetarian something or other, a creamy sauce, a puttanesca or some other tomato and chilli and something fishy. Same thing, vary it a bit from week to week, but you can't vary it too much outside those basic limits. The punters don't like it if you do."

"The punters," I suggested, "flock in?"

"Darling, it's like a plague of locusts. Ten minutes to crunch time. Get in now, pick up your docket, wander out and find a table, but don't be in a hurry to eat. Get your drinks from the back bar, *otherwise you'll dehydrate*. They'll start flocking through the door just after six, and by six-thirty there won't be a spare seat anywhere. Then when they've finished eating they'll have one drink and disappear. The *gobble and go show*, that's what I call it."

Acting on information received, five minutes later we'd paid for seven pastas and relocated to a table in the beer garden to watch proceedings. Sure enough, exactly as promised, just after six a flood of

eager diners started, and for most of the next hour and a half the queue in front of the *bain-marie* wound through the Dining Room, occasionally extending into the beer garden. The tables around us were packed, and when one group of diners had departed the plates were barely off the table before another group claimed the space.

All through the proceedings The Duchess graced us with her presence since *the boys can look after this stuff on their ear*. When I suggested it might be time to exchange our dockets for sustenance, I was told there was absolutely no cause for concern.

"There's no way we're going to run out of anything. There are four pots of water on the range in there, and each one has a load of whatever pasta it's being used for in it. When one load is done, it goes out to the *bain-marie* and we whack another load in there. There's a new batch of each sauce ready to go out as well. When that one goes out to the *bain-marie*, they start on the next one. At the very worst, once they've gobbled and gone, the worst we can look forward to is a batch of each sauce left over. Most of them reheat OK, so there's tomorrow's lunch special covered if necessary."

"Seems remarkably efficient," I observed.

"Darling, if we could work like this every night things would be a breeze, but if we go more than once a week we'll lose the crowd. Half a dozen sauces, four pastas, conveyor belt approach. No frying, no chopping, no need to think too much. It's a breeze. Once things start flowing I just need to wander through every fifteen minutes or so. Apart from the pace it's an absolute doddle. Speaking of wandering through, it's about time I headed in there. Want to see a real rush hour?"

Not being a connoisseur of major kitchen action I declined the offer; but Jeffrey decided to take advantage of the chance to observe his former work-mates working flat chat and reemerged five minutes later to report on his observations.

"They're busy in there all right," he observed, pausing to point in the direction of Mr Cassidy. "Busier than this bastard at an arse-kicking contest. Not too busy, mind you, to refrain from throwing the odd dish cloth or other handy object in my direction when her back was turned and she was on her way back out to the *bain-marie*."

"So the Duchess was right?" I suggested.

"Unusually, yes. They're busy as shit, mind you, but since they're only churning out a couple of basic things it's not like a regular night when you'll get an order for five different meals on the one table and they'll want them to all come out together."

After Lady E's assurances that the food was not going to run out there seemed little to do but wait for the crowd to disperse before heading to the *bain-marie* ourselves, so the next hour was spent indulging in the usual whimsical character assassination until, just before eight the crowd had thinned enough for us to front for a feed.

Arriving there, I discovered a previously unmentioned benefit of waiting. With the rush over there was a need to ensure that leftover pasta and sauces were kept to a minimum, and we found ourselves heading back with plates filled generously. A period of relative quiet ensued as each of us attacked the mountain of food, and once the assault was over conversation resumed.

Jeffrey was engaged in intimate discussion with Olga, who seemed more than agreeable to whatever was being suggested when vibrations in my pocket indicated there was someone trying to establish contact on the *secure* phone. I decided it would be wise to head away to take the call. While the beer

garden was reasonably deserted, my companions could probably overhear anything that came up in discussion. My glass contained a mouthful, and once that was gone I had an excuse to cover my absence.

"I'm heading inside for a piss," I explained as I rose to my feet. "Anyone need a refill?"

Having noted the company's requirements, I headed through the dining room and public bar towards a median strip unlikely to be contaminated by listening devices. On the way, I noted the beer garden was not the only area to have suffered a decline in population. Apart from Michael Brooks, there were only a handful of regulars on the premises. The gobblers had gobbled and gone.

Since it would have been unsocial to have passed through the bar without stopping for a chat, a pause was enough to establish Mr Brooks was on his way home from cricket practice and would be departing the premises when his better half appeared on the scene. She had, from what I gathered, been inveigled into attending a meeting of the school bus transport committee.

Brooks said the team for the weekend was looking good, asked whether I needed a drink, then, glancing out the door, remarked that he'd catch up with me on Friday since the chariot had arrived and he had no desire of transforming into a pumpkin.

"Grow the bloody things," he explained. "Doesn't mean I want to be one."

As the car sped off towards Brooks Acres, I crossed the road, found an unobtrusive spot in the median strip, took out the mobile and called the only number in its memory. It sputtered and farted for a few seconds, rang for a few more, then there was a cautious *Hello* in the dulcet tones of Mr Waddington.

"You rang?" I did my best to mimic the majordomo from *The Munsters*. From his reply I gathered that Waddles had not spent a great deal of time watching 60s American comedy. It seemed the reference had sailed over his head like a top edged hook off an express bowler.

"Yeah, I did. I thought you'd like to know that I had a few beers with Greg this afternoon...."

"Greg?"

"Sales rep bloke I told you about. He's going to pick us up here when he gets back from Collinsville about three-thirty tomorrow arvo and drop us in Townsville. I thought we'd get him to drop us at the cab rank at Rising Sun and get a cab over to that motel near the airport. I've booked us in there under your name. Hope you don't mind. I thought that might be enough to muddy the tracks. I'm off to the south early next morning and Wally's got a seat on a coach going north and a flight to the Gulf booked, so this time Friday we should be well and truly away from here. I tried to get on a flight tomorrow night, but the only one that leaves after six-thirty was booked out."

"Sounds good," I replied. "No one's seen you while you've been here?"

"Well, your cleaning lady was out here with some bloke having dinner in the restaurant..."

"I thought you and Wally were eating in the room," I interposed.

"Well, we were, but Greg invited us to join, and there was no one there apart from Daphne and this bloke. They were sitting there over dinner with a pile of what looked like textbooks."

"You're obviously unaware of Daphne's abiding interest in sociology. She's doing some Uni course by correspondence. The bloke must have been her lecturer."

"Yeah, he looked like a lecherer. They were still going at it hammer and tongs in the restaurant when we left."

A momentary vision of Daphne's ample proportions reclining across a dining table while some bearded sociologist explored her internal dialectics crossed my mind. It wasn't a pretty sight.

"Apart from that everything looks OK." Waddles paused, and I wondered whether the telephone connection had somehow succeeded in transferring my mental picture across the ether to Waddles.

"Like I said Greg is picking us up here tomorrow arvo. He should be reliable. We paid for his dinner, bought him a good bottle of plonk and let him drink most of it, and I said we'd pay cash for his accommodation as well, so he'll get the whole of his expenses cash in hand when he claims them back from his boss. I told him we'd have the receipt for him when he collects us from here. Saves him having to worry about settling the bill tonight or tomorrow morning, and it probably guarantees he'll be back to collect us because he can't claim his expenses without it. He reckons he's going to claim our meals by saying we're a couple of developers who are looking at a prefabricated steel framework for a warehouse on the industrial estate here.'

"A likely fabrication."

"Yeah, right old load of bullshit but it'll keep his boss happy and throw another hundred and fifty bucks into Greg's pocket, so he's happy about that. So everything looks *schmicko* and I'll give you a call from down south Friday morning."

"Sounds good to me," were my parting words, and I heaved an inward sigh of relief. At least it looked like *Operation Secure Waddles* would reach a successful conclusion. It seemed fair to assume I could now focus on what to do with Bernelle.

With the phone back in my pocket, I crossed the road, walked through the public bar and found Sandy standing in the *Quick Service* area. He explained my absence seemed to have been longer than necessary, and people had remarked that their glasses were empty and there was no sign of an approaching refill.

"So I volunteered to come and see what was holding you up and whether you needed a hand."

He was polite enough to avoid reference that I seemed to have found it necessary to answer the call of nature, the excuse for my departure, on the median strip. Once we found our way back to the beer garden, it was obvious that we had over-catered.

When I had departed the party had numbered nine, but on our return there were a of spare chairs, and there was no one to claim a blue tin or one brightly coloured alcopop. In short, it seemed, Jeffrey had dematerialised. Suspiciously, so had Olga. Their drinks sat unclaimed, and while Sandy intimated they had been there when he left and they must have departed while he was inside, none of the others seemed to be willing or able to explain their disappearance.

As the conversation continued intermittently, I sat back and ran through a mental checklist.

If Jeffrey had found an alternative venue, at least for the time being, there was marginally less danger of the struggle for Jeffrey's affections getting in the way. I recalled envelopes that changed hands earlier. It was quite possible the one His Lordship passed to Jeffrey had contained a key, and the one in the opposite direction had contained money to secure a room for one or more nights. Those details could be verified later. Assuming Olga had been removed from the list of likely disruptive influences, I mentally checked other factors that might impinge on *Operation Bed Bernelle*.

The Twins were resting before a heavy day's journalism.

Gloria had gone to the movies with her mother. Earlier reports indicated that although Bernelle had suggested she might want to join us the invitation was declined because we *drink too much*. Not sentiments to be encouraged, but as long as Gloria felt that way the allegation would remove one potentially disruptive influence and the possibility of a repeat of the Monday night debacle.

Other difficulties? None I could see. Waddles and Wally's plans for tomorrow reduced the chance anything relating to them would impinge on my ambitions.

Mickey's big hand moved inexorably towards ten o'clock as Sandy started referring to the fact that certain people were going to be looking at an honest day's work tomorrow.

Hopalong joined in to suggest that his presence in Reception would permit a call to the British Isles and that the available envelope of opportunity for making such calls was limited.

The Duchess pointed out while it was all right for *all you bloody drunks to sit around carousing till all hours, some of us like to get to bed at a reasonable hour* and stood, indicating that, should His Lordship be desirous of her company she would be waiting upstairs once he had secured the premises.

Bright Eyes indicated that she had designs on beauty sleep. Or perhaps we would care to use the *other taxi service*?

With no sign of Jeffrey or Olga it seemed there was nothing to stop us departing *tout suite*, and a party of five would fit comfortably into the convertible.

"Just as well Jeffrey's not here," remarked Hopalong. "Where'd he get to?"

Since his spouse had strong views on Jeffrey's sexual antics, her absence enabled Lord Edward to explain Jeffrey had booked his old room for the next few days (*in case he needs it*) and should any of our party venture upstairs and knock on the door we would more than likely discover that *something has come up* and Mr Jeffrey would not be requiring transport home this evening.

Bidding our host farewell, we headed towards the convertible and five minutes later found ourselves pulling up under the **Moderation** sign.

Bright Eyes departed immediately, indicating that there was little chance of her reading lamp directing benighted travellers, Sandy, calling down the wrath of the heavens on Year Nine Studies of Society and the Environment classes headed cotwards himself. When I suggested that Hopalong might care for a nightcap beside the pool, he declined since there were calls that needed to be made and that he would be retiring for the night once those communications had been completed.

Again, I checked off the other possibilities.

Provided I ensured the door was locked and the security chain slotted firmly into place there were no disruptive influences likely to impinge on the success or failure of my mission. The breeze delivered a slight chill to the outdoor entertainment area and the absence of company meant there was little point in remaining out in the cold, so I ushered Bernelle towards my quarters.

Inside, door locked, security chain in place, lights dimmed and something soothing on the stereo it seemed everything was going according to plan. A pile of clothing materialized on the floor beside the bed and I was about to join Bernelle on a horizontal surface.

"Where's your thing?" she asked.

"Right here," I replied. "Right where it should be. Pink, pointed, present, correct and ready for action."

"No, not THAT thing. The other thing. You know. The RUBBER thing. The what do you call it?"

"A condom? A rubber? A fred? A franger? A prophylactic device?" I ventured.

"Yes. One of those. You've got one haven't you?" With some reluctance I reported the absence of any such item.

"I didn't think we needed any. We've never needed one before. This is the first time I've heard of anything like this."

"Don't you keep one as a precaution? Just in case? I promised Mum I'd never do it unless the guy was wearing one of them."

I had visions of the consequences of any similar suggestion being made to Jeffrey. His objection to the items in question had, I recalled, been expressed with some vehemence at frequent intervals. Any suggestion earlier in the evening upstairs at the Palace would, I was sure, have meant that we would have been fitting in an extra passenger on the way home.

"Look. I'll bet your mother isn't worrying herself about that as she impales herself on Jeffrey's mutton dagger. He won't wear one. If she'd tried to get him to wear one I'm sure we would have found him back downstairs in record time, looking for his blue tin and calling her all the names under the sun."

"I don't care. Mum made me promise, and that's all there is to it. If she doesn't want to worry about those things, that's fine for her. She's had her tubes tied."

"Yeah, but that's not the point, is it? The thing about those things is as much about preventing diseases as it is about preventing a belly full of arms and legs, and you're on the pill. Aren't you?"

"No," was the reply. "Before I came down here I promised Dad I'd never take one of those either. He wanted me to promise that I wouldn't sleep with anyone before I was married."

"Which, of course, you did," I suggested.

"No, I couldn't promise him that. Because I had."

"You had..."

"Yes, I'd slept with Luke when I was in Year Nine. Dad asked me to promise him when I was finishing Year Ten. I couldn't promise him because I already had."

"This Luke," I asked. "That wouldn't be the same Luke I'm thinking of, would it. The guy who's now a leading gay rights campaigner? Of course, he wore a condom..."

"No, he didn't, silly. I hadn't promised Mum back then. I was still in Townsville."

There was a strange logic in operation, which would, make further discussion fruitless, but at the same time I was disinclined to lay the subject to rest. Bernelle, on the other hand, had decided enough was enough and, inserting herself between the sheets and assumed *Silent* mode.

That was where the matter rested.

Where I rested for the evening was, as any casual observer might have guessed, the couch.



## THURSDAY

While the couch might not have been the most comfortable option, it was well after sunrise when someone moving around the room brought me back to consciousness. As expected, the someone was Bernelle and while she treated herself to a shower, I feigned sleep and reviewed the events of the previous night.

Regardless of recent developments, I was disinclined to abandon the project but we were approaching the point where the law of diminishing returns would kick in, making further attempts uneconomic in terms of *return per unit of effort expended*.

It might be the sign of a professional pessimist, but having assumed Fate was slipping the lead into the boxing glove while I'd been checking off the things that could go wrong the day before I already had a fallback position and there was no point staying in familiar surroundings. While external factors hadn't contributed to the latest disaster, a change of venue would mean I could dismiss a number of disruptive influences, and I knew the right alternative venue.

There was no point in raising the subject straight away. If I said anything about the idea and gave her the day to think things over Bernelle would quite possibly find a way to inveigle Gloria, her mother or some other malevolent influence into the scenario.

*No, I thought. Say nothing. Plan meticulously. Spring a surprise this afternoon and get her away from anything that could possibly interfere. If some unexpected factor does come into play, that will be that. Game, set and match. Thank you umpires, thank you ball boys. The judge's decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into.*

Having come to that conclusion I extricated myself from the couch, dressed, and was seated at the table when Bernelle emerged from the shower.

Since she seemed disinclined to refer to last night's events I thought it best to leave sleeping subjects lie doggo and made inquiries as to her health and any plans she might have for the evening without making specific suggestions. Once the phone call to the taxi service has been made I escorted her off the premises, wandered back through the kitchen, fixed myself a cup of coffee and headed towards the rain room. Emerging shortly after seven-thirty, I finished off the coffee and decided to lie low until it was time to check out preparations for the weekend. Around nine-fifteen I was in the middle of preparing breakfast when the phone rang.

Fearing the worst, I was relieved to hear His Lordship asking if I could find my way to the Palace around eleven. A representative from the Dipsomaniacs had called during the evening, but in the rush associated with pasta night the bar attendant who'd taken the call had jotted a number on a *call back* slip and placed it on His Lordship's desk, rather than walking out to the beer garden to ask whether Mr Barron was able to take the call.

His Lordship had found the note while securing the premises but decided to return the call first thing in the morning rather than last thing at night. That call revealed last night's caller was on his way out of the house and suggested His Lordship arrange for me to be present when he called from his office about eleven to finalize details for the weekend.

Assuring His Lordship there was no need for him to collect me, I went back to my breakfast, then, with the dishes in the dishwasher, strolled down to Bright Eyes' room to arrange transport. After I had been assured that it would be a privilege to drop me in town at a quarter to eleven I headed towards my room reflecting on a sarcasm I hadn't previously noted in Bright Eyes' demeanour. I hoped that it

was not a sign of an impending change to our transport arrangements. Perhaps the novelty of her position was wearing off and Bright Eyes needed some diversion from her day to day existence.

Alternatively, the return to academic life might be taking its toll, and requests for a lift down town could be an inconvenient and unwarranted interruption.

On the other hand, it could be a case of someone needing a break. Having already decided to include Airle in my plans for the evening I considered asking Bright Eyes' to transport us there and giving her the chance to indulge in a little child-bridegrooming while I attended to the matters I had in mind.

*No, I thought. Keep things simple. We don't want extra influences that might stuff things up tonight. Maybe I can work out something to give Bright Eyes a chance to escape the weekend after next. Arrange a few nights' accommodation and a lift down. Hopalong could probably do that. Drop her down there Friday evening and pick her up Monday lunch time.*

Having come to that conclusion, I settled down to plot my own scheme for the evening.

There was a decent resort looking out over Muddy Bay that Jeffrey and I had operated from while we carried out our search for accommodation in Denison. A phone call suggested the management looked forward to seeing me again and an explanation that I was thinking of springing a surprise on my girl friend was sufficient to establish there were several vacancies in the spa rooms. It was highly likely at least one would be free when I *made up my mind* to head down that way in the afternoon.

"No. Make it a provisional booking and I'll call this afternoon to confirm. What's that? No. If I give you my credit card number; you can charge me for the night if we don't turn up. I want to spring it on her as a spur-of-the-minute thing, then ring up as if that's the way it is. Yes, it is a bit romantic. She's like that and I just want to give her a surprise. You'll be in the office just after five? Perfect! Expect a call then. You're sure you don't want that card number? Fine. Call you later. Bye."

*Laying it on a bit thick, you say?* I suppose so. If this was going to be the final attempt on Bernelle's honour we might as well plan thoroughly. There was no point calling the restaurant I had in mind so, in the meantime there was nothing for it but to potter round till it was time for Bright Eyes to drop me down at the Palace.

Since the morning failed to reveal any sign of Hopalong I paid him a visit to check on developments on the overseas front. Having learnt everything was, as far as anyone could tell, under control, I returned to base. Around ten-thirty Bright Eyes was ready to drop me in town.

As the vehicle turned out of the driveway I glanced across to the fuel gauge.

"Looks like you're getting a bit low in the old fuel tank, Bright Eyes, and while you're filling up I might just pop into the gents."

"Where you'll no doubt be dropping a few coins into the condom vending machine."

I was, momentarily, stuck for words, and something in my expression prompted Bright Eyes to elucidate.

"While you were wandering around the pub last night, Jeffrey and Olga disappeared. Not together, if you know what I mean, but it was fairly obvious what was going on."

"The Duchess didn't notice? That'd be a first."

"The Duchess was doing a final check through the kitchen when they slipped away. She got back just before you did, and Hopalong was quick to change the subject when she was on her way back."

"The subject was?"

"Mr Cassidy was expounding at some length on the importance of *safe sex*, particularly when you're dealing with someone who'd probably been doing his share of what he referred to as *bareback riding* in the fleshpots of New Orleans. He went so far as to turn to young Bernelle and suggest that she'd be well advised to make sure that she took all the sensible precautions herself."

I made a mental note to raise certain issues with a certain one-legged gentleman.

"Bernelle explained she'd promised that she'd never *do it* unless the guy was wearing a condom, which is when Hopalong stated that, to the best of his knowledge, you'd never bought a condom in your life. So I guess I'm safe in guessing things didn't work out the way you hoped last night and you're not particularly inclined to pop into the pharmacy or the supermarket and have one of your ex-students."

"Precisely. So, despite all statements to the contrary, Hopalong knew all along that Jeffrey wouldn't be needing a lift home last night?"

"Correct," Bright Eyes observed as she turned into the servo. "Fortunately, or unfortunately, depending on how you look at it, Mr Cassidy is slightly smarter than you two give him credit for."

With the relevant purchases and payments made it was just after a five to eleven when I walked through the front door of the Palace, to be confronted by a visibly angry publican's wife.

"Herston, you bastard. You must have known about this. How come I wasn't informed?"

To be quite honest, the directness of the question took me more than a little aback. Which particular situation was under discussion here? A series of possibilities crossed my mind.

Had the southern syndicate searching for Waddles and Wally been back in touch?

Had Waddles and Wally succeeded in blowing security?

Had their presence at the Shoreline been reported by Daphne?

Was it something to do with the Dipsomaniacs visit?

Something about what could be described as my relationship with Bernelle?

My hesitation before answering must have given some indication of my confusion.

"That rattlesnake! You knew he was going to be carrying out his sleazy activities upstairs in *my* hotel, didn't you? You probably put him up to it. There I was minding my own business this morning when Downtown Roger wandered into the kitchen asking whether I'd heard the racket last night. He said it sounded like someone having their teeth extracted one by one without anaesthetic."

The only possibility I could think of was that we were referring to Jeffrey's nocturnal activities. The *rattlesnake* should, in retrospect, have led me straight to the suspect.

"I don't have any idea what you're talking about," I ventured.

Which was, the diligent reader will recall, exactly the case. I had not been aware of Jeffrey's alternative shagging arrangements until they'd actually kicked in, so to speak. At the same time, I had serious doubts whether Downtown Roger could be termed a credible witness, having spent much of the preceding decade in his cups. The gentleman in question was known as the *Plastered Plasterer*, as opposed to the *Pisspot Paintpot*, Uptown Roger, who lived at the pub at the top of the main street.

"What was Downtown Roger on about?" I asked, playing for time till I could summon up facts to present a believable rebuttal. I had not laid eyes on Jeffrey since I had ventured out to call Waddles, and he had been conspicuous by his absence around *The Crossroads* that morning. He had, I guessed, escaped the Palace around *Sparrow Fart* and made his way back to base *via* the taxi rank.

"He heard someone moaning around midnight. Since it sounded like someone in serious pain, he got out of bed and went to investigate. He traced the noise to room 23. You know, the one Jeffrey used to live in until you took him off our hands when you won that money."

"What about the others? Where was everyone else? How come Roger was the only one to complain? Surely there were other people disturbed?"

That seemed a reasonable assumption. Downtown Roger, the *Brussels Bruxomaniac*, had been the subject of many complaints regarding snoring and the grinding of teeth and was notoriously difficult to wake. Noise sufficient to rouse Roger should've roused everyone within a fifty metre radius.

While the accommodation facilities at the Palace fell considerably short of anything approaching palatial, they were usually close to 100% occupancy due to permanent bookings by government departments who used the place as a base for any of their employees stranded in town overnight.

"The boys on the tugs were out at Monkhouse Point, and the two railway guys who were supposed to be staying here were called out to an emergency in Collinsville. They must have had a derailment or something. So for the first time in living memory that end of the building was totally deserted after midnight. Except, of course, for Downtown Roger. He says he spent five minutes standing outside the door before he summoned up the courage to ask if everything was all right."

"What happened then?"

"There was an English voice telling him to *be a good boy and toddle off to where he came from*."

"An English voice? So where do I fit in to this?"

I was unsure of exactly how she was going to be able to pin the blame on me, though I was sure the attempt would be made.

"When I went and looked in the register there was no record of anyone booked into that room." That news came as no surprise, as His Lordship would have had enough sense to ensure there was no direct reference to Jeffrey's booking. More than likely, remembering the possibility that his spouse might peruse the register, he would not have put anything in writing and hoped for the best.

"Well, it's news to me. It probably wouldn't be the first time someone's stay here hasn't been recorded in the register; would it? All I know is I went into the bar last night and got waylaid."

"I know. You weren't in the bar when I went into the kitchen to check on things."

The sound of a phone ringing would, I hoped, provide an avenue of escape from this line of questioning and I was relieved when His Lordship appeared, beckoning me to join him in the *Inner Sanctum*. As I entered, followed by The Duchess, His Lordship switched the phone to speaker mode.

A voice cut through the ether: "So you've got Herston there?"

"Present and correct. You're?"

"Balls," was the reply.

Barry Ballmer had been an up and coming opening batsman when I'd left Townsville. He was now apparently rated Senior Dipsomaniac and Tour Director: "I've been Minister For Games for the past couple of months. You'd been talking to Razor before that, correct?"

"Right on," I replied. "So what's the G.O. Who's coming down?"

"I'll be opening the batting with Nuts, and Pretty Boy will bat three. Then we'll have Ming and the Holy Trinity from The Fish - that's The Godfather; J.C. and Rum & Coke - and the bowlers. Retread, Psycho, Brown Dog, Angry and Ankles. Usual deal? Bat eleven, field and bowl twelve?"

"In other words Ankles' batting hasn't improved."

Bryan Angstrom was an aging spin bowler with a legendary capacity for strong drink whose batting fell into the category of *legendary incompetence*.

"Yeah, well if we bat twelve he'll only last one ball anyway, and your bloke would probably make bloody fifty. Anyway, fifty overs, eight over limit but everyone barring the keeper and one other bloke bowls at least two?"

"That was what Razor wanted. You'll have to confirm that with Brooksy, but. I don't think he'll be objecting. No, I think that'll be fine."

"Anyway, we can worry about that later on. Let's get the nuts and bolts sorted out. Accommodation?"

"In the old movie theatre at the back of the pub," His Lordship cut in. "Showers and toilets in there. We use it for the Crustaceans when they have their preseason carnival, so there'll be more than enough camp beds to go around. We'll have twenty set up tomorrow afternoon, assuming you'll have a couple of extra bodies in tow. We'll change the bedding on Saturday as well. You'll need to let me know if you need extras. Won't be a problem provided I know before things start to get busy on Friday arvo."

"Meals?"

"We've got counter meals on Friday night. I can fax you the menu, if you like so you can ring through with your orders. Friday night's busy, so that might be the way to go if you're running late. Otherwise there'll be plenty of chips and bar snacks."

"That should be fine Friday night. Saturday night'll be counter meals as well, I guess. More importantly, breakfast Saturday and Sunday morning?"

"Same deal as we offer for the Crustaceans Classic," The Duchess interjected. "Big cooked breakfast. Bacon, sausages and eggs, plenty of cereal and fruit juice. Pineapple and orange?"

"Tomato juice," came the reply, "and plenty of Tabasco and Worcestershire would be very helpful."

"A barbecue lunch at the ground both days," The Duchess went on. "I've catered for fifty all up, but it'll be no problem getting extra if we need it."

"Okay," Balls went on, "that's the basics attended to. Now for the important details." I could see the dollar signs starting to flash in His Lordship's eye sockets.

"We'll need a bar tab set up both nights. Fifteen hundred will do for starters. Once we hit that you'll need to let me know. That should cover all the beer, standard spirits and Bloody Marys for anyone wearing one of our team shirts. Wine and meals the boys'll pay for as they need them. At the ground."

"Tinnies," His Lordship remarked. "Two dollars a throw. Right?"

"Spot on. I guess Razor would have let you know about the right mix. You'll have enough to cover us for takeaways for the trip home? Very important, that."

His Lordship glanced in my direction. He was obviously having difficulty believing his ears.

See? I mouthed. *Told you.*

"On the way down," Balls went on, "we should be leaving around four, which'll put is on your doorstep between six and seven..."

"When you hit the turnoff from the highway," I cut in, "you'll spot a motel on the left. Used to be called *The Crossroads*."

"Know the one. Stayed there once. Coming back from the south when the roads got cut a couple of years back."

"Anyway, that's where the ground is. You'll notice the name's been changed to *Moderation*."

"As in *Drink alcohol in moderation*?" Balls suggested. Our minds were known to follow similar paths.

"You got 'im in one. Anyway if you pull up at the motel I'll be waiting to navigate you into town. Not that you'll need any help in that regard, but I'll be able to direct you to the spot to park the bus. Parking's at a premium around here on a Friday night."

I conveniently neglected to mention that the arrangement would also have the advantage of giving my liver a couple of hours' valuable breathing space, since I could reasonably expect to be the victim of severe Dipsomaniac hospitality.

"If you're running late, it'll be easier to call me at *Moderation*, rather than bothering anyone here at the pub. I can pass on any messages that need to be passed on."

"Sounds fine. Since that seems to have covered all the bases I'll see you down that way between six and seven tomorrow night."

There was an audible click as the call was terminated.

"See?" I turned to His Lordship and The Duchess., "as I told you. Should be a nice little earner for you. Now, if it's not too much trouble, if someone could drop me back home, there are a few pressing matters that need to be attended to, and I don't mean the ironing."

"I can do that," His Lordship offered. "I've got a couple of calls to make around town."

He turned to the Duchess.

"I checked the lights next door. A couple of the fluoros seem to have blown, so I'll need to pick up some replacements. If I'd thought to check earlier in the week I'd have been able to get a sparky in to check the wiring. Those tubes shouldn't have blown that quickly. Anything else you want me to get while I'm out and about?"

There wasn't and we made our way through the public bar and into the pub ute with great rapidity.

"Thank goodness for that," His Lordship stated as the engine turned over.

Certain other gentlemen of my acquaintance would have invoked the fornicatory deity.

"She's been on my case since Downtown Roger came into the kitchen with stories about strange noises coming from Room 23."

"Tell me about it. I got the third degree from the time I walked through the door. What'd you tell her?"

"Basically, nothing," His Lordship explained, "for a start there wasn't anything written in the Register..."

"Surprise, surprise!"

His Lordship ignored the remark.

"Fortunately I'd anticipated something like this, so when Jeffrey asked me about the room I asked him to make sure there was no sign it'd been used when he left. I put a change of sheets in there yesterday, and made him promise to make up the bed before he slipped out in the morning."

"The other sheets? The ones reeking of a night of passion?"

I was intrigued to see how His Lordship had arranged things.

"Went in the spare room the tuggies use for their changes of gear. That's the one you slept in when you came to town, remember? Then I waited till Daphne'd stripped the beds in the rooms that were used last night, and distracted her with a wild goose chase for long enough to slip the extra sheets in with the others. She's probably scratching her head about six sets of sheets when she'd only had to make up five rooms, but as long as she doesn't say anything to Betty."

"You should be all right, and once you get back I guess it's just a case of staying out of the way till things liven up this evening and letting time take its toll on certain memories."

"That's why I threw in the remark about the fluoros. I had a sparky in to check the theatre last week, but she was at the hairdresser, so what the eye doesn't see the heart doesn't grieve over. I'll catch Bluey, he's bound to drop in some time over the weekend, and get him to wander in early next week and take a quick dekko at things. He owes me a favour or two."

"Meanwhile the possibility of having the pub burn down because of some electrical fault will give her something to distract her from thinking about noises coming from rooms that don't appear to have been occupied. Mind you, she's already put two and two together."

"Which is what I'll be talking to Jeffrey about when we arrive at your place. Not that he'll be needing the room tonight, from what he was saying, but it'll be handy to have Plan B in place in case a similar situation arises in the future."

As we turned into Moderation I reflected Plan B needed, in my experience, to be backed up by Plans C through Z. That was enough to turn my mind to more pressing matters and I bade His Lordship farewell as he stood on the step outside Four and headed for my own quarters.

The accommodation was organized, so the next issue was the small matter of an intimate dinner: There wasn't much point in calling before two, so I continued working through the shelves till then, and made the call to check there was a table available in the upstairs section of the eatery.

With a booking in place I explained I'd pay them the courtesy of calling back to confirm once I was sure we were on our way. From there it would be a case of *back to the catalogue* once a further call had been made. I was about half way around the boundary of the cricket field when the secure phone saved me the trouble of calling.

"Fire away, I was about to give you a bell."

"Great minds think alike," Waddles' voice informed me.

"Either that or *fools never differ*. Anyway, what can we do you for? I thought that since you're heading north this afternoon there was no need to send Hopalong out with another round of supplies."

"That's what I thought. We're on the last of the videos at the moment. Tell Hopalong, by the way, that his taste is right up his arse. This is the worst load of shit it's been my misfortune to watch, if it wasn't the last one after we've watched everything halfway decent at least twice I wouldn't be watching it now."

"So Elvis' departure from the building is still imminent?" I inquired hopefully.

"You betcha. Our mate just phoned to say he looks like being finished his business in Collinsville within the next half hour and he'll probably be picking us up here in an hour and a bit."

"He rang the mobile?" I was more than a little miffed at the possible breach of security. Not that it was the first one.

"Do you think I'm *stupid*?" I refrained from stating the obvious. "Anyway it's too late to change my arrangements without creating hassles for everyone, but I thought I'd let you know about the change in departure time, so you're not likely to be calling while we're already in the car, like."

"So unless something goes wrong, you won't need to be calling here again. That'd suit my plans down to the ground since I'll be on my way to Airlie around the time you're lobbing in Townsville, and a call while I'm in the car could create complications. Of course, if there's something I really need to know, give me a call anyway and I'll just have to come up with a cover story."



"Which wouldn't, by any chance, have something to do with a certain little blonde hairdresser you've been seeing a bit of, would it?"

As I concluded the call I reflected that Waddles seemed, for someone who had been maintaining a low profile, to be remarkably well-informed. Crossing off possible avenues through which he could have learnt of developments gave me something to ponder as I continued cataloguing the collection. There was no point in raising the issue with the other residents of *The Crossroads*.

While Hopalong may have guessed the real identities of Buckets and Knuckles, and Jeffrey was aware of the situation, putting Bright Eyes and Sandy into the picture would only create complications.

When it came to making inquiries further afield, I knew only too well how quickly rumours travel. It was possible that the news had reached Waddles *via* Ron and Bev, who could well have picked up the information from any of the multitude who'd wandered into the Palace on Friday night or decided that last night's *gobble and go show* was the way to go in the catering department.

At least, I *hoped* that was the source of the information. The possibilities associated with the alternatives did not bear thinking about, and I had other fish to fry for the evening. Around a quarter past five a tap on the door signalled Bernelle's arrival on the scene.

## INCLINING TOWARDS FINE DINING

It was time to feign inspiration. "What," I asked when she'd ensconced herself in the environs, "would you like to tonight? Or pop down to Airlie for dinner?"

"That sounds nice," was the reply. "When do we leave? Who's going?"

"Spur of the moment decision. Just thought of it a couple of minutes ago when I realized we hadn't worked out anything for tonight's dinner. I thought a *bouillabaisse* on *The Balcony* sounded good, and there's bound to be a vacancy somewhere in Airlie. Have a good feed and a few drinks, follow it with a good night's sleep and back home early tomorrow morning. What do you reckon? Want me to start making a few calls?"

I was informed the idea had potential but someone would need to change out of *these yucky work clothes* since they were not up to the standards of sophistication appropriate to dining in Airlie Beach.

"Well, then, just hang on while I phone *The Balcony*. Should be early enough to make sure we get a table and pre-order two bowls of *bouillabaisse*."

The dish in question was one of the specialties of the house, prepared fresh daily. The preparation was a lengthy process, taking up much of the afternoon, so there was a limited supply and latecomers were likely to learn that the dish was *all gone*. Given the possibility of unexpected complications delaying our arrival, a *pre-order* would be helpful. The phone book was consulted and the appropriate number dialled.

"Hello, Kelly. Dave Herston from Denison here. Yes, it has been a long time. I've been overseas. Any chance of a table for two tonight? Preferably the one in the corner looking out over the street. Fine. Say around seven-thirty? Sounds good. Put a hold on two serves of the *bouillabaisse* if you don't mind. My friend hasn't had the joy of experiencing it yet. Catch you shortly."

I turned to Bernelle.

"Easy as. Now for somewhere to stay tonight. Feel like spending the night in a spa room at the place Jeffrey and I based ourselves while we were looking for somewhere to live? If they're fully booked they might be able to point me in the right direction, or at least let me know if there's somewhere along that strip of road that's fully booked."

One call, of course, was all it took to confirm arrangements I'd pencilled in earlier in the day, and the right wording ensured Bernelle had the impression that it was a spur of the moment decision. When the arrangements were in place, Madam departed for a change of clothes. I hoped she wouldn't have company when she returned.

In the meantime I made my way through the rain room, selected something suitable to wear and threw a change of clothes into an overnight bag. With preparations taken care of I moved along the residential section, advising all involved of my plans for the evening before finding a spot in Reception where I could monitor comings and goings in the car park. In other words, when I sighted Bernelle on the horizon I'd be moving to head off any complications at the pass.

So, as soon as the car had come to a halt I was inside, noting the absence of other passengers, and the vehicle was reversing into a position that would take us back out onto the highway.

"So," Bernelle asked, "what are the plans? Where are we staying?"

"I've got us a spa room at *Shoalwater Spa* for tonight and we're booked in upstairs at *The Balcony*. Been there before?"

The response indicated lack of familiarity with the eatery in question.

"Next to the pub's bottle shop, there's a shop that sells nicknacks, hammocks, things like that. Know it?"

"I think so."

"Well, right next door to that there's *The Courtyard*. Been there for years. I was down there for the cricket trials a few years back and we went past it on the way to the beer garden at the pub for a counter tea on the Sunday night. They had a menu board beside the front door, so I stopped for a quick squiz. It looked interesting enough to check out next time I got a chance."

"And?"

"As things turned out Sharon Quayle was running the social club at school, and she'd wangled a deal for an end-of-year do on a Saturday night at one of the resorts, Coral Bay, if you know that one, and I suggested to a couple of the others it might be worth going down a night early, staying at the pub and grabbing a feed at *The Courtyard* Friday night."

"We're going to *The Balcony*," Bernelle pointed out.

"True. At the time there was a financial adviser operating out of the upstairs section of the building, but he moved out to the Marina, out to the office complex there, and the restaurant had room to expand upstairs. That gave them *The Courtyard* and *The Balcony*."

"What's the difference?"

"Well, at first *The Courtyard* was a *fine dining* establishment. You know, moderate-sized portions, high quality ingredients. Not the sort of place that'd appeal to the backpacker market."

"Expensive?"

"Exactly. They're right next door to the pub, so they hadn't bothered with a liquor licence, which saved them hassles about wine lists and stuff like that but took away one of the big money-spinners if you're in the restaurant business."

"Which is?"

"The markup on the grog prices. Have you noticed if you order a bottle of wine you can buy from the bottle shop for ten dollars a licensed restaurant will want to slug you for twenty-something? So since they can't subsidize things with the grog markup, a BYO place has to charge top dollar for meals. Once they'd moved the fine dining section upstairs they were able to change the menu in *The Courtyard* and they're doing very nicely, thank you. Not that there's anything wrong with the food in the pub but it gives you an alternative spot away from poker machines and TV screens."

"So what's the food like upstairs? Where we're going?"

"Not quite what it was when they were downstairs. Both places work out of the same kitchen, so they've had to limit the menu in both. *The Courtyard's* standard stuff, reasonably priced, good spot for a quiet meal without going to the pub."

"We're upstairs"

"True.. With the number of dishes downstairs, they don't run a big menu upstairs. The place is owned by three chefs who were jack of the restrictions they had to deal with at other places. They're dealing with them again in *The Courtyard*, so the menu upstairs is things the three of them reckon are *interesting*. Changes every couple of weeks. A soup, an entree, a main and a dessert from each of them plus a couple of regular favourites to pad it out. Then they have a couple of daily specials."

"Sounds interesting."

"Best food you'll find round here. I've tried to get there as often as possible because, apart from anything else I enjoy the sledge war."

The response suggested a degree of puzzlement in my one-woman audience, so I went on.

"The three of them are competitive as buggery. They're the best of mates away from the kitchen, but once they're in there, it's on. Everything on the menu is directly traceable to one of them, and when you walk into the kitchen the first thing you notice is the tally board."

"Which is?"

"A whiteboard ruled into three columns. Upstairs is closed Sunday, Monday and Tuesday and they take turns to work *The Courtyard* on Sundays and Tuesdays. That's where the tally board comes in. From the time they open *The Balcony* on Wednesday night, everything that's ordered is recorded on the tally board. When they close Saturday night, the winner, the bloke with the highest score, gets three nights off, so there's plenty of motivation there. But it gets better."

"How?"

"Whoever runs second gets to work *The Courtyard* Sunday night. It's usually quiet, so it's no big deal. Whoever runs third gets Tuesday, which is the night they all want to avoid, because Monday night the three of them go out for a feed at one of the places that are open seven days. That's most of the resorts, as you'd guess. The winner gets to choose the venue, whoever runs second pays for the food and tail-end Charlie pays for the grog, which is, as you can probably guess, the most expensive part of the deal, because the other two take it in turns to decide what to order."

"So?"

"So if you win one week you get three nights off and a free feed on Monday night at a venue of your choice. You get to choose whatever you like from the menu wherever you are."

"So it's worth winning."

"You're not wrong, Narelle." The *Naked Vicar Show* reference flew straight over the driver's head. "If you can't win, you definitely want to run second, because you get two nights off and only have to pay for the meal on Monday night."

"But," Bernelle mused, "the other guy gets two nights off as well."

"*Correctamundo*. He *does* get two nights off, but he has to pay for the grog on Monday night and then work Tuesday, more than likely with a horrendous hangover. So you can see no one wants to run third. The competition means you're always going to get something really good when you eat there."

"You pre-ordered something? What was that?"

"*Bouillabaisse*, fish soup from the south of France. It's one of those dishes that there are a thousand recipes for, and I'm sure most of them take less than three hours to prepare. Three-hour recipes aren't what you want in a restaurant, unless you make a limited quantity in advance, which is what they do. Make a batch each day, and when it's gone it's gone."

Bernelle nodded.

"So, in other words, if you want the *bouillabaisse* you need to get there early. Sometimes, as a favour on a quiet night, they wouldn't do it on a Friday or Saturday, for example, you can pre-order provided you're a regular who's arriving early enough to avoid embarrassing explanations. You can imagine what would happen if you got there early, were told that the fish soup is off and then notice someone who turned up after you getting it. That's why I asked about a particular table first. It's one that's out of the way where you can have a discreet dinner without people at nearby tables hearing, or in this case, seeing, what's going on."

"So we're in for a nice intimate dinner, and when we're in this discreet location, what are we going to be talking about?"

"I'm sure that some suitable subject will be come up. It usually does."

If I had anything to do with it there was something else that was going to be coming up a little later in the evening.

We spent the next few kilometres discussing how I knew so much about the internal operations in a kitchen located an hour's drive from Denison, as I explained that I tried to visit *The Courtyard* as often as I could, that I'd recommended the establishment to any of my friends and acquaintances who'd take the time to listen, and diners from Denison had been known to mention they'd arrived because of a recommendation from Dave Herston.

"You remember that wet weather back in February when the road from Denison to Prossie was cut a couple of times? Jeffrey and I had started looking for somewhere to set up camp and commuting between Denison and Airlie. Hopalong and Captain Headrush were looking after the taxi duties."

"I remember you talking about that."

"While the rain was around with the water levels there was no guarantee if we got up to Denison in the morning we'd be sure of getting back, and if we could get back we thought it wasn't being fair to expect Wayne or Hopalong to drive back in the dark."

I conveniently neglected to mention the fact that our first round of inquiries on the real estate front in Denison had drawn a total blank.

"In any case, we were in good digs in Airlie. Jeffrey and I were staying in the place we're heading for, *Shoalwater Spa*. Tonight we're in one of the spa rooms. Jeffrey and I had rooms a few steps down from that. Better than any last-minute arrangement we could come up with in Denison, as you can imagine."

"And," Bernelle guessed, "you were eating at *The Courtyard* every night."

"Right again. Except, of course, for Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, when it was closed. On the Saturday it was pissing down, I was the last customer left, not keen on the walk back to *Shoalwater* in the rain when they shut the kitchen down and the three of them wandered out for a knockoff drink. The place isn't licensed, but you wouldn't be surprised to learn that they've a couple of decent bottles on hand when they're feeling thirsty. They get plenty of wine reps eating there, so you'd expect them to be landing the odd sample bottle or two."

"So you helped them with one?"

"Or two, or three. I'd been there the night before and the waitress had pointed me in the direction of the bar her sister's boyfriend was playing at. He's a big Allman Brothers fan, does an excellent *Jessica*, and I was talking to her about that when they emerged from the kitchen. Had a glass or two with them. Got caught in another downpour on the way home, but that's another story."

"You can't see rain coming at night. I've noticed."

"Anyway, before I left I'd been asking the boys for a recommendation for Sunday and Monday nights, since I wouldn't be eating with them. Simon reckoned that the restaurant at *Shoalwater* was as good as anything that was open on Sunday and one of them let slip where they were going Monday night, and the general opinion was I was quite welcome to join them."

"Which you, of course, did?"

"Along with Jeffrey. We paid our own way, but the grog bill was horrendous. Fortunately the roads were open again Tuesday, though I wasn't in great shape when Hopalong arrived on the doorstep Tuesday morning. Better shape than when he called to check if we needed him, mind you. Still not in great shape. Jeffrey and I made a flying visit to the real estate agents, had a couple at the Palace and were back in Airlie by five-thirty in time to collect a takeaway for dinner and crash early for a change."

"So," Bernelle remarked, "you do take it easy from time to time."

"From time to time, yes. While Jeffrey was collecting dinner I stuck my head in the kitchen at *The Courtyard* to see how Simon was shaping up. Got roundly abused for my trouble, as you might expect. Anyway, over those couple of nights I got a fair picture of how the operation works. I think you'll be impressed."

"I'm sure I will be. Do you think they do wedding receptions?"

The comment took me slightly aback.

"Dunno," I replied. "Why? Know someone who's getting married? We could ask, if you like."

The lull in the conversation that followed the remark lasted a couple of minutes while both occupants of the vehicle pondered the implications of that last exchange.

At least I did. I can only surmise when it comes to the direction Bernelle's thoughts were taking, but from subsequent developments I suspect she regarded the entire excursion as an elaborate plan to propose. She, I guessed, was anticipating when I was likely to *pop the question* and how she was going to respond. For my part I had decided anything resembling a proposal was out of the question until certain acts had been completed.

A large number of times.

"After all," I mused, "if that old story is true, and the supply does get cut off when you walk down the aisle, it stands to reason that you'd want to get in as much action as possible beforehand. If I'm not getting any now, how much am I likely to get when it stops? Sorry, kid, you won't want to be holding your breath. If there's no action tonight you'd better be prepared for the teary farewell."

The silence lasted till we passed the *Trees For Rat Control* sign before the turnoff to Airlie, and the question of exactly how trees could be used to restrict rodents provided an opportunity to channel discussion into safer waters. At least, it did for a while. We were coming over the rise that leads into Strathdickie when the driver changed the subject.

"There are some nice houses around here," she remarked.

"Yeah," I cautiously concurred, harbouring suspicions as to the direction the conversation was taking. "Nice houses. Acreage. Rain forest. Very nice."

"I've often thought I'd like to live around here. *You'd* be able to afford something nice around here."

*Yeah, more than likely I could, I thought, but that would involve a move away from Moderation. More than likely it would involve a move into moderation. In all things. Kids. Wiggles CDs. Joining the P&C Association. Thanks very much I'm not interested in going there any time soon.*

"I like the rainforest. First holiday I had on my own was in a shack in the mountains up at Paluma. One of my mates' parents owned the place and I had the chance to spend a week up there when I was at College. Absolute tranquility. Loved it. Before that, back when I was at high school my folks took us up for a holiday at Bingil Bay. Some nice spots up that way too. Cost you an arm and a leg if you were looking at buying, of course."

"You can afford an arm and a leg," Bernelle laughed. "You won all that money.."

*I did, I thought, and while I'm not exactly hoarding the shekels I've bought all the real estate I'm planning to buy for about the next decade.*

"Across the bay from Mission Beach, which is just down the road from Bingil Bay, as you probably know, is Dunk Island. Probably my favourite place in Australia, not that I'm the country's greatest traveller, of course. Wonderful spot. Been there?"

"Dad took me over there at Easter just before I moved to Denison. He was on one of the yachts in the Townsville to Dunk Island yacht race. He'd just got married a few months before the race and they hadn't had time for a proper honeymoon."

"So he flew the new bride and the almost adult daughter across to the island for the honeymoon? Puts a new definition into *kinky* I'd reckon."

The response indicated that the daughter had been packed off back to school while Dad and the new stepmother had another week by themselves.

"Nice flight over there," I went on, doing my best to divert the conversation back to neutral territory. "Went over there with the Dipsos a few years ago. They've got this cricket team over there. Dunk's Dozen they call it. Play a weekly game against somebody. They'd gone about a hundred games when we went over without losing one. When we left the unbeaten record was intact."

By this stage we were turning onto the main road between Proserpine and Airlie Beach. Increased traffic caused a temporary halt to conversation while we made our way through Cannonvale. As we were halfway up the hill between Cannonvale and Airlie Beach the silence was broken by a request for directions to the night's accommodation.

"Keep going through the main street, and then when you get to the end of the business area it's the third or fourth place on your right as you go past Muddy Bay. There's a new place under construction, or there was when Jeffrey and I were staying there. If it's finished *Shoalwater* it'll be the fourth. Anyway you can't miss the sign."

A couple of minutes later the prediction had proved correct, and once we'd checked in we found our way to the Spa Suite. As previously indicated I'd stayed there before, but neither Jeffrey or I had seen any need to access anything beyond the *entry level* option since all we needed was a place to sleep.

With other purposes in mind this time, I'd gone for the *top of the range* which involved parking at the rear of the premises and entry through the rear rather than the front of the unit. This involved a drive up the slope overlooking Muddy Bay, locating the designated parking spot (no such luxury for the occupants of the units at the foot of the slope) and would have made for a minimal journey with luggage if we'd had any to lug.

"What do you reckon?" I asked as the door swung open. "Think it'll do for the night?"

I wasn't expecting any specific response. I figured that something like *Wow, nice!* was most likely, and once we'd got that far I thought I'd see where the ensuing conversation took us.

I ushered Bernelle through the door, and discovered that, rather than the interior of an up-market motel room I was looking at a passage way. A passage way that took a dog leg to the left, but a passage way nevertheless.

In my experience of motel rooms, passage ways usually provided access to a bathroom, or some form of cupboard space, but this one didn't. As we turned the corner the aspect improved markedly. Since my first question had failed to elicit a response, I tried again.

"OK. They tricked me with the passage way. What do you reckon now? Good enough?"

Bernelle stopped in her tracks and turned in my direction. "I thought you said it was a spa room," she pouted. "Where's the spa? I'm so looking forward to a spa when we come back from dinner!"

"You'll probably find it in the bathroom. Last time I stayed here I was in one of the rooms at the bottom of the slope. No spas in those, but I reckon it'll be in there."

I indicated the doorway that provided access to a room on the opposite side of the *dog leg* wall in the passage way. A quick glance through the doorway indicated a distinct lack of anything beyond the usual facilities and the usual facilities did not include a plunge bath.



"Well," I suggested, "it has to be here *somewhere*."

Walking through the door that opened onto the balcony at the front of the unit I found the facility in question on my right hand side and noted it provided a rather spectacular view across the water. Bernelle was close behind me.

"So, what do you reckon now? View across the bay. A dip in the spa with a glass of bubbles after a good meal. Sounds right on the money."

I squatted, bringing my eye line to the approximate level of someone soaking in the spa.

"Yep, just as I suspected. With the height on the slope and the edge of the balcony it doesn't matter whether the tide's in or out."

The waters of Muddy Bay didn't offer an attractive sight at low tide, and this had been evident during my earlier stay. Bernelle gazed across to Mandalay.

"Beautiful," she murmured. "This would be a really nice place for a honeymoon. Just the first night, of course, after that you'd go somewhere like Hayman Island or some exclusive island resort in Fiji. You could have the reception downstairs or at the restaurant we're going to tonight."

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," was, I thought, a suitably noncommittal response.

I took as read the implication that in each of the above instances *you* was meant to be replaced by *we*. "Anyway, first things first. Hungry?"

Now that we'd determined that the room offered the full range of advertised facilities it was time to turn our thoughts to dinner. A brief stroll down the slope would have been helpful for those who needed to work up an appetite, but since neither of us fell into that category we cheated and took the lift, which delivered us to the lobby which provided access to Reception and the Dining Room.

As we turned onto Shute Harbour Road for the three hundred metre walk to dinner it wasn't possible to determine whether the tide was on its way in or out but the fact that the view from the spa on the balcony wasn't going to be affected by low tide gave us something to talk about until it was time to cross the road opposite the restaurant.

Once a gap in the flow of traffic gave us the opportunity to cross, I guided Bernelle past the entrance to *The Courtyard* towards the steps that led upstairs to *The Balcony*. Once we'd made the ascent I was greeted like a long lost friend by the waitress, who happened to enjoy an on-and-off relationship with one of the chefs. Since she was on the premises I assumed the relationship was in *on* mode.

Once introductions were out of the way she grabbed a pair of green folders and another two purple ones and started to usher us towards the table.

"So you're still here?" I asked.

Kelly had been on duty last time I'd dined at the establishment before we made the big collect but had been missing in action when we were there earlier in the year. Presumably the relationship had moved from *on* to *off* mode and back *on* over the intervening period.

"I am," was the reply, "and after all the stuff that's gone on over the past couple of years, hopefully this time for good. Simon and I are getting married at the end of the year. We're in the middle of working out the reception at the moment."

There was a pause while congratulations were offered and accepted. As we took our seats, Bernelle looked up.

"You'll be having the reception here?" she asked, her thoughts following a train I'd prefer derailed.

"You're kidding!" was the immediate response. "There's no way Simon would be able to sit back and let Brett and Nick do all the work, and there's no way he'd be able to persuade them to do it anyway since they'd want to be there for the party."

"It'd be some party," I suggested.

"Right on. Anyway we're looking at something like a big spread of seafood and a pig on a spit or something like that. Keep it simple, leave all the work to the caterers and."

"*Laissez les bon temps roulez*, as they say in New Orleans," I suggested. "And the wine list? Could I guess? Clare or Eden Valley Riesling with the seafood, something like a Tempranillo or a Sangiovese with the spit roast, Noble One with the dessert, whatever that is, and Arras for the toasts?"

The response indicated that I was close to the money.

"If you give me your postal address before you go I'll have an invitation for the two of you in the mail when they go out some time in the next couple of weeks," Kelly went on.

I wasn't quite sure any existing relationships in the neighbourhood were likely to be extant by the end of the year, and was pondering an appropriately noncommittal response when Kelly went on.

"Anyway, enough about that. You're here for dinner, so I'd better let you have a look at the menu."

"So I can figure out what I'm looking for when I whip across to the bottle shop," I suggested.

"Actually," Kelly laughed, "you won't be needing to do that." I glanced at the two folders.

"You mean you've taken the plunge and got the liquor licence?" I asked. That issue had been the subject of considerable debate over the years.

"No way. You can take a bit of credit for this one. You remember when you were down at the start of the year and we ended up at dinner at the *Shoalwater*? You asked why the boys didn't have a wine suggestion from the bottle shop along with each dish on the menu? Well, when they went to talk to the people at the pub they came up with an even better idea."

"Which was?"

"We took the old fax machine here and got another cheap one second hand, set one up here and the other one in the bottle shop. If you want to go with the wine suggestion on the wine list we send a fax to the bottle shop and they'll deliver the wine here. It'll cost you an extra three dollars a bottle, but everyone seems happy."

"The two folders?"

"Are the menu," Kelly explained. "You might have noticed that there's no *Specials* board around the place? The green folder is the *a la carte* menu. You'll notice that the wine matches are there, so we're not going to be changing it too much."

"The purple one?"

"Is what used to be on the *Specials* board. When we worked out the new arrangement with the bottle shop we couldn't have the daily specials changing all the time, so we went for a weekly *seasonal* menu with the wine matches worked out so we can make sure that the pub's got enough stock."

With the new arrangements clearly understood, it was time to sort out what we were going to be indulging in. The first course was, as previously indicated, as no-brainer. The *bouillabaisse* was matched with a Sauvignon Blanc from the Adelaide Hills, so that was easy enough.

From there matters became slightly more complicated. Since the Sauvignon Blanc was never going to outlast the *bouillabaisse* by much it was a question of how many extra bottles we were going to put away. The easiest answer seemed to be to go for a shared dish and the appropriate accompaniment.

"Since we're starting on a Mediterranean seafood theme with the *bouillabaisse*," I suggested, "why don't we continue along the same lines and go for the *paella*, that's the Spanish version of fried rice, and they've matched it up with an Vermentino, which is a new variety for me, so I'm definitely interested there. We can look at the desserts when the time comes. What do you think?"

The response was favourable, the order went in, the Sauvignon Blanc arrived and Kelly was about to pour two glasses when her better half appeared on the scene, offering to take over pouring duties while she attended to other tables, which were filling rapidly.

Things were apparently temporarily quiet around Simon's station, so we had a couple of minutes exchanging news before a wave from the kitchen doorway indicated that his presence was required within. The *bouillabaisse* arrived, and had no sooner been despatched than a second member of the culinary crew arrived brandishing a bottle.

"Got a few minutes to spare," Nick explained. "My latest offerings don't seem to be flavour of the week, so Simon suggested that I pop out with this bottle of Vermentino we were trying with one of the wine reps last night. Kel said you hadn't tried one before, so I thought that you might like to see how this one stacks up against the one that's on its way across from the pub. We were arguing about whether to change the wine match last night and when Kel told us you were out here Nick thought it might be worth seeing which one you thought was the better match."

Now while you would have presumed that the preceding remarks were addressed in my direction, strange to say the gentleman's eyes were fixed on my companion. He left shortly thereafter, with two glasses poured and when the *paella* arrived, complete with accompanying bottle and fresh glasses, so did the third member of the culinary triumvirate.

While I'd eaten there reasonably often and regarded the kitchen trio as more than mere acquaintances but not *quite* bosom buddies, this level of attention was unprecedented. We'd almost finished the first glasses from the sample bottle when the meal arrived with the second bottle. Brett placed the *paellera* in the middle of the table. From there it was a case of ladling the contents into a smaller bowl to serve. Brett helped himself to a seat rather than a serve.

"So," he began, "what do you think of the Vementino? Take your time..."

I did, helping myself to a heap of highly seasoned rice and checking the combination of wine and food.

"Nice match," I said after a couple of samples of both. I watched as the fresh glasses were filled from the newly arrived bottle.

"So how about this one?"

I swirled the wine in the glass, took a lengthy sniff, followed by a swig and allowed the liquid to swirl across the palate in the recommended manner. I held the glass up to the light. It was pleasantly light yellow straw colour with tinges of green around the edge. Topping up the other glass from the first bottle, I did the same, then held both up against the same background. The resemblance in colour, while hardly surprising, was remarkable. I took a swirl, a sniff and a swig of the first wine.

"You know," I remarked, "you'd almost think they were the same wine." I reached for the first bottle, which bore the insignia of a relatively unknown producer in the King Valley, and glanced across to the second, a product of a larger producer from the same area.

"Any chance they're sourced from the same vineyard? A contract grower who sells to both wineries?"

There were slight differences in taste between the two, possibly the result of slight differences in the way the grapes had been handled between the press and the bottle. Both wines had the same citrus and passionfruit notes on the nose, and very similar crisp acid on the palate.

"That's what we thought when we tried the second one last night," Brett observed. "It raises an interesting question, and one that we'd appreciate an independent opinion on."

"Which is?"

"Recommended retail on the first one is eighteen-fifty through a national distributor," Brett went on. "Fair enough, the bottle shop puts them into here at twenty-one, so we're looking at three-fifty a glass on that basis."

The reference to a price by the glass was slightly bemusing, but I allowed him to go on.

"Recommended retail on the second one, the one the rep brought with him, is twenty-three. So if we got that in next door we'd be looking at, say twenty-five fifty delivered. Four-twenty-five a glass." Again, the reference to the glass price was something unexpected. I gave a noncommittal nod and took another mouthful of rice.

"But the rep," Brett went on, "has a pallet of the second one that he's offered next door at a price that'd let them put it out at eighteen. There aren't too many places on the coast who'd be interested in a pallet of Vermentino from a relatively unknown producer who needs the cash flow."

"Hardly surprising," I observed.

"The pub would be able to offload a few cartons onto the islands and up to your mate at the Palace. We'd probably account for a couple of cases a week ourselves if we put it on the menu as a match for the *paella*."

"So why don't you?"

"The *paella*, you might recall, is Simon's baby. He's the rice and risotto king. When it comes to the weekly tally, Simon does very nicely out of the *paella*, thank you very much."

"Which is a vital issue," I remarked in Bernelle's general direction, "since taking out the weekly prize brings three nights away from the kitchen and a free dinner and drinks Monday night. Remember I was telling you about that on the way down?"

"So Simon reckons that if he changes the wine match on the menu and replaces a well-known brand with one that no bugger's heard of his numbers will go down."

"With a corresponding impact on his wallet," I suggested.

"Bang on. He's done field research that suggests most customers take the dish with the matched wine because they know the winery even if they've never heard of the grape variety."

"Couldn't you put both wines on the menu?" Bernelle asked. It was probably a good question, but I suspected I knew the answer:

"If we did that," Brett replied, "we'd be tempted to do the same thing all over the place. Things are running smoothly in that department at the moment and we'd rather not complicate things."

"So why not match it up with something else on the menu," Bernelle suggested. "Maybe put something new in there that'd match up with it?"

"She's not just a pretty face, eh? It makes sense, if you look at it. I assume that Simon's *paella* counts as two serves on the tally board whenever someone orders it, right?" The response indicated that I'd hit the nail on the head.

"Which means that it only gets ordered if at least two people at a table want it. It's not exactly cheap, either: No single serves, are there? So while he gets plenty of benefit out of it, there have to be plenty of people who just can't order it for one reason or another. You're the seafood king in these parts. So you put together something with a Spanish or Mediterranean flavour in the seafood line, whack it in the purple folder, match it with the new Vermentino and make sure you've got a note that makes the variety sound like the next big thing and see what happens."

Promising to give the matter serious thought, Brett headed back to the kitchen, leaving us temporarily to ourselves and our *paella*.

The situation only lasted a couple of minutes. Simon reemerged from the kitchen, engaged us in another conversation based loosely around food and wine, was called back to his station to be replaced shortly afterwards by Nick. The *paella* was gone, the dessert menu was in the process of being examined and Bernelle indicated that she needed to *powder her nose*. Her absence gave me the opportunity to give voice certain suspicions that had raised their ugly heads.

"I can't help thinking," I started as Bernelle disappeared around a corner, "you three bastards are running a sort of tag team here. I mean, I've eaten here a few times over the years and I've usually had one or two of you sit down for a yarn and a drink at the end of the night, but this time I've had the lot of you dropping by constantly. In the same bloody order. Wouldn't have anything to do with ..."  
I nodded towards the recently vacated seat.

"You'd have to admit," Nick retorted, "that the scenery's a bit better than it usually is when you're in these parts. Is that a problem?"

"Dunno," was my response. "I have a suspicion that Madam thinks this little excursion has been staged with the particular aim of giving me the chance to get down on one knee and propose, or some shit like that. That's not likely to happen when we're constantly being joined by a third party."

"So you'd rather we..."

"Kept it going. If that scenario's going to be fulfilled it won't be happening till we're a long way down the track. I was wondering how I'd avoid the issue this time around."

"So we'll keep it going," Nick replied. "We'll keep the odd extra bottle heading this way as well. I mean, if the girl's going to be finding herself a permanent spot in your lifestyle she's going to have to learn to drink, isn't she? Take a gander at the dessert menu when I'm gone, and remember that if you're looking at a sticky with dessert I've got a little bottle of Rutherglen Muscat for after."

Bernelle's return to the table saw a brace of *brulees* ordered, along with a botrytised bottle from next door. The conversation at the table wandered aimlessly for a few minutes, and when the desserts arrived, so did Brett and a bottle of Muscat.

As the premises emptied, the numbers of visiting chefs doubled. The conversation ranged across various topics, and as we reached the coffee and Muscat stage, the last remaining diners departed, two chefs became three as the apprentices started cleaning the kitchen. Kelly's arrival saw six seats surround a table meant for an intimate dinner for two. While there was a degree of coming and going as chefs retreated to monitor the cleanup process and Kelly replenished the coffee the gathering, as any student of Australian social interaction would expect, split into gender-oriented factions.

It was hardly a surprising development given the fact the female proportion of the assembly had a ready-made topic of conversation that was guaranteed to be bloke-unfriendly.

As a result the girls were deeply immersed in discussions about wedding arrangements, while the rest of us, rather than drinking beer and talking sport were sipping Muscat and discussing matters that related to my stay in New Orleans.

Around eleven various members of the party began to remark on the need to retire for the night, so the bill was produced, payment was made, and Bernelle and I ushered out the door as the premises were secured for the night.

While my arm around a certain waist as we made our way towards the kerb seemed a natural fit there was a certain remoteness when it came to reciprocity. We made our way across the road, headed towards *Shoalwater* and I pondered the possibilities once we'd made it back to the room.

The way the evening had panned out had effectively ruled out any opportunity for events Bernelle seemed to expect. Not that they were ever *likely*, since any suggestion of establishing a permanent relationship was only going to occur, if it occurred at all, a long way down the track and after frequent repetitions of physical acts that had, to date, failed to materialize.

On the other hand, the way we'd been treated could suggest there were benefits to be gained from establishing and maintaining a physical relationship. There was plenty of money available and I hoped I had displayed a willingness to splash the cash around liberally in a way that would benefit anybody who managed to place herself nearby on a regular basis. As we headed along the footpath a thought crossed my mind.

"Been a good night, hasn't it?" was meant to provide an avenue into a conversation that would lead to certain carnal conclusions. The response was noncommittal.

"We should do this more often. Not every week, but every couple of weeks. Make a weekend of it. Roll down here Saturday lunchtime, have lunch somewhere. The *tapas* plate at the pub's always good value, but you don't have to go there *every* time. Dinner Saturday night, brunch Sunday morning and maybe even dinner Sunday night and back home Monday morning."

The suggestion brought no response, but I continued undeterred.

"If we were looking to do that every couple of weeks, I guess it'd make sense to check the real estate agents and pick up a unit somewhere up there."

My left arm waved in the general direction of the hillside on our right. My right arm remained in contact with a singularly unresponsive waistline.

"There are a couple of developments going in up there, and I reckon there's enough in the kitty to get into one of them. I think at least one of them's one of those *time share* deals. You know, the ones where you use the unit for part of the year and they rent it out when you're not there. I'm not too keen on that idea just quietly, I think I'd rather have the place set up just the way you'd want it without the thought of some strangers wandering in and out of your personal space..."

I paused for a moment, intending to provide certain parties with an opportunity to contribute to the discussion. None was forthcoming.

As we turned into the entrance to *Shoalwater* I again attempted to point out the area to which I was referring. There was a new complex under construction directly above our current accommodation.

"A place like that would be just about ideal. You'd probably get access turning off back at the corner and cracking a lefty what, about sixty metres up the hill. Looks like the road'd be reasonably flat after you'd done the uphill bit. You wouldn't want to be doing too much uphill stuff, of course. There is such a thing as too much exercise, particularly if you're looking at activity once you've found your way back at base."

None of the above produced a response before we reached the lift in the lobby, and I suspected future developments were unlikely to continue down my preferred path. Like it or not, the die was cast. Once we'd made our way upstairs, events would follow whatever path they were going to follow.

With the door locked and chained, and around seventy kilometres of highway between the two of us and disruptive influences, I suggested that a spell in the spa might be of some benefit to the pair of us.

"A warm spa," I suggested, "would be an ideal way to round off the evening." It would also, of course, require the removal of substantial amounts of clothing and open up certain other possibilities.

"It would be." My companion's silence was broken. I waited for some further elucidation, but none was forthcoming.

"So," I went on, moving in the direction of the bar fridge in the room, "what do you reckon? A glass of bubbles to go with the soak in the spa?" There's probably a half bottle of something in here. Not likely to be anything from the top of the line but you can't have everything."

"If you absolutely *must* keep on drinking, go right ahead. Some of us have to work for a living and I'm going to have to drive back in the morning, so I don't think I'll be needing anything more."

"You will be joining me in the spa?"

"Unfortunately not. I don't think you'd be too happy if I did. For hygienic reasons."

"You mean, that it's the wrong time of the month or something?"

"No or *something* about it. Now, if you'll excuse me it's been a long day and I'm ready for bed."

This latest development, coming after comments earlier in the evening that had suggested the spa was somewhere around the top of the list of priorities, was a surprise. I was about to point out this apparent inconsistency when discretion took over. After all, there were other options.

I prepared myself for bed, and, once the lights had been dimmed, set off on the now-familiar process of establishing intimate contact. I'd no sooner started when the shutters were slammed down.

"It's no good," I was told. "I told you. It's the wrong time of the month and ..."

"There are other options," I interposed. "It's not as if there's only one string on the bow."

Bernelle sat up and scowled.

"If you think you're going to be putting that thing anywhere apart from where it's supposed to go, you've got another think coming. Put it in my mouth? Yucky!"

"I don't recall making any specific suggestions. All I was doing was pointing out that there *are* other options." Some subconscious radar guided my hand towards Bernelle's hindquarter.

"Don't think you're going to be putting it in there," she remonstrated. "It'll come out all brown, sticky and stinky. Icky! You should be ashamed of yourself."

For a moment I pondered the wisdom of pointing out that things almost invariably emerged from the process under discussion in a form that could be described as *sticky and stinky* but decided against it.

"In that case," I replied, "I think I'll pop over to the spa. I'm not quite ready to nod off yet."

I diverted en route to check the bar fridge. The previously mentioned bottles of bubbly were present, though they were hardly the most diplomatic option under the current circumstances. There were, on the other hand, cans of premixed rum and cola, which would, fit the bill more than adequately.

Sitting in the spa I analyzed the situation. I had, after all, expended considerable mental energies without anything resembling the desired outcome. If I abandoned the campaign that expenditure would account for nothing. On the other hand, if I maintained the effort, surely my attempts would eventually come to fruition, but was that a desirable outcome?

Regardless of other considerations, Bernelle's attitude to the lusts of the flesh could hardly be described as an enthusiastic willingness to explore all the possibilities. Fair enough. Neither did mine.

Recent developments looked like someone was determined to head down a particular road, and until her ambitions had reached fruition anything resembling satisfaction would be rationed and even when



they had there would not be a flood of physical intimacies. Birthdays and anniversaries, more than likely and not much else. Enough to produce the requisite two-point-something offspring and then *not tonight you'll wake the children.*

*No, I thought, tonight was the deadline. It hasn't happened. It's not going to happen. It's over. Thank you umpires, thank you ball-boys. Game, set and march. Knock off the bails and draw stumps.*

An examination of the contents of the tin of rum and cola indicated that stumps had been drawn in that department as well. I moved stealthily into the room, procured a resupply and exited spawards, careful not to disturb sleeping beauties. I felt it was best to ensure that the other party was sound asleep before I made any moves in the direction of slumber. Lengthy, deep and meaningful discussions on the future of a relationship were hardly the highest item on the agenda.

I was midway through a second can when the sound of snoring indicated deep sleep..After three liquid sleeping pills, although it was some time after one o'clock and I was almost totally smashed, I managed to remember to draw the curtains before I crawled into the cot.

## FRIDAY MORNING ON THE ROAD

I was slowly emerging from the depths of slumber into something resembling consciousness when I became aware of a burst of unfamiliar music. The sound was enough to jolt me straight into wakefulness, and produced the same reaction on the other side of the bed. It was obvious I was hearing a ring tone, and the source was Bernelle's mobile.

The room was in darkness as Bernelle took the call. For my part, having been jerked unexpectedly into a fairly close approximation of full consciousness it was a reflex reaction to take a glance towards the bedside clock radio.

What I saw caused me to reflect that in all my years of staying in motels while the radio side of the clock radio never worked, the clock could usually be counted on to be reasonably accurate. The digital display if it was right, indicated I'd been asleep for a good eight hours.

It would have been reasonable to expect that a classy establishment would take more care with minor details because while the clock was showing 9:30 as far as I could tell there was no sign the sun had risen. I was half way between bed and window when it became obvious the journey was no longer necessary. Bernelle was making fervent apologies for her non-arrival at work and promising to be on site as early as could be humanly managed. When the call had been concluded she turned to me.

"This is all your fault, and if I lose my job because I came down here with you, drank too much and slept in."

"You'd more than likely have a case for unreasonable dismissal. That's presuming you haven't made a habit of turning up late. If it comes to that, I'd be able to testify that this little jaunt was all my idea. Anyway, if the worst comes to the worst."

A voice in the back of my brain was quietly stating *you'd better hope it doesn't*.

"I'll look after things," I concluded out aloud. It was about the only appropriate response that could be expressed under the circumstances. "Anyway, what did they say?"

The response indicated that the exact words used were something similar to *be here by eleven if you know what's good for you*.

"In that case we'd better get moving." I'd had enough experience thinking on my feet to know inducing a flurry of action in those around you can provide an opportunity to gather your thoughts while ensuring that others don't necessarily have the same privilege. "You dive into the shower and we can get straight on the road. I can have a shower when I get back to *The Crossroads*."

"If we get pulled over on the way? I think I'll still be over the limit and if we are pulled over and I have to blow in the bag there's no way I'll be able to make it back to Denison in time."

"If we get pulled over, we get pulled over. If we are pulled over, I'll cover any financial matters that come out of that. In the meantime, if you dive into the shower I'll get some coffee on the go and we can probably be on the road by ten. Should give you time for another shower and a change of clothes and still be at work by eleven."

A five minute shower interval provided an opportunity to plot out a course of short term action. Complications introduced by the constabulary might or might not arise, but in the meantime it was a case of negotiating a swift and safe return to base. Once Bernelle emerged from the bathroom and was in the process of dressing I pointed to the cup of coffee I'd prepared while she was in the shower.

"If you can get that into you, that'll be a start. I made it industrial strength, two coffees, three sugars, so that'll be a start. I've grabbed everything that belongs to us that's lying around here, and it's already in the car. If you take a quick squiz around the room to check you shouldn't find anything left behind. I'll head down to Reception and settle the bill. If you drive down, we can be on the road *a.s.a.p.*"

In other words, give the other party things to keep them busy and find an excuse to get out of the way so we don't lose time fretting over minor details. As it transpired the decision to make my own way down to settle the bill turned out to be timely.

Reception was deserted and unstaffed when I arrived, and the arrival of the receptionist coincided with the lift disgorging half a dozen people intent on settling their own accounts. I'd completed the transaction when Bernelle walked through the door and surveyed the queue behind me.

"See?" I nodded towards those waiting to settle their accounts. "Lucky I headed straight down. Of course, it could have been better if we'd woken up a little earlier."

I turned to the receptionist.

"Your curtains are remarkably effective," I remarked. "Do you have a problem with guests who don't make it to checkout time?" Part two of the strategy I'd mapped out involved creating at least one diversionary topic of conversation for the return journey.

The reply indicated management made a conscious decision to ensure patrons who'd been partying till dawn had ample opportunities to recover before they set out to repeat the process, and checkout time was more flexible than in neighbouring establishments. There wasn't time to pursue the matter further, and by the time ten o'clock rolled around we were through Cannonvale and turning onto the short cut through Strathdickie.

In the car, I used the mobile to contact *The Crossroads*. It took half a dozen attempts before Jeffrey answered the phone. Once I'd been assured no pressing matters had reared their ugly heads in my absence, the early stages of the trip back was completed in relative silence. Predictable, since both of us were somewhat the worse for wear.

Mind you, I couldn't help noting the contrast between someone's chirpiness on the way down and the current somewhat strained silence. Bernelle was obviously preoccupied with the need to get back to town in time to save her job without losing her licence, and it was obvious I was to blame for both problems.

At least that's the way it looked from where I was sitting.

For my part I was going to have to work out a way to extricate myself from the relationship, such as it was. My self-imposed deadline has been passed, and the frostiness on display was a reminder that relationships were not all beer and skittles.

After all, even if you have to take the rough with the smooth it makes sense to avoid the rough if you can. While the weekend was going to provide a temporary disengagement, there was still a need to develop a workable exit strategy.

We were on the run into Strathdickie when we sighted a car bedecked with a display of red and blue lights headed in the opposite direction. A glance at the speedometer indicated we were travelling under the speed limit, but the sight was enough to induce a litter of small furry felines in the driver.

We'd negotiated the right hand turn at the Strathdickie Forge and made our way through the uphill dogleg when I spotted a brown four-wheel drive and a cream coloured sedan on the side of the road. A figure in a blue shirt was conducting a conversation with the inhabitants of the sedan. The figure was definitely a familiar one.

"Relax," I said as we passed the scene. "The car we saw before was obviously dropping Dennis out here so he could bring the radar unit back to Airlie or Prossie or wherever it's based. There's every chance we're in the clear for the rest of the way back. Unless, of course, the boys from Denison are out on the highway south, but there's nothing we can do about that."

"What do you mean? Why are we in the clear?"

"Well," I explained, "the brown four-wheel drive back there is obviously a mobile radar unit."

"I could see that. It had *Police* painted on the side."

Score one for the bleeding obvious.

"Mobile radar units need to be moved, which means a car has to deliver the driver to the mobile unit and has to pick him or her up from wherever they're moving the revenue raiser to. We passed the car that dropped Dennis here heading back to Airlie, which means that the radar unit probably isn't going back out on the highway. There are probably batteries that need to be recharged or something..."

"How do you know?"

"Well," I was forced to admit, "I don't *know*, if you catch my drift, but if you think things over, if they were going to move the radar somewhere between here and Denison the other car would have dropped Dennis here and gone on ahead. They'd probably have gone as far as Longford Creek or wherever the dividing line between Prossie and Denison is and then double back to pick Dennis up once he's landed wherever the radar's going next. In any case they're all behind us, so we should be right. I'd still be sitting under the hundred if I was you, to be on the safe side."

"That's all very well, but what if we'd been five minutes earlier? I mean, if we'd woken up a little bit before we did, that would've meant it could have been me that was pulled over."

The stress was obviously getting to somebody.

"If that'd happened, there are two possibilities. Either we'd have gone past when they were changing over, which would have meant they'd be distracted by what ever they have to do to worry about someone who's not speeding and isn't doing anything to arouse suspicion."

"Or?"

"If they'd changed over and were heading back it's more than likely that Dennis'd be the one pulling us over. Do you remember seeing that brown four-wheel drive on the way down?"

The response was negative, so I went on. At this point I wasn't concerned about the accuracy of my suppositions. The idea, as far as I could see, was to provide a reassuring flow of commentary that might dispel the driver's concerns and, in the process, reduce the likelihood that she'd do something that might attract unwanted attention.

"Since you'd guess they'd leave the radar in one spot from some time in the afternoon till the following morning it must've been just on the other side of the turnoff, and they were bringing it back to Cannonvale so they could redeploy it on the road between Prossie and Airlie later today. Which means five minutes earlier we might have missed them completely. Anyway, assuming it was Dennis who pulled us over we'd still have been OK. More than likely, anyway."

"Why?" A worrier's curiosity is seemingly never satisfied. "You're talking as if you know this guy."

"You'd be surprised who I happen to know. Particularly where the cricket's concerned. Two years ago, Dennis's young bloke, Shane, was the State Primary Schools' wicket-keeper."

"And?"

"Dennis seems to have come to the conclusion I had a lot to do with the kid getting the spot. Plays down his own part in the kid's development, which was probably the most important bit. All I did was make sure the kid got noticed by the right people, which is the major part of the battle."

A comment seemed to demand further elucidation, so it was provided. We were, after all, in the business of stopping certain parties from worrying about things which may well fail to transpire.

"Dennis, apart from being the sergeant at Proserpine, has played cricket all over the state, depending on where the Police Department decided to send him. At one stage people were talking about him playing for Queensland but he got transferred to Urandangie or somewhere. As he says, at the time Queensland had about ten quality quicks and he was number eleven on the pecking order. He could either go to Urandangie and take the promotion involved with the pay rise or stick around in Brisbane and wait and see what happened with the cricket."

The observer might suggest the topic of police officers and their activities would be better avoided under the circumstances. On the other hand, the flood of information was hopefully going to be enough to prevent the audience's mind from straying into more worrying territory.

"Anyway, after he'd been a good boy at Urandangie for two years, he got a transfer back to the coast and ended up at Mirriwinni, up near Cairns. Met Jean while he was there, got married and ended up playing grade cricket in Cairns. Played well enough to make it into the Queensland Country side a couple of times. Shifted around a bit while the kids were growing up. There's a daughter named Tracey as well and ended up in Prossie. Jean's a teacher and her family's from there. By that stage he wasn't the same fast bowler he'd been, but he ended up captaining one of the B-grade sides and had Shane playing with the men by the time he was ten."

"Which would be unusual?" was the not-entirely-unexpected response.

"Would be if the kid didn't happen to have talent and a Dad who was captain of the side and happens to be second-in-charge at the cop shop. Anyway the kid got to bat from time to time, had the occasional bowl and fielded to give one of the older blokes a rest. Played Junior cricket on Saturday morning and B grade in the afternoon with Dad. As far as Junior Cricket was concerned he was good enough to make the Under 12s as a ten-year old, which made him a walkup start the following year, which is when two of the kids from the first year made it into the State Primary School team."

I gave the information a few seconds to sink in, and when there was no response went on.

"So when Tabby and Lofty made the Schoolboys' side, Dennis reckoned Shane was close to a certainty. The kid was probably also a certainty for the Junior Cricket Under 14s as well, but there was a State cap involved, so Dennis was keen to check his chances of Shane making it."

"Which is where you came in," Bernelle guessed.

"September holidays last year we were having a visit from the Ipswich mob, who were bringing their two rep teams on a warm-up tour before their season started in the southeast corner. They were going to stop off in Denison, where I didn't have enough kids to field two strong teams against them."

"So you got Dennis to bring his kid up to Denison, and *hey presto*."

"There's a cousin who's half handy as well and Dennis brought them both up. One of the blokes on the Ipswich bus was one of the State selectors, so first thing I did was to make sure Dennis got introduced to him. Ken knew who he was, but during the afternoon Shane was standing up to his cousin, who's a better-than-average fast medium bowler; picked up two leg side stumpings and a catch in the process."

"Which was enough to get him into the Queensland team?"

"Not quite. There was a State carnival to get through. But it meant Ken had seen the kid in action, knew who he was, and would have been comparing the kids he saw in the southeast corner to him as they went through their rep stuff in fourth term."

I went on to explain that I'd managed to drop the kid's name into influential ears, had introduced Dennis to everyone who mattered when he went to Toowoomba with the NQ team and most of them recognized the name and knew who they were talking to.

"Then the kid did the right thing. Captained the side well, went within an ace of winning the carnival, scored a couple of fifties, took more catches than any of his rivals and pulled off two more leg-side stumpings off the cousin. With the result that both of them made the State team."

"So if Dennis was to pull us over," Bernelle speculated.

"We'd probably have spent five minutes exchanging news and ended up on our way without anyone mentioning the need to blow in the bag. Wouldn't have saved you from the speeding ticket, if that was the reason he'd pulled you over. The reading'd already be on the speed gun, and once it's there it isn't easy to get rid of, but you'd have avoided the more unpleasant option."

"So there are benefits having you in the car," Bernelle suggested.

"Could well be. I'd be sitting just below the hundred for the rest of the way just to be on the safe side. After all, the next guy up the road may not be someone I know."

By this point in the discussion we were within cooee of Denison's outskirts and while the rest of the journey was completed in silence the conversation had achieved the intended purpose.

Along the way, despite the threat to her hairdressing career, it also seemed to suggest to Bernelle that there were some benefits involved when it came to being associated with David Herston, which is ironic since I'd been trying to work out the most convenient way to terminate the whole thing.

In any case, as the car pulled up outside *The Crossroads*, Bernelle asked about my plans for the weekend. Under the circumstances there wasn't time for a lengthy discussion, but I pointed out it was going to be full-on cricket degeneracy for the next two days and, come Sunday afternoon I'd probably be looking for somewhere like the room we'd recently vacated so I could roll the rock across the doorway and hibernate undisturbed for a couple of days.

Waiting for a break in the uncharacteristically heavy flurry of traffic turning off the highway and making its way towards Downtown Denison, Bernelle suggested that she might drop by on Sunday evening to see if there was anything she could do.

The remark brought up echoes of The Band's *Up On Cripple Creek* as I closed the car door to allow her to head towards whatever fate her employer had in mind.

I looked across to the curves encompassed by the seat belt I reflected that here, indeed, was *a drunkard's dream if I ever did see one*. As the car receded into the distance I strolled onto the premises and reflected that while I'd probably be suffering from the latter stages of terminal alcoholic poisoning by Sunday afternoon I'd still need to be exceedingly wary should certain parties come calling.

Once I'd checked in with Bright Eyes and reassured myself that no pressing matters were looming on the horizon I was quite happy to grab a couple of bottles of mineral water and a supply of vitamin B tablets and retreat to my room. There was, interestingly, no sign of Mr Jeffrey.

"I'll be back on deck by four, I reckon," was my parting remark. "The Dipsos won't have hit the road by then, so there shouldn't be anything serious in the way of emergencies in the interim. On the other hand, if there are I'm afraid to say you're going to have to deal with them yourselves. Until further notice, the doctor is out, the judge's decision is final and no correspondence will be entered into."