

The ENDANGERED LIST

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Brian Westlake

**The
ENDANGERED
LIST**


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Australia has a rich tradition of wildlife television presenters and while inspiration for a story may emanate from such a source, the facts of this story are entirely fictional and no character described in this book bears any resemblance to any real person whether living or deceased and any possible similarity is purely coincidental.

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ONE

For three days I must've been the only one in the country who didn't know Mick Lamington had died.

I've lain awake at night guessing where I was at the fatal moment. My best estimate puts me in the dry gibber-studded bed of the Gonjako Wash crouched in my hoochie waiting sixteen hours for a scarlet midgereee kowari, that most elusive of the desert rodents, to sniff out the stonehenge of Kraft Tasty chunks I'd placed around the mouth of its burrow. I wanted to lure it out to say 'cheese' for the camera. We weren't expecting to have to wait so long.

The crew had gone back to Brokentree Springs after half a day. I'd hung on alone with camera, cheese and whatever hope hadn't dried up in the desert sun. Midgerees dump urine and faeces around their burrows as a 'Keep Off The Grass' sign to other animals, so from the reek of my cheddar you'd think it'd have known something was amiss. But it was taking its sweet time. What a rat. I began wondering if it could've been a male in there, which is to say it

mightn't have been in there at all. The males only live for eleven months. Confirmed bachelors, they live alone and when they get to ten months old, right on the button, the bell rings and they get into an unrelenting teeth-first, no-holds-barred *war* with other males to mate with the females. Their prime lasts four weeks. Precisely. No variation, no ifs or buts, twenty-eight days. Like clockwork. Then the stress of the mating season buggers their immune system and they die. Every last one, every man-jack of them.

I didn't have a watch and I might not have been holding vigil at the exact moment Mick kissed it all goodbye. I might have been packing up the camp, swearing at everyone because all I'd managed to shoot, a booby prize, was a horn-nosed marsupial mole. Yet again. I'd done them back in season two. Not that Mick'd remember but the fans would. And there was my professional pride. Or it could've been later still when I was belting out of Gonjako towards Broken-tree Springs and the f.ing radiator cracked on me. At the exact moment Mick Lamington died I could've been picking my nose or taking a p., I don't know. But when they came to interview me for *60 Minutes* I had my story down. I'd been waiting for the rat.

Every other bugger in the country thinks they know where they were when Mick died. Correction. Every politician and half-arsed celebrity does know, and if they don't they make it up. They're no better than me, and they should be.

He's become our J f.ing K. Even the Prime Minister, the P f.ing M, in the *60 Minutes* special, tears up over the 'where-was-I-when-I-heard' story. But we all know where the PM was: smack-bang in the middle of Question Time when a clerk brought the note. Just a scrawl on a sheet of paper but momentous enough for the PM to stand up and cast a statesmanlike hush on the House and give a moving eulogy to 'this most famous and influential adventurer

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and wilderness conservationist and ambassador for our country'. Clever politics. All the polties, and a few million people around the country who caught the next news bulletin, and all the rest who saw it on TV that night, have to say that the first they heard about Mick Lamington's death was from the PM's very own lips, withered and outcurled like the petals of a drying plumwood flower. Clever, all right: she'd cornered the market.

'My advice is that this great character and environmentalist went out doing what he loved,' the PM told Parliament. She couldn't have known that for sure—emotion had got the better of her and she was ad-libbing—but maybe her saying it gave Phil Barrows the idea for the official version which he put out later. Maybe the official version is the truth. You'll have to excuse my scepticism. All I can say, seeing I wasn't there, seeing I was three thousand miles away waiting for a dirty rat that stood me up, is that Phil as Mick's manager could only have wished for such legend-making serendipity as what the PM said had happened.

It came out later that day via sources close to the film crew that Mick had died in the *very, very act* of doing what he loved.

Mick Lamington, as you'd know unless you've been on Mars, had his trademark thing. When he was filming a doco, creeping up on a deadly snake or sea monster or spider or some lethal-minded marsupial, tempting fate in that suspense-filled formula we perfected and patented over eleven record-breaking years, the crowning glory of each segment, the money shot—'the Kill', Mick called it, though not on camera—was when he'd plant a kiss on it. His signature, his registered trademark: the Kiss. There's been all sorts of analysis and whatnot about what made him so famous when there are so

many other TV naturalists about, all scrapping over the same patch, all dying of stress like male kowaris, but it's generally agreed that over and above his charisma, his enthusiasm, his great touch with the kiddies, his daredevilry and his genuine love of the outback and the outdoors, it was the Kiss that made Mick Lamington the international gigastar that he was. He'd planted the Kiss on saltwater crocodiles, giant snakes, dingos, platypuses, stingrays, echidnas ('Yow! We'll remember that one, kids!'), wombats, even sharks and dolphins, every creature great and small, safe and endangered. We even rigged it like he Kissed a Portuguese man-o'-war at the Barrier Reef once but between you and me there was a bit of fancy footwork in post-production for that one. Anyway, you get my point. The Kiss was Mick's Thing.

So I'll go along with the official version.

Filming a doco in Tasmania—and this part is more or less true—Mick had come down with a bad attack of chronic sinusitis. He'd suffered from it for years. Some shocking bouts blew his head up, stretched it shiny red and bloated like a baboon's a. His body was packing it in from the usual wear-and-tear of our profession—bung knees, dodgy back, crook neck, all his cartilage rubbed down to paper width, most of his joints bone on bone—but it was the sinusitis that brought him down most often. Julie thought he got infections from all the Kissing. 'You would,' he ribbed her. 'You're my missus! Be something wrong if you weren't jealous!'

He wouldn't stop filming, but. That was Mick. Never put himself first, and what would people say if they heard Mick Lamington, who feared no creature on earth, folded up with a snotty nose? He hadn't missed a day's work since he was a kid and his old man'd kicked the s. out of him. That's true. I read it in his autobiography.

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Right, so they were down at Shipstern Bluff in Tassie. They'd taken out Mick's sixty-foot research launch, *Kiss It*, which he'd designed himself, all loaded up with shark cages, diving bells, cranes for lifting heavy creatures out of the water, rubber duckies and satellite dish. Behind it was the boat for the film crew of twelve including cameras, lighting, make-up, grips, the whole shebang.

Now Shippies is a wild black scab on Tassie's bared southern a., waves rolling in without a Stop sign since the Antarctic, building a head of steam like the winds that sweep the continent from coast to coast. For the doco Mick went for a surf—he was a noted boardrider, or so we put out. Truth be told, he hadn't had time to do much surfing since he'd become famous, and even back in his youth he could only wobble up to his feet on a nine-foot Mal on one-foot waves, if at all, and, oh yeah, only pro surfers could take on Shippies when it was breaking. Shippies was like a staircase to heaven collapsing on your head. Luckily for Mick it wasn't breaking at all that week, so they filmed him paddling out on his board and planned to intercut it later with some blurry shots of Andy Irons carving it up. All good fun, the magic of post-production. Nobody need know, we do it all the time.

Anyway, that half-hour's paddle in cold saltwater had brought on Mick's snot-itis and he could barely do his to-camera pieces. Still, being Mick he insisted on going for the dive. The show had to go on.

His aim was to crack the Tasmanian sea taipan, one of the hardest-to-film reptiles on earth due to its notorious shyness. The advance crewies had found a nest but, near Shippies, and it was all set up for Mick to go down and get his hands on one. He was smacking his lips, they said.

Though it's called a sea taipan it's not a venomous (or as we

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say ‘hot’) snake like the land taipan or sea snake. In fact marine zoologists call it a variety of eel. But it has been called a sea taipan in some circles—we didn’t just make it up, I swear—and it was the name that whetted Mick’s appetite. He wouldn’t go to Shippies for a f.ing eel, but for a sea taipan let’s get the boat down there!

So, the account has it, they motored out to the nest and Mick masked up. The crew fitted him with snorkelling gear and AquaGrips—the nipped rubber gloves Mick used to grab hold of sea creatures when he was close enough to plant one on them.

There had been talk of rigging him out in one of these new chain-mail shark-proof diving suits out of America. You can film great whites actually attacking you! Mick was keen on the chainmail suit, but Phil Barrows talked him out of it. ‘Your whole essence, mate, is no armour, just you and the creatures. The chainmail suit makes you look like a wuss.’ That was enough for Mick. Never mind staying alive, you wouldn’t want to look like a wuss. Anyway, as Phil pointed out on *60 Minutes*, chainmail wouldn’t have saved Mick that day.

Earlier, while Mick was pretending to go for a surf, the crew had set up a perspex box around the nest so that the sea taipans couldn’t swim away, clear plastic so it wouldn’t show up on the film. (We’d got a permit from Tasmanian Fisheries, I was told. Though the permit seemed to have gone missing when the police came to do the autopsy. It didn’t matter, but. Tassie Fisheries loved Mick and so did the cops. So did everyone. We got a fresh permit backdated.)

When the crew had enclosed the sea taipan nest a diver called Glenn Mellon went down ahead of Mick to stir them up. The nest was only ten or fifteen feet down at low tide in a kelpy outcrop rich in nutrients that attracted the small fish the eels feed on, so even though the water was fourteen degrees Mick didn’t wear a wetsuit. It wasn’t that he liked the cold, more that Phil went for

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a uniform look in the films, and since the early days, when everything had been done up in Queensland and the Territory, all tropical, Mick had always done his underwater stuff in nothing but a pair of budgie-smugglers. Another registered trademark, they've done well: you'd've seen the 'Kiss This' line of d.-stickers on our website. So that was another reason why Glenn Mellon had to go down first. Mick couldn't stay in the water too long.

So Mellon goes down and it turns out the Tasmanian sea taipan's not as shy as its reputation, at least not when it has a perspex box and some thousand-watt camera lights surrounding it. It's quite happy to poke its face out of its hole and say g'day. Bit of a show pony really. (Good match for Mick . . . no, I didn't say that.)

When Glenn Mellon stirred them up, far from boiling into a rage of Deadly Reptilian Fury a family of five sea taipans—mum, dad, three kids (they have a nuclear unit, which Mick had talked about to camera)—wandered out and welcomed Glenn with a fair deal of inquisitive sniffing about. They've never been hunted, sea taipans, and lack natural predators, so they acted like a country family who don't get guests very often and want the phone linesman to sit down for a three-hour cup of tea.

So these deadly beasts have come out and are swimming around happily inside the perspex box. Mick dives down and Glenn lets him in, and they do six or seven takes with Mick grabbing a sea taipan by the tail and shaking it about, pretending like it's rounded wildly on him, then he scoots out of harm's reach. The usual stuff. With a camera on him, Mick could make answering the phone look like a life-threatening activity. With sharks and crocs and real hot snakes and whatever, it was serious of course and he couldn't buggerise about. But he had a real gift for making perfectly harmless creatures look f.ing deadly. JFC, I'll miss him.

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Anyway, they've done a few takes and Mick's getting cold and his snot-itis is giving him hell, so he's ready for the money shot. He wants to do it in one take. He's had enough. He's also disappointed that the sea taipans aren't putting up more of a fight. But he's doing his best. The show must go on. So he goes down and picks out the eldest daughter—he should have known better, but she was a pretty one, I've seen the footage. Golden speckles in a line down the top of her head, black-purple skin as slick as oil, tiny rainbows showing up under the spotlights. Mick always had an eye for the pretty girls. So he dives down there, pretends to wrestle with her for a bit—he'd pre-done this voiceover with him speaking both parts: *'No means no! . . . Oh yes it doesn't!'* It doesn't make any sense at all, and if there's one silver lining to the whole tragedy it's that the *Tasmanian Devils of the Deep* doco will never see the light of day, not if I have anything to do with it.

So Mick's had his little foreplay, he swims up to the surface to get a breath (we'd cut that in the normal run of things), and then he's back down to give her the Kiss.

He gets her in the AquaGrips and pulls out his snorkel to pucker up. But little does he know that in this nuclear family the dad has one sore point and that's his eldest daughter. Mature male sea taipans go mental if the big daughter is endangered. The mature male has a line of hot mucus-covered spines in his tail—not very poisonous but more painful than a bull ant bite. So behind Mick's back, the daddy turns from deep purple into a violent shade of red, glowing in the gills, and stings Mick on the calf. It gives Mick a shock—like being nipped by a toy dog, a chihuahua. But although the daddy sea taipan's doing his nana and going at Mick again, he thinks, I can get the money shot in quickly and not have to come down again.

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When Mick turns his puckered lips back to the daughter sea taipan, she's still her sweet-tempered self. In fact she's aching for it. Got a rebellious streak they do, especially when their dad's going troppo. She sees Mick's famous big wet pucker, even more world-famous than Mick Jagger's nowadays, and she dives at him.

You've heard the jokes about Mick wanting to give her a French kiss, that's why his mouth was so far open. But the facts as I understand them are that at the very instant he was to kiss the daughter sea taipan, the daddy dislocated his jaw—the sea taipan can do that, like a great white shark, if it sees something that needs a big mouthful—and chomped down on Mick's Achilles tendon. As he would say: *Yow!* And that's probably what he did say. At the instant of the Kiss, Mick's mouth opens up in a scream of pain and before he knows it he's got six inches of she sea taipan down his throat.

He must look like the f.ing Sammy the Seal show at Seaworld: most of her is still poking out of his mouth, so he wraps the AquaGrips around her tail and starts yanking. But she's slippery and now the dad sea taipan, certain that this big white Neptune in too-tight budgie-smugglers is *eating* his first-born daughter, his treasure, is ferociously going at Mick's leg like a whole school of piranhas.

Mick's panicking now. This is not looking good. Glenn Mellon and the cameraman have got the perspex door open for him but it's a bit of a struggle to get him out. His hands are still clamped round the taipan's tail trying to pull her out of his gob, and the daddy's following him, now taking large and painful scoops out of his leg. The water's a thunderhead of celebrity blood. Glenn Mellon, who's not done this too many times before, starts thinking of all the great whites around southern Tassie. So he's keen to get out of the

blushing water.

Mick shoots straight to the surface. With one hand he pulls off his facemask, which has been blocking his nose. He can't breathe through his mouth because it's got a sea taipan in it. But now he's up and treading water, he takes his hand off the girl and, feeling the cold air on her back, she dives in deeper. Mick's gagging. And now the daddy sea taipan's going for Glenn Mellon's legs and Glenn thinks he's being attacked by a shark. Screaming, he goes for the boat, leaving Mick bobbing about.

The crew are standing there watching, having a bit of a laugh. They don't realise how serious it is. They think Glenn's the one with the problem because he's the one making the noise. Mick's got his grips around the sea taipan and is still trying to pull her out, but that rainbow skin is as slippery as a certain well-known naturalist at shout time in a pub. I shouldn't be making a joke, I apologise. But still. It's been a while now and we get what we can. Anyway, she's slippery and he can't get her out and his mouth's blocked and even though he's got his facemask off he can't breathe through his nose. His sinusitis, see. He can't breathe.

The boys on the boat think he's kidding. Your typical Mick prank would be to pretend he's being mauled to death by some harmless skink. So aside from Glenn Mellon, who's saving his own precious ex-Chippendale skin, they're all watching Mick pretending to suffocate and having a good old chuckle.

They did get him aboard eventually and got the sea taipan out of his mouth. Problem was, by that stage he wasn't breathing. They tried to resuscitate him but he didn't make it to hospital.

That's the story, anyway, and we as an organisation are sticking to it.

* * *

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So, given the cloudiness of certain details regarding Mick Lamington's death, and the fact that I was three thousand miles away and not wearing a watch or in any way conscious of the day or the time as I sat in my vigil outside the scarlet midgerees's burrow (my great asset has always been my eternal patience—it's another reason why Mick and I complemented each other so well) I can't tell you exactly where I was when my best mate died. He's the whole country's best mate now, but, and they all know where they were, so maybe I should give up on being possessive about him.

I can tell you where I was when I found out, but. I'd walked the last few dozen miles into Brokentree Springs and got to the pub where we were staying. Sheena and the kids were on that shoot with us, as they often were during school holidays, but there was no one in the room when I got back. I took a bath, turning the water into red desert mud. My hands were hanging over the sides and I had my eyes closed. I was seeing scarlet midgerees kowaris. I'd cooled down a little about the marsupial mole—it might be good enough for a minor spot. We did my bits as kind of quiet interludes, just to put Mick's adventures—which were what the people paid for—into relief. Light and shade, you know? You don't want wall-to-wall mayhem. Sometimes it was better if my segments were low-key. I saw myself as the naturalist for the purists. The kids came for Mick and his Kiss, but the serious types wanted to see what I'd brought to the table.

Anyway, I heard Sheena's thongs slap on the bathroom tiles and opened my eyes. It took a sec to focus on her. She had her hair up in a kind of straggling bun and had pushed her sunnies up onto her crown. She wore a khaki ranger's shirt and khaki shorts and I'll never forget the expression on her face.

Look, in telling how Mick died I've become flippant. The eel, the

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Tassie trip, the Kiss, the shocking bad luck . . . I've worked on my timing. It's over-polished in the telling, that one. I'm told that it's my 'coping mechanism'. Mick wouldn't mind. But what I'm about to say is the rough cut, all the edges and burrs still on it, because I haven't told a soul what I'm about to tell you now.

'Mick's dead.'

That was all Sheena could say at first. I sat up in the bath and gawked at her. My throat had just seized up like a column of red desert dust had blown into it. Uncoiled tails of dark-auburn hair were pasted to her forehead, from the heat outside more than the steam in the bathroom. We looked at each other, probably only for a second but in my memory it feels like an hour.

As she said it, it was like she'd dropped fifteen years. All the lines fell out of her face. She was my baby bride again. She said later that when she looked at me, I was the same, years younger—though it could have just been the effects of the bath. We were mirrors of each other.

'Mick's dead.'

She only said it once, but it seemed to echo. And after she said it there was this kind of a smile playing on her lips. I know she wasn't happy. I know there wasn't a cell in her f.ing body that felt anything but sorrow and sheer terror and disbelief. But you know how this happens sometimes? When you reckon someone's pulling your leg? You're waiting for the punchline. There was this little smile cavorting round the corners of her mouth.

And she said I was the same. I know I was. I felt the smile twitching on my lips like a tiny fish on the line, so tiny you know even before you see it that you're gunna have to throw back. That's all it was—a kneejerk reaction, a reflex. Some animals seem to smile the instant they realise they're for it. One example is the spinifex

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hopping ferret. The ferret has one predator: the central blue-tailed hawk. And if the hawk gets the ferret in its beak, the ferret actually smiles. Its lips peel back from its teeth and its eyes crinkle in an expression that can only be likened to bliss. I know this because I have it on film, though Mick, for some reason, never wanted to use it for the American audience. Said it wasn't 'life-affirming'.

Anyway. That's all my smile was. It didn't mean anything. Or not to me.

We locked eyes for a hell of a long time. I was thinking, *Baby, you're joking, right?*

Then I thought she'd said, *Mick's Deadly*. And I relaxed and opened my smile wider.

It didn't mean anything to me, that smile, but I was to find out that it meant a heck of a lot to Sheena and, in its way, that reflex, both hers and mine, brought down a lot of the f.ing s. that was to follow.

But she hadn't said *Deadly*.

'F. me,' is what she remembers me saying as I sank back into the bath and blinked at the ceiling, hoping I could rewind the tape and Sheena could go out again and we could both pretend none of this had happened, it was just a mistake, she'd misread the script.

I didn't ask how Mick had died. That could come later. All I could think then was that I'd lost the lot.

'F. me.'

TWO

I always thought Ned Clegg was a genuine actor, a real once-in-a-generation home-grown legend, till I sat in the stands watching him perform his eulogy to Mick.

It was eight days on and Ned was the lead-off hitter in the public memorial service. As he couldn't make it home from New York City he was beamed in by satellite on the big screen, dressed in a black suit with this rose garden behind him, his orange tan and bulldog-skin forehead embalmed by fame. Ned was the oldest living credited Australian actor, that bloke who was in pretty much every film we made from 1970 until 1996 when the a. fell out of the industry. If there's any Australian actor who hasn't been in a movie with Ned, they're lying. Then, about five years after he'd passed his use-by date, Quentin Tarantino plucked him from retirement on a Southern Highlands apple orchard to play the deaf-mute godfather to a brutal Irish-American martial arts gang restoring Los Angeles' Koreatown district to white hands, and bingo: Oscar

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nomination, flavour of the month, overnight success at age sixty-eight, two million a pic. He'd moved to America and was trying to pass himself off as 'Edward' Clegg, but twenty million Australians, including yours truly, couldn't come at that. He'd always be our Ned. But you can't begrudge an overdue success, much as you might like to. In the past five years Ned had gone from voicing over community TV ads to being the best-known Aussie in Hollywood, his global celebrity second to none. Or second to one.

His character today was Undertaker in Chilly Churchyard Cemetery, all northern-hemisphere Protestant, even though we'd scattered Mick's ashes over his beloved Barrier Reef three days before and were now holding the memorial service in the steam-boat-hot auditorium of the Kangazoo, Mick's wildlife park, his great legacy to the people of Australia, instead of the state funeral the PM had offered. Mick was an ordinary Aussie, he'd be squirming in his grave if it'd been some big f.off affair in St Andrew's Cathedral with suits and ties and God and what-all else. Mick'd had nothing to do with cemeteries or religious burials and he'd have been laughing his head off if he'd seen what Ned Clegg was trying to impersonate. Or maybe he wouldn't. Mick got pretty serious about his celeb mates towards the end.

Mick was, Ned was telling us, the 'stars' star'.

'Mick . . . *mate*,' Ned corrected himself, though the stumble and the correction were both in the script and you could tell, 'you made this world a better planet, not only for us and for every species you brought to light, but for our children, and their children, and all the generations to come . . .'

Being a one-time Oscar nominee, Ned wasn't going to pull off something as obvious as wiping a tear out of his eye or making his voice shake, but he paused here and collected himself as if his throat

and tongue were fattening—like an allergic reaction to a bluebottle sting. He was having trouble going on. He bit his lip hard and let his pooling eyes drop.

Maybe he was just embarrassed by his lines. I don't know what he was thinking, talking about 'our children'. Of course Mick was a huge hit with the kids, but I couldn't stop my eyes from skidding to my left as Ned made his blooper.

Let me explain the seating order in the official box Phil Barrows had roped off for the service. In the front row was the Prime Minister and her husband, the State Premier and his wife, and the Federal Opposition Leader and his wife. It was a pretty big tribute to Mick that the Opposition Leader had come along. With the PM, it was a no-brainer: Mick was her boy. Mick had called her 'the great leader we had to have'. And this audience was the PM's constituency. One time, when Mick was being investigated over interfering with wildlife in Antarctica (we filmed him huddling up with a bunch of Emperor penguins and a couple of them got upset—great telly but not too smart, as the offence carried a one-million-dollar fine and we incriminated him with our own footage), the PM took a 'personal interest' in the investigation, and she herself made the announcement that Mick had been cleared. That's why it took some balls for the Opposition Leader to attend. Or maybe, as Sheena said to me later, he couldn't afford not to come: the Mick Lamington constituency was the *entire nation*, the meat in the sandwich, and no leader could afford to be seen sulking. Jeez. If anyone had asked, Mick would have called him the great Opposition Leader we had to have. That was Mick: he liked pretty much everyone. It was only by accident that he came to be political property.

So anyway, all the big nobs were in the front row. In the second row, lined up like minor chiefs come to farewell the king, were the

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biggest names of Australian nature presenting: Brock McCabe, Don Simpson, Sharpie Phelps, Deano Rudd and Steve Heath, each a legend in his own way but none as big as Mick. Their presence was an important statement. Of some kind.

In the third row, central, sat the family and the inner circle. Julie Lamington wore a pair of Cancer Council sunglasses so big they needed windscreen wipers. She looked like a fly, honest to God. You'd have seen more of her freckled face if she'd been wearing a burqa. Julie had been secluded and sedated since Mick's death, and this was her first appearance. She wasn't going to give an interview to anyone until the bidding war had plateaued. As she sat there I was impressed by her *size*. Big bones, Julie, not fat, built like a rugby forward. And normally a big personality too. For eighteen years I'd wondered how she could spend her life playing loyal second fiddle when she had so much brain and talent and soul. Why defer? She had more going for her than . . . but don't get me started. Most of the time I was hopping mad at Julie in that way you can go totally troppo at someone when you see yourself in them. He turned us into sidekicks, Mick did. Julie and I had that in common.

Clutching Julie's stiff hand was Phil Barrows, Mick's agent, producer and now the remaining executive director of all the Lamington-Kangazoo businesses. With his threadbare pot-scrubber of sandy hair combed from ear to ear (I once saw the wind blow it off and it sat on his shoulder like a pet parrot), Phil had wedged himself between me and Julie. I'll get to Phil.

To my right was Sheena and to her right was Glenn Mellon, who Phil had allowed to give a teasing TV interview about Mick's last moments, carefully omitting some specifics of Glenn's actions on the day. It was all about casting and characterisation. Phil Barrows, the master puppeteer, had set it up so that Glenn was the Heroic

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Survivor, the buddy who took after Mick's own heart and had Been By His Side When It Happened. Such was the outpouring of love for Mick around the country, and particularly the world, nobody was going to examine too closely what Glenn Mellon had done. Or not done. The show needed a Heroic Survivor.

I might have been that myself but I was harder to cast. Phil and the media couldn't decide if I was the Best Mate, the Heir Apparent or the Superfluous Sidekick. Of course I *was* Mick's best mate and heir apparent and I shared the on-air time with him in the TV series and documentaries, but there was something about me that they couldn't quite box in, like trying to get a stork into a pigeonhole.

So anyway, along our row to my right were Sheena and Glenn, to my left were Phil and Julie, and beyond Julie were her kids, Ranger and Hunter.

Ranger Lamington was seventeen going on three. She'd come to the memorial service in the same get-up she'd worn at the private family funeral out on the Reef: ears and nose nine-tenths stainless steel (her head must have weighed a tonne), some kind of Japanese symbol tattooed across her shoulderblades, hair all purple and black and spiked up like (and probably used as) a toilet brush, mascara like Frank N Furter, and to cap it all a black midriff top and black lowrider jeans that made her look like a sausage burst on the barbie. Pretty much typical Ranger, in other words. This girl who as a six-week-old baby had been taken on a film shoot to the Barrier Reef, this publicly anointed golden child who used to ride on her dad's shoulders as he wrestled with snakes and fought with dragons prior to writing his signature with his pucker on their snouts . . . by seventeen she'd reduced herself to *this*.

Mick had meant well, or as well as a father like him could. The idea had been that exposing her to animals from babyhood—at

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two months she was photographed scarily with a diamond python curled round her like she was its own young—would familiarise her, ‘naturalise’ her as Mick put it, with the animal world. It made sensational footage until she was about five, and from there on it worked like aversion therapy. From five onwards Ranger couldn’t stand a critter—she’d charge around stomping on spiders and setting possum traps. She actually pulled the wings off butterflies, though mostly, I reckoned, to p. Mick off. The very last time she saw her dad, when he ducked in to say goodbye for his trip to Tassie, she was half-asleep in front of a music video. He asked why she didn’t watch something less brain-corrosive. She yawned, ‘Yeah right, like dead-boring animal shows on Pioneer. I’d rather pierce my eyeballs, Dad.’ The last words she said to him, honest to God. I was there.

The rotten apple of her father’s eye, the blot in the Lamington copybook. I’d overheard some of the blues between her and Julie the last few days; it was a miracle Ranger had come to the memorial service at all. I hoped she might regret her parting shot one day. But it was typical Ranger not to show remorse, not even with the whole world watching. Especially not.

Hunter, humpbacked in his seat beside her, was a gem of a kid but a little slow with it. He was nine, and if I say he didn’t realise what was going on I mean it nicely.

Unlike Ranger, Hunter did show some knack for the family business. He loved animals, that kid, had a special connection. When he was five days old they took him on a snake hunt for a TV Christmas special, and his tiny hand reached out for a death adder’s head like it was his rattle. Pure instinct. All through his infancy Hunter’d just sit with wildlife in the Kangazoo and stare at them, holding silent and private conversations while the drool formed

swinging lianas off his bottom lip. He wasn't a simpleton, don't get me wrong. He just lived in his parallel world where he'd forget all about this one. Very often he knew animals were sick before I did, certainly before his dad did. He just had it: the ears to hear what they were saying. Sweet boy, he reminded me of myself. Before I had kids of my own, Hunter'd come with me on my minibike around the zoo and watch me dig a new trench for the crocs or fix the netting on the aviary. He just had the Force, Hunter did. But you know, if they hadn't home-schooled the kids, Hunter would have been either in a school for geniuses or a remedial institution. Little mouse-haired chubster, more overweight than his sister and sweet where she was sour. Your heart bled for him. Mick called him The Absent-Minded Professor. They'd send him off to get dressed in his room, and find him an hour later with one arm half-out of a sleeve and sitting on the floor gazing at a silverfish. Or he'd come out with two shirts on, one over the other. He'd just forgotten he'd put the first one on. I know his absent-mindedness and his slow ways drove Mick bonkers. Mick'd tease him non-stop. Always picking on him. Poor little bloke. I spose Mick reckoned he needed toughening up. Funny way of going about it, but. Worst of all, Hunter idolised his dad.

Ned Clegg's shoulders were hunched against the cold and his hands had goosebumps. At least he made us feel cooler. He was reading some lines about what children had been doing for Mick.

All round the country, Mick's death was considered so traumatic that the kiddie therapists were all hard at work giving quotes to the newspapers. One school had its kids 'coping' by building a garden and frog pond commemorating Mick. Kids needed a note from their parents to allow them to watch the memorial service on TV. I guess the only children who didn't need a note to watch were the ones sitting three and four seats to my left.

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I reckon a lot of the public outpouring was on Mick's kids' behalf, pitying them to be growing up without a dad. Once Ranger was out in the open air, though, the public sympathy shifted wholly onto Hunter. He was wearing his brown Kangazoo staff uniform, and the velour kangaroo tail he loved: he pressed a button on it and it went *Boing!*. Kept pressing it and giggling while Ned Clegg eulogised, until Ranger planted her three-inch black-painted claws into his wrist and made him whimper. Get that angle, Mr Director! The vision switched onto Hunter's rumpling little puddin' face and it was the most moving moment of the whole service, made all the TV news highlights.

Ranger and Hunter were the biggest disappointments of Mick's life. The fact that one wasn't willing and the other wasn't able to follow him into the business was a barb through his heart. And here was Ned raving about kids, putting his foot right in it. I could see Julie Lamington biting her lip. But Ned wasn't to know. He'd never met Mick's kids, nor heard Mick talk about them. Mick just didn't.

Ned and Mick only met on two occasions. The first was at Los Angeles airport when we were bumping in and Ned was bumping out and he came over to Mick and told him what a huge fan he was. Mick couldn't believe it. He was speechless, which was pretty rare. They stood there for a few seconds and to fill in the silence Ned talked about the film he'd been shooting—or talked about Martin Scorsese who'd been directing it and Harvey Weinstein who'd produced it and what 'mad bastards these guys are, heh-heh-heh'. Mick wouldn't have known Martin Scorsese from Don Corleone but I could see he was impressed, and when Ned gave him his card—'With my private email address, mate, I'll read them personally if you send them here'—Mick asked me to give Ned one of ours. All I had was our Kangazoo Productions head office card so I was a bit

embarrassed. But Ned, to his credit as a true bloke of the people, eventually got one of his assistants to get in touch with Kangazoo and invited Mick and me over to his place in Sydney—a penthouse overlooking the Opera House. That was a blast. Ned showed us around his ‘art gallery’, which was all his own stuff, heavy oils and mixed media (he was branching out), and took us out on his thirty-foot cruiser. In the evening, things wound down a bit because Ned broke out his baggie of purple haze hydro and offered around a facemask-sized bamboo bong of all things. Old school, Ned. ‘Nah, mate,’ Mick said. ‘Not even caffeine for me. I’m so wired-up already I only sleep four hours a night. Gotta stay sharp in our biz, eh!’ I admired Mick for saying that, knowing everything I did about him and having been through a bit of it myself. Starstruck he might have been, in Ned’s posh waterfront, but Mick still had bits of himself he wanted to hold back.

Anyway, from there it was an evening of us sitting pretty much stone cold sober and silent while Ned lectured us about global warming, African poverty, the important movements in Hollywood studio ownership, and most of all about the ‘pillow-biting arse-munchers in the art world’ who refused to recognise the greatness of his paintings. In other words, a nine-carat f.ing bore. But after we left, as we were tromping back along the Quay, Mick, being Mick, shook his head and said, ‘Bro, I reckon Ned was awesome in *Fallowfeather*—should have got an Oscar for that one, I reckon.’ Ned hadn’t talked much about his own movies—world affairs and the art scene were his trip—and I think it disappointed Mick. But he was a glass-half-full guy, my mate, and he never said a bad word about Ned Clegg as long as he lived. He felt flattered to have been invited over.

‘Mate.’ Ned gave a chuckle and shook his head. Then I saw it.

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The tear! He wiped his eye. Good one, Ned! ‘Mate, I’m in New York right now, the big city, mate, and you should see the coverage over here. You’ve been on CNN for a week, Fox News, all the networks, free cable and satellite . . . And around the world you’ve been on the BBC and news in every country, saturation coverage.’ Ned shook his head again, as if to say not even he could have commanded that kind of coverage. (*Saturation*. Who was writing his lines? Later, Phil Barrows told me he’d written the draft but Ned had sub-edited it ‘with his very own hand’.)

As Ned listed the news networks that had covered Mick’s death, I could feel the vibe in the crowd. It was like, *Yow!*. We knew Mick was big, but nobody knew he was this big. He was *international*.

Ned kept reeling off the stats—‘Mate, you had sixty-four internet fan sites based in America alone, dozens more in Europe . . . even Julie’s got twelve internet fan sites. You were beamed into two hundred and forty-five countries, mate. They showed Mick Lamington in more countries than sell Coca-Cola. When you came to the States, you had to put on a disguise to go down the shops or else you’d be mobbed . . .’—in this private, intimate voice, like Ned was the only other Aussie who knew the mixed blessings of being genuinely world-famous. And maybe he was, and maybe, I thought, there’s a special link between people who are that famous, they *know* each other, like telepathically, and that’s why they need each other. Their friendships aren’t really a mutual admiration society, they’re a *support group*.

‘Remember the day we both put on beards and hats to get out of that hotel without being mobbed? You were a classic, Mick, a true classic. Mate,’ Ned finished. ‘You touched my heart. Julie, Ranger, Hunter—I’m always here for you. Whatever you need, I’m here. Don’t forget that.’ He closed his fist and thumped his heart—what I believe to be a black American sign of solidarity.

Truth be told, Ned's acting in his eulogy was Ess-Haitch-One-Thompson. It was the first thing I'd ever seen Ned Clegg do where he sucked. Where he looked like an actor. I don't blame Ned. I blame Phil Barrows' writing. Anyway. At least over in the wintry big city Ned wasn't sweating waterfalls from his armpits like the rest of us.

Next the PM got up and said a few words, mercifully quick. Phil Barrows, who'd concept-designed the whole Kangazoo ceremony, hadn't invited the Opposition Leader to put in his five cents' worth, which showed rare poor judgement from Phil seeing that the polls had the government behind and the opposition might re-examine some of our more favourable tax concessions if it won the next election. But it wasn't the pollies' day. It was the fans' day!

We had Bluey Macauley sing his unofficial Australian anthem, 'Stone the Crows', which—just quietly—Mick and I had always taken the p. out of until Mick, in his late years, grew (like a sort of mould) this positive enthusiasm for his fellow-famous so that everything done by anyone famous was 'great'. But now that Bluey was strumming his guitar and singing acoustic-style, I've got to own up that my tear ducts were filling up like a sick koala's. That corny Aussie s., it gets you right here sometimes. The only thing that stopped me breaking down was Sheena holding my hand and Ranger Lamington pretending to puke. Her mother stomped on her black-nailed big toe so hard that it took the breath out of her muffin-top stomach right up to the tops of her eyes.

After Bluey, Phil Barrows made a speech that was like a personal advertisement for all the film, TV and sponsorship deals he'd done in fifteen years of managing Mick, and then we had the video tributes: action-movie hero Hawk Jakins, who'd foiled a terrorist plot with Mick's help; talk-show king Tiger O'Malley, whose wife

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was ‘more devastated by Mick’s death than those of Princess Diana or John Kennedy Jr, both good friends of ours’; unsuccessful US Presidential candidate Jack Blohm, who said, ‘Mick, you and I both know that the only failure in life is the failure to be ourselves.’ There was a message from the White House. Mick was in the President’s prayers. There was a basketball star who laughed it all off as another ‘rumour of your demise’. And there was the white rapper, I-Q, who said, ‘We only spent maybe one day hanging together, Mick, but you and me is brothers for life.’ I recalled that day. They’d met in a TV studio and the rapper wet his pants in excitement. It was heart-rending to see such a wanker turn into a childlike fan. I-Q seemed to watch a lot of Pioneer Network TV. Mick was also quite flattered, afterwards, when he found out who I-Q was.

It was all very impressive, but you couldn’t help noticing that not one of the video links, aside from good old Ned Clegg, was an Aussie. (None of them for that matter seemed to be talking about Mick, instead it was all about them—but that’s celebs, I spose, eyes mirrored from the inside.) But Phil had been quietly peed off for years about Mick’s fame in the States compared with his relative obscurity locally. (Weekly: forty-eight-point-five-million viewers in the US, another thirty-three million in other countries, and fewer than three hundred thousand in Oz. ‘Even per capita,’ Phil complained, ‘that’s an outrage.’)

If Australia didn’t realise what a massive international superstar Mick Lamington was in life, they would get hit over the head with it in death. Wars and earthquakes had been knocked off the front pages of the *New York Times*, the UK *Sun*, *Le Monde*, f.ing *Pravda*! News websites all around the world were being overwhelmed. Mick’s death was a six-car pile-up on the information super-highway.

But I wasn't in New York, or cyberspace. I was in Queensland, looking around the auditorium as we baked in the sun, into all those grief-stricken faces. *J f.ing C, what are we going to do?*

It hadn't hit me until then. But jeez. What *were* we going to do? The more I listened to the rollcall of Mick's achievements, his worldwide popularity, the more it felt like a mountain range on our shoulders. As I looked around the faces in the crowd I saw the true depth of their sadness. Kids red with tears. Mums and dads stoically holding it together. The three thousand we'd been able to fit in had scored their tickets in a statewide lottery Phil had set up via text-messaging; a lottery that also managed to fund the service itself and clear a surplus to boot. We didn't have to pay tax on it either as we were a wildlife preservation charity. But we did better than paying taxes—we made the world a better place.

I looked around at those three thousand faces—not the nobs up front but the lottery-winners up in the bleachers—and thought how this was Queensland in the sauna heat, this was Old Australia, this was the Anzac Spirit. This was the best of what our country has given the world—good, straight, honest people, who, if our allies went to war, it didn't matter where it was, we'd get over there and pitch in, make the ultimate sacrifice, because we know all about mateship, what it means. We pick and we stick, we know who we owe. I was bloody proud of these people and proud of Mick's unique ability to connect with them. If you could bottle it, you'd call it Fair Dinkum Australian Juice, no preservatives, no additives, no BS. Just fresh-squeezed from the green-and-gold heart of the nation.

Our army of fans had even turned the bad publicity into good. When that expat pinko-femmo academic Nola Rickles scored her regular fix of limelight by ranting in some Pommy rag about Mick 'getting his final comeuppance for badgering and terrifying yet

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another helpless animal', the good hearts of our fan base made her as popular as a finger in a bees' nest. They set upon her till there was nothing left of poor Nola but a cringing apology and a cloud of dust. Our fans, they were out there, beyond the Kangazoo where the walls were piled high with floral bouquets and a big screen was showing the service for the thousands who couldn't get in. Some of our more patriotic fans were marching about the place wrapped in the Australian flag and menacing complete strangers to 'Kiss it' or risk a thick ear.

Our fans, loyal as the day is long, were on the beaches, on the landing fields . . . F.ing hell, they were down in Tasmania right now, crusading in their silent majority, leaving their mark on the shoreline in the dozens of sea taipans that had been hunted down the past few days, their bodies left alongside their decapitated heads. It made me sick, this wanton destruction of innocent life. I didn't want to think about it. But I knew deep down that Mick would have been tickled pink. He wouldn't have seen them so much as revenge killings as a dip of the lid, a sign of tribute, to him.

But was I the only one who was f.ing terrified of what we were going to do next? Without Mick, we were up s.creek without a paddle, without a f.ing boat even. And we all knew it. Whether we were admitting it was another thing.

I was feeling a bit drained when we got up at the end of the service. The finishing touch was nice: Kangazoo staff piled a garland of blood-red Queensland poinsettia bracts that eventually fell into place as a giant red mouth, the lips that Phil Barrows had registered as a trademark. No individual was bigger than the brand. The Kiss would live on.

It was hot enough to uncurl a possum's tail. The Kangazoo auditorium can really funnel in that Queensland humidity, that's for sure. A cyclone, Cyclone Shane, was building up north. This was the musty heat down south, between Shane's toes. When we stood up—Bluey was playing 'Stone the Crows' again, this time with less effect—our shirts were stuck to our backs, with the exception of Ranger whose crop top was splitting loose. That girl had worn old clothes to her father's memorial service, as a statement. What kind of f.ing statement is that, I ask you?

I went up to her to tell her so, and who knows where it might have led, possibly to a *mêlée* or a fracas, because I was boiling both inside and out at that girl's blatant impertinence. *You broke your father's heart*, I was ready to blurt. But Phil Barrows, sniffing the two pre-ceremony cognacs I'd taken to tide me through and spotting the warlike look in my eye, stepped between us. Ranger was off the hook, for now. And so was I.

'Frosty,' Phil said, with firm hands on my biceps. Phil was taller than me by the thickness of a comb-over. He usually wore linen suits and white shoes, the Gold Coast property-developer look, but today he looked distinctly sweaty in the Kangazoo uniform of brown shorts and coxcomb-yellow polo shirt.

'Frosty, you've met Tim Steam and Mandy Rout,' Phil said.

We were on the top deck of the grandstand, about to go down the ramp towards the reception centre where all the luminaries had been invited for an air-conditioned refreshment. From behind Phil emerged, modestly, wearing sympathetic but uncontrollably optimistic smiles, Steam and Rout, or, as they insisted, Tim and Mandy. The producers of our *Kiss* series for Pioneer Network and the six cinema features we'd completed with Mick. Our bosses, as Phil liked to call them to their faces.

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They owned us, though in a funny way we owned them.

‘Tim and Mandy can’t come to the reception, they have to fly out this afternoon,’ Phil said.

‘The LA shuttle leaves Brisbane in three hours and there’s only one a day,’ Tim said helpfully, as if I hadn’t done that flight more times than he had hot airline dinners.

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ I forced myself to say, still looking for where Ranger had gone. I was going to get her, at the reception or later. Little snot-nosed s.bag.

‘So we’re going to have to drag you away,’ Phil said. ‘Tim and Mandy want a quick word.’

‘About what?’ I said.

Mandy came and took my arm like I was her f.ing date. I noticed she wore a tortoiseshell hair comb. I didn’t want to look down in case she had crocodile-skin boots.

‘About the future, Frosty.’ She smelt of Colgate.

‘Come downstairs,’ Phil said. ‘My office is quiet at this time of day.’

Tim and Mandy laughed loudly, as if there were many shades of meaning to Phil’s remark and they needed to look like they’d got them all.

THREE

Phil ushered me and the two Americans into his office. Once Phil Barrows had been a TV journo who'd fancied himself to lift the lid on Mick; by the end of the day he was working for him. Now, a decade-plus later, Phil had mastered the art of *ushering*. He was smooth as a courting sea slug, a sweep of his freckled hand showing us into the corner suite on the top floor of the three-storey administration block built into the back of the auditorium. Mick himself didn't have an office, as such. Offices were cages to Mick. He couldn't escape fast enough. When he absolutely couldn't get out of paperwork he camped in Phil's office, or in Julie's on the opposing corner, bothering them like a hyperactive kid until they'd tell him to just sign the dotted line and nick off.

'I just love your office,' Tim said to Phil. There was a lot to love about it, primarily the view: the Daintree in the foreground, the Red Centre alongside the Alpine Plateau, the Sunshine Coast hinterland beyond, Brisbane herself shimmering on the horizon—talk about the best of all worlds. The view was like those pictures they do with

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New York or Paris at the centre of the world, occupying nine-tenths of the planet while the other countries are a distant skin. Only this was Queensland. Too bloody right!

Phil conducted his usual guided tour. Stepping over the bearskin rug in the centre of the room, he showed Tim and Mandy some framed pictures: him and Mick with Bill Clinton, Mick with Nelson Mandela, Phil and Mick with the Pope (Benedict, not JP2), Mick and yours truly with Britney Spears, one of our biggest fans, dunno why they couldn't have organised a video feed from her. Then he showed them the stuffed oryx and polar bear heads on the wall—not hunted, of course, but 'brought to God' while Mick was shooting docos. Then he showed them the framed gold and platinum DVDs we'd received when our sales went past a hundred thousand and two hundred thousand, and the gold American DVDs when we cracked the million. It wasn't as if Tim and Mandy needed reminding, but Phil, wired-up on too much coffee and celebrity, was subtle as a mallee bull. He guided them back over the bearskin, still rabbiting on, to the white cowhide sofa with ivory side tables adorned with crocodile-skin coasters. Phil preferred his animal products to be useful. It was his little indulgence, and if you told the outside world about it he'd have your head stuffed and mounted and on his wall.

Tim Steam and Mandy Rout sat side by side on the couch, which Phil had set up so it overlooked the biggest and most tropical enclosure in the Kangazoo: the Daintree Rainforest Biosphere. Glassed overhead, climate controlled inside, it featured the world's truest replication of the Far North Queensland wilderness, housing birds, reptiles, rodents and insects native to the region.

'We gotta go in there,' said Tim, nodding to the window but speaking to Mandy. In black-framed glasses and suit, he was the Clark Kent type, except without the Superman option.

‘Uh-uh, you’re on your own, Tim.’ Mandy shook her head, then looked at me apologetically. ‘I got a thing about creepy-crawlies.’

I replied with an understanding grimace. I’ve never been able to make my face do the right thing with these corporate exec types. Sure, they’re only making small talk to pass the time, but f. me, the worst she’d come across in there would be a bush rat or a mozzie. Nothing creepy or crawly was allowed anywhere near the visitors. Unless you counted Phil.

‘Spose you prefer your zoos with elephants and giraffes,’ I said. F.ing Phil had left me with them for two minutes while he went out to summon some cups of coffee weak and watery enough for American tastes.

‘Oh no,’ Tim said, over-compensating with the politeness. ‘We appreciate you having an all-Oz zoo, right, Mandy?’

‘Oh, sure,’ she said, too brightly to be convincing. She was like the better-behaved kids, who came out of the zoo disappointed about no monkeys or tigers but didn’t want to let it show.

We sat there grinning at each other—who said there were no monkeys?—and trying our best to make sure nobody had taken any offence. Luckily Phil put me out of my misery, returning with a glass pot of bull ant’s p.

‘How you guys been making out?’ Phil said to them, nodding eagerly towards me as if I was a bride and he was my dad and they were the favourites for the arranged marriage. Phil was a genius deal-maker, and it’s legend now that Mick wouldn’t have made it to square one without him. But right now Phil was all amped up and hadn’t slept for seventy-two hours. He’d been giving interviews to every asker from round the world and was by now almost as famous as Mick himself. I wondered if Phil quite knew what he was doing—he looked a bit too much like he was enjoying his

moment. But as Julie wasn't speaking to the media, Glenn Mellon had too much to hide and I hadn't been asked, Phil figured he had no alternative. He was doing what Mick would have wanted him to do. The total professional. Stressed, but.

'Great, great,' Tim said and turned to me, safe now that Phil was here, to address me more directly. 'We just love you, Frosty. Don't we, Mandy?' She gave an orchestrated nod. 'I mean, I don't think Mick would ever have worked so well on television—now please don't take this the wrong way, Mick was a superstar, rolled-gold, no questions asked—but he wouldn't have worked so well without you on the show with him. When we first saw you, we thought, if you're as real as you seem, we *have* to have you on. That's the thing about you, Frosty. You keep it real.'

Tim said it like it was a consolation prize, but Phil chipped in, bug-eyed as a cockatiel: 'Dead right, dead right.'

'It's all about light and shade,' Mandy said seriously, technically. 'When we had Mick up front, you were the necessary bit of . . .' Here she struggled for the right word and looked at Tim. Slim and light in her bones, she had a broad face like a meerkat and was probably pretty if you liked that feline-rodent look. Tim, nodding with great warmth behind her, was tall and dark and would have been handsome except for a giant black mole on the corner of his mouth, which, being American, it was amazing he hadn't had removed. Maybe its roots went into his brain. Still, why would that stop him?

'You were the grit of *real* without which the pearl couldn't have grown,' Tim said, swelling with pride at his ability to perform on the spot. 'That's what television's all about. The pearl.'

Don't get me wrong. I like Americans generally, and I liked these two. For Hollywood television executives, they were sincere and hardworking and always honest with us. Sometimes Mick and

I were embarrassed about how well Pioneer treated us, as if we were their masters. But when we acted too humble on one of our trips to LA, Phil told us to snap out of it: Tim and Mandy were now senior vice-presidents of production at Pioneer Network, and their careers had shot up as a direct result of their involvement with the Mick Lamington series. Mick was their meal ticket, and the truth was they were terrified that we might get an offer from another network—National Geographic or Discovery most likely, but even the free-to-air might wake up one day and snaffle us. So, Phil said, they treated us like their lords and masters because we *were*, and we should never forget that.

‘So, you know what we’ve got ahead of us,’ Tim said, his smooth face all of a sudden serious, his mole staring at me like a third dark eye. They can do small talk, these corporate types, but only for so long. Then it’s the flick of the knifeblade and they’re into the biz.

I shrugged. What the f. could we do? We only had four and a bit episodes in the can for a thirteen-ep series.

‘How about we make the stuff we’ve got into a movie-length feature,’ I said slowly, canny as an old barramundi hiding among the snags. ‘We can put it out as a last tribute to Mick. Maybe cut in some of the stuff from the service today. Maybe some old stuff—you know, highlights and whatnot. Maybe,’ I swallowed, feeling dangerously audacious, ‘maybe we can find some, ah, tasteful way of using the footage from, you know, from Tasmania.’

Tim and Mandy were leaning forward on the couch looking at me intently. Or so it seemed. It also seemed like they were trying really, really hard to look at me intently and not quite managing.

‘Wow,’ Mandy said quietly, shaking her head in wonder. ‘What an amazing idea.’

My old-man-bushie act always played well with Americans.

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I put the sage back into sagebrush, that's for sure. I shrugged, all laconic modesty.

'Hey,' Tim said, addressing Phil, who was skittering about like a sand crab. 'We ought to get Frosty in with our creatives. He's got a hidden side to him.'

Phil said, 'You mind if I . . .?' He flashed them a pack of cigarettes. All manners, Tim and Mandy fell over themselves to let Phil make himself at home. Then, when he sparked up, they kept turning their heads away from the smoke like it was Zyklon B.

'It's a great idea,' Mandy said, patting my thigh. Her hand, her arm, they really were too thin and brown. These Americans spend so much time looking after their bodies, they'll make themselves sick.

'But we've got bigger plans,' Phil cut in, wanting to move things along. 'More sustainable for the long term. You tell us, Tim.'

Tim could tell us, but Mandy and Phil already knew, so actually Tim was telling me. First, he laid out the 'underlying situation'. Kiss Productions was contracted to provide the thirteen episodes of the current series, and while there was a death/accident/act of God provision in the contract, Phil and Pioneer had agreed that it would be to everyone's benefit if the series could be completed, albeit without Mick himself.

'That's a big albeit,' I said, stumbling on the word.

Tim flexed the muscles inside his jaw, like he was nervous in front of me. His mole, I swear, shot me a wink. He then explained the stakes: Pioneer's investment was upwards of a million dollars an episode, which, effectively, had already been spent. The network would make a handsome profit on the series, but wild-life—outside of Mick Lamington—was pretty much on the nose worldwide and they were losing money on everything else they

made. It was tough times for a wildlife-only cable network. The bottom line was, Mick's series had been keeping Pioneer afloat for six or seven seasons. *Kiss* was their flagship program and they literally couldn't afford to let it stop. They had no life insurance on him, because no insurance company would cover Mick—both because of the risks he took and his value to the network: tens of millions of American bucks, not BS Aussie dollars. I'd never quite grasped, until now, how truly rooted Pioneer was without him. I'd figured that they'd made so much, the rest from here on was cream. But that's not the way it works in business. You're only as good as your next season. Can't rest on your laurels when you've got none.

'Our marquee star,' Mandy added, as if I hadn't understood, though to be honest her input clouded it a little for me. I still couldn't work out what they were getting at. Sure, Mick's death was a bummer—a mega bummer—but that's life, isn't it? They couldn't computer-generate him, and even if they did, everyone knew he was dead. As Ned Clegg had told us, *everyone* knew, right down to the kiddies in the favelas of Rio. In Brazil, they'd refused to lower their flags to half-mast for the death of an ex-President, but they'd done it for Mick Lamington.

A major bummer. A bummerissimo. But what could you do? You couldn't replace him. Mick was the whole point of the show, wasn't he?

'I know what you're thinking,' Tim said. Shockingly, he got up and walked over to Phil and bummed a ciggie off him. Things were tense, I knew, but I hadn't realised how tense. Tim took a couple of deep drags. A party smoker, for sure.

'You're thinking,' he blew out his spirit, a column straight upwards, and it hung in the air like the World Trade Center just after it came down, 'you're thinking, how do we replace the irreplaceable?'

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‘And you’re right.’ Mandy stroked my knee. Her magenta fingernails, colour of a cunjevoy’s flesh, scratched the coarse hairs on my thigh. I could see she didn’t like it, stroking the leg of a man wearing shorts. But we were their lords and masters and she’d probably do a lot more to swing a deal. ‘He can’t be replaced,’ she said reverently. ‘And he won’t be replaced.’

‘Nevertheless,’ Tim said, donkey-rooting another ciggie off Phil. ‘Nevertheless, to tide ourselves over through this series, we’ll need an alternative host.’

‘An alternative host?’ I said. ‘You’re pulling my leg.’

‘Naturally there can be no replacement for Mick Lamington,’ Mandy said, all velvety chocolate. ‘And we’d never ask the alternative to be like Mick—never do anything like kiss the animals . . .’

‘We’ve retired the kiss,’ Tim said expansively, as if he’d taken control, asserted himself over cruel fate. ‘We’ve retired the whole character.’ Then, realising he might have gone too far, he smiled at me: just one long wet glistening white-toothed American smile, lasting and lasting as long as it took for the penny to drop.

‘I dunno . . .’ I mumbled. Speak the unspeakable . . . replace the irreplaceable . . . was there anything these superheroes couldn’t do?

‘Think,’ Tim said quietly. ‘It’s all about the conservation, mate. Look outside.’

We looked outside, over the zoo. Cicadas chirred, frogs croaked. I could hear the differences: not just cicadas, but a coordinated orchestra of yellow Mondays, green grocers, brown bakers, black princes. Not just frogs, but green trees, cane toads, marsh frogs, clown frogs, butterfly frogs. I could even hear rheobatrachus, the so-called ‘caviar frog’ that broods her eggs in her stomach and turns off her digestive juices until they hatch out through her mouth; and ah, there was the

noisiest of the lot, the marsupial frog, *Assa darlingtoni*, whose eggs, as they hatch into larvae, leap from the female to the male, the male raising them in his pouch. What a world, what a frog. But Tim Steam couldn't see or hear any of that. He was just trying to get me to say yes to his plan. Yes, it was all about the conservation and keeping the effort going, and I had more reason than anyone to maintain Mick's legacy and keep the money rolling in—more reason even than Tim and Mandy and Phil—but they still couldn't hear what I heard out that window.

'See, Frosty,' Mandy went on, cooing like a crested dove at my knee, 'we feel there's an opportunity here.' Everything's an opportunity, looked at the right way. This is what sets the buggers apart. 'Mick's persona . . . we get the feeling, now that we're spending a bit of quality time down here, that Mick's larger-than-life personality, well, it kinda embarrasses a lot of Australians. When we talk to people around here, they love Mick and all, but one thing they always say to us, when they find out we're Americans, is, "Mick gave you what you wanted to see, but us real Australians aren't like that."'

She couldn't quite say 'Aussies', much as she'd have liked to. But still, I couldn't help twigging to what she was on about.

'And we think, yeah, it's like—the biggest American exports in TV around the world, including Latin America and Africa and Asia, are—you know what they are?' Tim sat down on a kangaroo-fur pouf so he and Mandy had me circled. Phil was detached from the discussion, standing at the window smoking like a factory.

'*The A-Team* and *Baywatch*,' Tim said. 'Even now, in the twenty-first century. This is what the syndicated world wants to see in us Americans. And you know, it's embarrassing for us too. That's not what we really are. We'd like to give the world something that's *real*

about us.'

'Then maybe,' Mandy said, a catch in her voice, 'a few more people around the world would treat us nicer.'

'Yeah, so,' Tim said quickly, disagreeing with the note Mandy was striking, 'we know where you're—where these people out there,' he swept his hand abstractly towards the Kangazoo, 'are coming from.'

'We share your pain,' Mandy said, again not quite striking the right note. But I was getting the point. In fact, I was trying to figure out how soon, in the over-planned choreography of it all, I ought to interrupt them, let them know I'd arrived before them. They'd praised my smarts before, like they were surprised I could be so sharp. This old Aussie bushie, don't you worry, mate, I can see it coming.

'We share your feel for an opportunity,' Tim said, as if it was mine and not his. 'And we think, for an alternative host, we'd like someone completely different from Mick—someone who's a real Australian. Recognisable to the Australians. It's a gamble, but what have we got to lose? We can't create a new Mick out of thin air—'

'And we don't want to!' Mandy said excitedly, as if she'd won something.

'We want the fair dinkum Aussie bloke,' Tim said, sounding like a conservative politician trying to have a beer and a yarn in a miners' pub.

I nodded—more quiet sagacity to deepen the silence. Tim and Mandy were practically falling onto me. I guess I had to think about it, let it soak in. I was different from Mick, that's for sure. And, all modesty aside, I reckoned I was a more authentic expression of the Australian spirit. Mick could be a freak show at times, just giving the Americans what they wanted. Larger-than-life Aussie caricature, the Kiss and all. Maybe the world was ready for something truer

to life. Someone who would put the real stars—the animals, the wonders of our nature—back into front and centre. For too long the show had been about Mick, Mick, Mick. He'd got between the audiences and the animals, which should never be done. I respected the animals too much for that. I guess I loved them more than anything. And they could see that, the Americans. They were ready for me. Why not? There was nothing to lose.

'You love the animals more than anything,' Mandy said, an awestruck look on her face. Bloody hell, the meerkat was reading my mind. 'And that's what the rest of the series has got to be about: the animals.'

'The nature,' Tim corrected her.

'Cut it out, you guys,' Phil said. He walked to his desk—petrified jarrah propped on four African elephants' tusks—and stubbed out his latest ciggie in a cowrie-shell ashtray. His office was quite fugged up now.

Tim and Mandy looked at Phil like he was their boss. Maybe he was. In effect, he really was. He was pulling the strings.

'You don't have to over-egg the pudding,' Phil said, hopping up to ride the corner of his desk. His freckled white knee glowed like a full moon from the gap between his shorts and sock. 'Mate,' he said to me, 'you've been in this with Mick from the beginning. That's why you're here. We know you don't have any proprietorial rights over the program, and you've not done as well perhaps as you might have, financially, out of Mick's success.'

'The zoo's success,' I said, looking down at the bearskin. The grizzly's eyes were looking at me. They comforted me. They had more life in them than Phil's.

'Yeah, well, so that's why we wanted you in on this,' he said.

All of a sudden I wasn't sure. This all felt too heavy for me.

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Was I ready for it? To carry all the attention? To be accused of taking up the throne before it was cold? There'd be a backlash from fans, for sure: I'd be trying to steal Mick's glory. And there'd be all the personal appearances, all the celebrity BS. Ned Clegg would want me. Hollywood starlets all over me. Honest, I wasn't sure if I wanted it; and I wish to God that I'd had my chance to say that, to say *I don't want it, thanks but no thanks*, before it was too late.

But it was too late and they didn't give me a chance.

Mandy Rout took my gnarled hands in her little brown cat's paws and waited until I looked up into her yellow eyes. She'd had that thing done, botulism injected around them, to stop her from expressing all the wellness and softness of heart that was inside her.

'Frosty,' she purred, 'how do you feel about Glenn Mellon taking over from Mick?'

F. me. That came from out of an Arantje marsupial mouse's hole. How did I feel? I can tell you that straight: I felt nothing. I felt like I'd taken flight, like a wood swallow caught on an updraught. Like a seagull coasting after a 747. I was up heavenward, not spending an ounce of breath.

'You'll still have your segments,' Tim Steam cut in, speaking through his mole, which had taken right over now. 'No change at all. You'll probably have a somewhat enhanced role in the show, but we know you're comfortable with what you're doing, and you don't like change, and as you've always said, the animals come first.'

He was talking too much, like all good people when they're in the middle of committing an act of sheer bastardry. Bad people, on the other hand, relish it in silence. Phil was perched on his desk, striking up another full-strength durry, enjoying himself too much

to watch me too closely.

Well, f. them. The animals did come first. Glenn Mellon was tall, he was young, he'd been a Chippendale, he looked like Chesty Bond. The Americans would go bonkers over him, especially the girls. Maybe that was what Pioneer needed—a twelve-year-old poppet-led recovery. If there was one thing I'd learnt about Hollywood, it was that twelve-year-olds rule the world. We already had the boys, so why not the girls too? Glenn Mellon was movie-star material. Young. Rugged. And more nautical than Mick. Glenn's specialty was getting into a sleeveless wetsuit and showing off his muscles underwater. Sunlight rippled off him as he hoisted himself onto the deck. Glenn f.ing Mellon.

'Just one thing,' I said. 'What if it gets out about what Glenn did?'

Now Phil was glaring at me, as if I'd thrown the one spanner into the works that he'd been waiting for.

'Glenn did nothing,' he spat in my general direction.

'That's what I mean,' I said.

Tim and Mandy looked at each other.

'The circumstances of Mick's death are a tragedy,' Phil said. 'We don't need to go over and over it. The fans want to move on. It's poor taste to dig it over and over.'

'There is that,' I ruminated. Always reasonable, Frosty. Always reasonable. 'But what about the other thing he did?'

Tim and Mandy looked at each other, then at me.

'Smashing up that eel once they'd got it out of Mick's mouth,' I said. 'It was hardly the act of a man who, in his heart, puts the animals first.'

Once the fatal female eel had been extracted from the pulseless Mick, Glenn Mellon had pounced on it and pulverised it with the

boat's anchor. He'd belted and belted it until it was waxed onto the deck boards. Then he'd scraped it up with his foot and hurled it into the water.

'It wasn't an eel,' Phil said menacingly. 'It was a sea taipan.'

'Oh right,' I said. 'Don't these guys know what Glenn did?'

'Sure they do.' Phil stepped forward, ready to put an end to all this BS, finally showing his annoyance that I'd been given the courtesy of a hearing. 'They know that Glenn acted as a true friend, an angry man whose passions got the better of him.'

'And I have to say,' Tim Steam said reasonably, 'an act that was in tune with the feelings of many of your fellow countrymen.'

'Ah.' I nodded: the headless sea taipans on the beaches of Tassie. So they did know. They knew, and they didn't care. They saw it as an opportunity: Glenn Mellon, leader of the lynch mob. I guess he was more in tune with the times than I was. Just as Mick had always been more in tune than I was. I guess I'm just not a man who's in tune with anybody's times.

Tim, Mandy and Phil were leaving the office. They didn't care if I came with them or not. I had one more question, though, and it stopped them at the door.

'You reminded me that I don't have a financial interest,' I said. 'So I appreciate being told what you're doing. But,' I looked straight at Phil, 'has anyone asked Julie?'

Phil looked straight back at me. The Americans kind of shrunk away into the scenery. They were our bosses, but yeah, they were our servants. What a crazy world.

'Julie,' Phil said, 'has just lost her soulmate. I will handle this with the utmost delicacy.'

He'd learnt a lot of new words, Phil, and new ways of stringing them together, since he'd started hanging out with famous people.

‘Suppose I can congratulate Glenn?’ I said.

Phil shook his head. ‘Nobody knows about this except the four of us here. I’d appreciate it, Frost, if you kept it that way. We’ll keep you in the loop. Now, Tim, Mandy, let’s just keep our fingers crossed that there are some of those local oysters left. Chef’s done them with soy sauce and wasabi. We can give you a doggie bag for your trip.’

‘Ooh, I don’t do oysters,’ Mandy said.

Their voices faded. I took a moment in Phil’s office to steady myself. I would have taken one of his ciggies if he hadn’t finished the pack. It was some day, all right.

A few minutes later I went down to the reception centre and began to look for Sheena. A live Aussie bush band had started up, the pollies had left, and the place, filled now with staff and family and friends, the real hard core, was hopping.

FOUR

In the weeks after Mick's memorial service I ghosted aimlessly around the joint like the last broad-faced potoroo, waiting to join my species in extinction. Phil and Pioneer wanted to keep the news about Glenn Mellon a secret until they were ready; until, as Tim put it, the time was 'seemly' to 'move on'. Until then, I was meant to stay mum. I was interviewed once, for the Kangazoo in-house newsletter, and then the news cycle rolled on and there were no more requests for the Best Mate. Phil was doing twenty or thirty interviews a day still—he figured it was the best way to 'stay on message', and nobody was arguing. He seemed worried about Ranger being interviewed and spilling her guts about her dad, but as much as Ranger disliked Mick she disliked the General Public and its media a whole lot more. She wasn't going to spill a single bean.

I had told Sheena, pulling her aside at the reception, or wake, or whatever it was called. She was in her widow's weeds: strappy black dress and what they call a fascinator, a kind of flyscreen over

the top half of her face. Not even Julie could outshine my Sheena. I got her into a corner and spat it out as quickly as I could. I still didn't know how it would affect me. I was in shock over Mick's death, in shock over this, layers and layers of shock and I didn't know which one was going to break the surface first.

'They're going to do the rest of the series with Glenn Mellon up front,' I said. And that was it.

Sheena's face was like timelapse landscape photography. A whole day's worth of weather passing over it, but in the end, not much change. Night into night. She didn't look at me. She was casting her eyes over the crowd.

'Glenn Mellon,' she said. 'And when you think, there's Brock McCabe, Don Simpson, Sharpie Phelps, Deano Rudd and Steve Heath to choose from . . .' She waved a hand to indicate the presence of these names in the room, as if they were contestants in a beauty pageant. 'The cream of the cream of Australia's nature presenters, and they've gone for Glenn Mellon.'

She could barely disguise the disgust on her mouth, as if she'd stepped into a fruitbat forest and looked up at the wrong moment.

'Not to mention present company,' I said, to remind her. It gave me heart to be able to make a kind of a joke.

Sheena wouldn't dignify this with a reply. It was obvious. Present company should have been top of the list.

'Glenn Mellon,' she repeated, trying the words out.

'He's a fresh face, a free agent,' I said, trying to conciliate. I don't know why. 'Or was.'

She let out a long sigh. I could tell she'd had a few Bundies already, while I was in Phil's office. I couldn't blame her. Was dying for one myself.

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‘So for us,’ she said, ‘nothing changes.’

I didn’t need to say anything. My silence was enough.

Over the next few weeks I needed more than silence to keep a lid on Sheena, who’s always been hotter in the passions than me. I’m not called Frosty Westlake for nothing. Although I was still walking around in a daze, I got over the shock of losing Mick. With Mick, see, I’d already lost him a few years before. My Mick, the Mick I’d grown up with, the Mick who’d saved my life in every way—that Mick had gone off somewhere, taken his leave, back when the show started to get big in the States. It wasn’t that the public Mick wasn’t what he seemed to be—what you saw was pretty much what you got—but there’s something about stardom that steals the soul, as though that Aboriginal superstition about photographs is actually true, but it’s not one photo that does it, it’s the constant repetition, snap after snap, until you’re all snapped up. One of Mick’s Hollywood actor mates, I can’t remember which, told Mick once: ‘Celebrity is a mask that eats into the face.’ A rare glimpse of truth coming out of that place. Hollywood, I mean. But that actor was just repeating a line; he might have been miserable about fame now and then but he needs it like an addict needs a fix, they all do. They know it’s killing them, but they’re hooked on it.

I’d seen celebrity eating into Mick’s face for years, and by the time he died he was eaten out. Some nights in the edit suite with me and Phil and the editor, Mick would be gawking like a kid at the Mick on-screen. And he’d go: ‘Look what he’s doing! What’s he gunna do next?’ It touched me, that did. It was too sad for words. Mick wasn’t big-headed about fame, and he wasn’t talking about himself in the third person like he had airs and graces. It was just

that when he saw Mick Lamington on-screen, he didn't see himself. He saw a character, a mask. He was able to put himself in the character and in the audience at the exact same time, and that was his genius, I spose. But it left me wondering: where, when he stepped across between character and audience, did Mick go? What crack had he fallen through?

Now it didn't matter any more. Mick was scattered in the South Pacific and we had a f.ing s.fight on our hands. Five weeks after the memorial service, Phil orchestrated the announcement that Glenn Mellon was stepping into Mick's flippers and there was a bit of a mixed public reaction. Some people were saying we should have just drawn the curtain when Mick died. Sheena said, if they weren't going to invite me to step up to the plate, why wouldn't they replace Mick with a ready-made star like Brock McCabe, whose specialty was crocumentaries, or Sharpie Phelps, the desert warrior?

But where I'd seen these guys at the memorial service as minor chiefs paying tribute to the king, Phil had seen them as Mafia godfathers waving off one of their rivals, calculating how to muscle their way onto his patch. None of them had ever been as big as Mick, certainly not in the States, and the way Phil saw it, they'd only come to line up for a slice.

Phil got asked the question at the press event when he named Glenn Mellon as the successor. Why not one of the established nature-TV heroes? He deflected the question with flattery. 'They're already big names in their own right,' he said. 'Grafting them into Mick's show would be like trying to replace Mick Jagger with David Bowie. They've all had great careers carving out their own separate identities. I wish them luck continuing to do so.'

Such BS. Sure, they had their specialties. Brock McCabe—crocodiles. Sharpie Phelps—desert animals, everything from dingos to

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thorny devils. Don Simpson—snakes. Steve Heath—birds of prey. But the problem wasn't that they were too big. They were too small. Either has-beens like Sharpie and Simmo, or not-yets like Brockie and Stevo. Deano Rudd was the only one who had any kind of profile in America, which was where it really mattered. Deano was the only naturalist whose status was anywhere near Mick's. Deano'd done Hollywood movies appearing As Himself. Deano fascinated the Yanks because he did spiders, the deadliest Australians of all, something that really put the creeps into you—funnel-webs, redbacks, mouse spiders, the whole eight legs. But not even Deano was the complete package, like Mick had been.

The truth was, Phil preferred someone he could push around. The logic with Glenn Mellon, who was a scuba guy, was that they could build him up over time. He could be another Ben Cropp, or Ron Taylor—sharks were a bit seventies, but as Tim Steam said, the seventies were getting big again. Who knows? Glenn Mellon could fuse retro and current via the great white. Worth a try.

Not that Sheena could be convinced. Sheena wanted—needed—me to be the replacement. It was a question of dignity and pride, both of which Sheena had in spades. It was a question of justice. She has a f.ing keen sense of justice, I'll give you that. I couldn't be overlooked yet again, not after all these years. And finally, it was a question of money. We'd never had points. I'd cut bad deals—or I'd been cut out of the good ones—from the very start, from day one. We didn't own our house, we couldn't send our kids to private schools, we didn't have a car, we couldn't afford holidays outside of work. It was lucky I was such a good-natured (or, in Sheena's head, *weak*) bugger. I'd been turned into a zoo animal all these years under Mick's wing. I had his patronage, and as long as he was there I was financially okay, we'd be looked after. I'd grown

soft, I'd lost my survival skills, and now I was being turned out into the wild.

All this argumentation, this gunk, was bubbling away under Sheena's surface. It scared me, to be honest. I didn't know in what direction she'd explode: against me, against Phil, against Glenn Mellon. Or something worse, something public. I had to keep a lid on her.

Anyway, all this is by way of explaining my behaviour in the weeks after Mick's death, when we moved back into production for the final nine episodes of the series. My behaviour, I can admit now, was frankly unacceptable. But somewhere inside me I knew it was damage control. If I carried on like a pork chop, it would attract a lot of heat to me. And if it went to me, it was sucked away from Sheena.

So I acted like a pure s.head. We all went down to Tasmania to take up where Mick had left off. We had to keep filming, even if what we were to make was a kind of a snuff movie. Mick was watching over us, telling us the show had to go on. So Phil said, anyway. He'd long had the direct line to Mick. I was to shoot some segments on Bruny Island, while Glenn was to do the big daredevil stuff with sharks and whales as well as a sentimental journey back to that nest of sea taipans for the final episode. Phil came down too, and Tim and Mandy sent out a couple of Pioneer Network flunkies to keep an eye on things. If their station was going down the tubes, they wanted a heads-up. Everything was riding on how well Glenn performed in Mick's place.

When I was able to go off alone with a crew, I was happy. That's the way things always have been. The wildlife comes first. We went to Bruny to get some footage of a southern-crested bluebill. I know they're not the world's most glamorous bird, but they have

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a unique set of rituals governing their mating and nesting behaviour. For a start they're monogamous: they pair off early and literally never let each other out of sight. Their young leave the nest at eight weeks, on their first flight, and they never return. So the adult parents need each other for company. They wade in creekbeds and damp forest floors and feed on yabbies and snails, picking them up in their bills and smashing the shells on wood or rock. Their eyes are covered with a special membrane, like welder's goggles, to protect them while they're working. Interestingly, male bluebills hate other males. Jealous buggers. If they see another male—even if one of their own sons wanders back—they'll hack him to pieces. This could endanger the species, so nature has worked out its own defence: juvenile male bluebills have the golden plumage and grey-green crest of the mature female. It's only when they've found their mate that the crest falls out and the plumage changes to the mature male's blue-black. What a world, eh?

I found real peace while we were doing the filming, but my segments only ran to a few minutes at a time so we couldn't afford more than a one-day shoot, especially not with the Pioneer bean counters looking over our shoulders. So I got hauled back to the main action—the shoots of Glenn in the water—and because we were now on a much tighter leash budget-wise I was dragooned into helping up with rigging, set-building and general advisory work. They needed my experience and I came cheap.

But I wasn't easy on them. There's a certain relief in being able to be grumpy when you're used to holding it in. It comes at a certain age, I spose, but I'd turned into one of those men. Everything the crew did wasn't up to scratch. Glenn's ideas for angles and set-ups were C.rap. We weren't going to the right places, and when we did we were scaring off the animals. The bait was wrong for great

whites, the whale hunt was a wild goose chase, and the idea for Glenn to plant a kiss on the sea taipan after all—forgiveness!—was in my view thoroughly misguided and I let them know.

These critical feelings weren't new to me. I've always had a mind of my own. But when Mick was around, I was careful to keep my lip well and truly buttoned. It was a matter of knowing my place in the pecking order. And if I behaved myself, they'd have no reason to chuck me. Now, though, without Mick's steady hand, they were f.ing everything up and it made me f.ing mad and I wasn't keeping it to myself. I got a reputation as 'doing it tough' or 'struggling with Mick's death', when in truth I was only letting fly a lot of the things I'd been thinking for a long, long time.

In the second week of the shoot Phil Barrows had to take me aside and give me a dressing-down, but he wasn't fooling anybody except the Pioneer Network observers and Glenn Mellon himself. Phil had no authority over me, none at all. I had to stand there and take it from him, but he could tell behind my aviators what I thought of him. We were both going through the motions, for the good of the series. For Mick's legacy. To keep it alive.

I know there were rumours that I was behaving the way I was out of resentment against Glenn. All I can say to that is to state quite clearly: I meant no harm to Glenn. I only wanted to help the show survive Mick's death. I set high standards. So did Mick, and I saw myself as the guardian of those standards now that he was gone. There was nothing personal between me and Glenn. I wished him the best in his new role. I can't make it clearer than that.

Anyway, those rumours stopped, quick smart, in the second week of the shoot.

FIVE

The climax of the Tasmanian sequence was to be Glenn's return to the scene of the tragedy. As the main witness to Mick's death (aside from the twelve crew members who weren't running screaming out of the water), Glenn would relive those last moments. We would tactfully cut in the usable footage from the day. The original disc, showing Mick choking to death and burbling his last agonised cries, was in the possession of the police, whose investigation was still underway and would be for some months yet. Phil had made a copy, and there was much speculation about whether the public would ever get to see it. Of course the answer was no. We couldn't do it to Julie or the kids.

Since Mick's death, Phil had kept Julie dosed up on Rohypnols and other tranqs, of which he had an ample supply. He kept them in a jellybean jar in his office. As long as I'd known it, the nature scene had been pretty drugged up—wildlife people often choose this career after some life-changing acid trip. It's like landscape

gardeners: all about the ‘laid-back outdoor lifestyle’. Julie Lamington, though, had always been too smart to get in over her head, except maybe one time, years ago. But now she was catatonic in the marital bedroom, sedated for the duration. It was like Phil’s final victory.

As for the eel footage, Ranger wouldn’t have bothered to watch it, but Hunter was a vulnerable little guy at the best of times and you didn’t want him to go through seeing what I’d seen the one time I watched it in Phil’s office. Nevertheless, Phil was tempted—*real* tempted—to use it in the doco, but in the end circumstances intervened.

So, Glenn was all teed up to go back to the scene of the tragedy. But first he had to shoot his big moment, the highlight of the series that would herald the arrival of a new superstar: his encounter with the great white colony off Cape D’Entrecasteaux.

As I think I said, I was wandering around in a bit of a blear after Mick’s death. So people cut me some slack—not that I deserved it. While we were setting up a shoot near Cape D’Entrecasteaux, I blew up at Glenn Mellon in front of the whole crew, telling him he was ‘a work-experience presenter’ and he wasn’t ‘fit to zip up Mick Lamington’s wetsuit’. All Glenn had done was correct me when I was fixing a lighting umbrella near a Tasmanian devil’s burrow—and he was right as it turned out, I had it in the wrong place. So my outburst was unforgivable on more than one front. But Phil gathered the team together at the campsite and made a compassionate speech, and everyone acknowledged that I was under a lot of stress due to Mick’s death and was probably finding it hard to keep moving on. ‘Yet move on we must,’ Phil said, glaring at me.

But Mellon *was* a work-experience presenter. The guy couldn’t read a cue card and talk at the same time, he kept fluffing his lines

even when he was standing still, and, most importantly, his way with animals had no touch, no feel. We who do it call it 'listening': when you get so in tune with the animal, you listen to it to the exclusion of everything else. You forget the cameras and crew, you forget the entire world, everything's shrunk down to just yourself and the animal. It's a beautiful feeling when you listen. Sometimes Mick had it, even though he talked so much. That was the great thing about Mick—he could talk and perform and clown about and be a TV star, but he was just throwing up smoke and fart; underneath it all, deep inside himself, he was alone with that animal and listening to what it had to say. Beautiful.

I can't believe I just said that. Compared with a real naturalist, Mick was an impostor. What he got, he learnt. None of it was instinctive. He did it by force of will. But it's all relative, and to my educated eyes Glenn Mellon was making Mick look like David f.ing Attenborough. Mellon was *deaf*. Sure, he was a heck of a good-looking bloke and was bound to sell us a lot of DVDs into the female market, and in time he'd become our Romeo of the Undergrowth, our Most Eligible Bachelor of the Wilds, but J f.ing C, he was a dopy bugger.

We had to do some paperwork on equipment we were having freighted down from Queensland, and when he was filling in the boxes Glenn saw that there were two columns: one Import, the other Export. As it was only coming interstate, the equipment was obviously neither. But Glenn was stumped.

He said, 'It's not Import, is it?'

Barely holding my temper, I said, 'No, it's not Import. It's coming from Queensland.'

'Okay,' Glenn said, knuckling down, and all of a sudden I could see him hunched over his school exam papers, putting in a hundred

and ten per cent for his score of thirty per cent. 'Okay,' he said as he scrawled. 'It's Export then.'

The equipment I'm referring to was the shark cage that we kept at the Kangazoo. We were flying it down for Glenn's shoot with the great whites. We'd located the colony and they were in breeding season—some particularly nasty and aggressive behaviour going on judging by our early recce—so all was spot-on for the shoot.

The shark cage arrived in its flat pack nice and sound, notwithstanding the slight confusion in the freight documentation. On the morning of the shoot, I was assigned to rig up the cage. This was what I was reduced to: a rigger for our new superstar. I'd done all my segments and was just there as free labour, as I let everyone know loud and clear.

Anyway, down to work. A shark cage is a beautifully simple device. A six-walled cube, one of them a gate. Each wall is made of eight parallel reinforced steel/carbon-fibre bars, tested to ten thousand pounds per square inch of pressure and—I've seen this in the plant, which is in America—put under the stress of a rocket-fired steel-and-rubber shark, a tonne in weight, propelled at a hundred and twenty kilometres per hour. It's quite a show, let me tell you. I've seen some angry great whites in my time, but that crash-test shark doesn't come off too happy after six goes against the cage, that's for sure. The cage is also galvanised against corrosion, dropped from great heights, given the full workout for quality control. You don't want it to bust in the money shot, and they never do.

To assemble one, it's not that you need a licence, but normally we have a cross-checking procedure on our shoots so that a 'buddy' goes over all the assembler's work. This time, we didn't. First of all, our budget cuts meant we were short on crew. And secondly, it

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was being assembled by our most experienced rigger, a man who, at that moment, nobody wanted to go near.

I remember the scene crystal-clear. We were motoring out to this offshore bombora where six mature great whites and six babies were waiting for Glenn. It's bloody rare to get so many of this endangered species in the one place, so our hopes were high for a red-hot shoot. The mood on *Kiss It* was as buoyant as it'd been since we'd lost Mick. A few of the team were starting to see the future, I spose. We'd all keep our jobs, Glenn would keep the flag flying, and Mick's flame would keep burning.

So was my head—burning, that is. As I was sitting there in the stern putting together the shark cage, I was off on one of my anti-Glenn thought trains. Why him? Okay, I knew why him—he was young, he looked like the lovechild of Chesty Bond and Pamela Anderson, he had a big innocent smile, and he was different enough from Mick for Pioneer Network to be able to flog him as the New Generation, not just a fill-in. That was why him. But it f.ing peed me off. Glenn was like a blow-up plastic doll when you get it into bed: or so I've heard. He had all the equipment but none of the X-factor. If I'd been Pioneer and Phil Barrows, I'd have put Glenn up front instead of me too. For the merchandising and whatnot. But that didn't make it any easier. It still wasn't fair. What was Glenn but a parasite, a Johnny-come-lately riding on Mick's coat-tails? When had Glenn Mellon paid his dues? Where were the hours and years Glenn had spent doing someone else's s.work, putting up with someone else's moods, keeping his place in line, copping all the heat but doing it all for the animals, the nature? Where was Glenn's conservation record? Far as I could see, he was a male model in a

wetsuit, not an authentic naturalist. He had no scientific training, no genuine love of wildlife and, in case I haven't mentioned it, he had a tin ear.

So I was stewing over all this while my body went through the motions of assembling the shark cage. There's only one point of weakness in a shark cage, which is obviously the gate. That's why when you attach the cage to the chains that lower it into the water, you have the gate on the top. Great whites don't usually dive-bomb a cage. They come from the side and up from below, but rarely from above. So rule one is, make sure the gate's on top.

The opening mechanism of the gate has to be simple. If something goes wrong, the diver needs to get out of there quick smart. So the fastening mechanism is even simpler than a kiddies' playground gate. You have an L-shaped latch that falls on the outside of the frame—so that if it's pushed from the outside, the gate can't open. It can only be pushed open from the inside. Then you have a simple magnet to keep it shut. It doesn't need to be any more than that, because it's the strength of the cage itself that keeps the diver safe. You don't need to worry about a shark fiddling a complex snib, and you don't want a panicked diver having to. You just keep it simple: an L-shaped bracket and a magnet.

That's all straightforward if the cage is properly assembled and all six sides are locked into place in the right order. It's a simple tongue-and-groove operation. Easy. Like whacking up a bookshelf from f.ing Ikea.

SIX

Some of the publicity after the event said that Glenn Mellon came to a grisly and shocking end, mauled by a great white shark that rammed its way into the cage. I happen to know that's not the case. Glenn went down in the cage with the camera fixed to his helmet, we threw some chum into the water to get the whites fired up, and it was all over in less than thirty seconds. One of the adult females went directly at Glenn in the cage, and the force of the cage gate opening crushed Glenn against the bars on the opposite side. He was knocked out cold, and my information is that the cause of death was chest and head injuries suffered from the cage, not the shark. Of course the sharks made a meal of him once the cage was breached and he was minced against the walls. But in case any of Glenn's family and friends out there are still labouring under the misinformation of this typical media beat-up, let me say it loud and clear. He never faced the agonising death of being ripped apart by an angry chummed-up bunch of great whites. He died swiftly,

without any pain, quick as a hammer blow to the head. The sharks just finished him off.

We got it all on film, but, like the disc of Mick's death, this one also went to the police. After Phil Barrows had made his own copy. Unlike Mick, Glenn Mellon suffered no pain.

Because of my poor attitude towards Glenn—the rubbishings to his face and behind his back, the reprimand I'd copped from Phil in front of the crew—everyone went easy on me after the incident. Also, I was the one who'd misassembled the shark cage. All the crew figured I must be feeling like absolute dog s., the lowest of the low, so I could tell they were soft-peddalling.

Phil put me on a first-class seat home and organised a limo to pick me up from the airport. He told me to take 'stress leave' for as long as I wanted. When I said goodbye at Hobart airport, he gave me a hug. He had a lot on his plate. A second dead presenter inside a month and a half, the media to hose down, the police to deal with, Glenn's family to be told, along with all the usual crew and budget hassles. Poor old Phil. I'd have felt sorry for him, except that when he pulled out of our embrace his true feelings were written all over his face. He couldn't give a s. about Glenn or me or the tragedy that had struck—his mind was whirring like a see-through Swatch. He was thinking, *How am I going to deal with Pioneer and where are we gunna find a new presenter to finish the series?* I guess you've got to admire the man's professionalism.

I, on the other hand, had to get home. Sheena had heard all about Glenn. Phil had phoned her. She'd put the kids to bed by the time I got back, even though I'd have liked to see them, just give them a hug and not let go. Roddy was four and Rosie three.

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The lights of my life, that pair. How could I get through this without them?

And Sheena, of course. She was as tender with me as Phil and the crew had been. Like Phil, she had an ulterior motive. A bit different from Phil's, but.

She got me to take a shower—I hadn't washed since Glenn had copped it, which, hard for me to believe, had been the same day, fourteen hours ago—and waited for me in the family room. We lived in a two-bedroom, open-plan demountable in the grounds of the Kangazoo, where we'd been for eight years, behind the Lamingtons' place, which was somewhat more substantial. A few of the other zoo staff also lived in demountables. One big happy family.

As Sheena will tell anyone in range, I'm not the world's best dad. I'm a good-time Charlie, a soft touch. After my shower, I couldn't help popping into their room and waking them up. Rosie, warm as a fresh bread roll, stretched her arms out for a cuddle and lisped 'Kiss?' without opening her eyes. Like her mum, Rosie has a love affair with sleep. I laid her back down and reached to the top bunk, hauling Rodney upright. He rubbed his eyes and looked at me sternly. 'Daddy, you were late,' he said. It always stumps me, how unsurprised they are to see me. Somehow I half-expect them to forget me if I'm away more than a day.

'But I'll be up early with you tomorrow,' I said.

Rod asked for a drink of water. When I came back in from the bathroom, he was coughing in a high-low, two-tone wheeze. The water calmed him down. Jeez, I thought, Sheena'll have my guts for garters if she knows I've woken them up.

'Don't tell Mummy I came in, okay?'

Rod took a last gulp and handed the cup back.

'I love you, Daddy.'

I was a little dry-throated myself as I went into the family room picking out my ears with the end of my towel. Sheena had filled the room with candles, a ritual she usually saved for more romantic occasions. Usually? Years ago. I still remembered, but. She was sitting on the floor with her legs tucked under her. Like me, she was wearing a bathrobe. In a way it did feel romantic, but Sheena was heavily solemn and sweet. She was performing a little tea ceremony to finish off the night.

‘You don’t have to sneak around,’ she said.

‘Eh?’

‘I heard you go in. Frosty, you can’t . . .’

I cut in. ‘Rod just said he loved me.’

‘Frosty, it took me so long to settle them down, if they’re awake again it’s your job to . . .’

‘Can’t remember him ever saying that,’ I interrupted her again. ‘Can’t imagine where he got it from.’

Sheena’s mouth twitched. ‘We don’t talk like that in this house.’

‘Other kids, must’ve been. Or TV.’

‘You never know where they pick these things up.’

As she poured the tea, I stood in front of her and looked out the main window through the stand of casuarinas dividing us from Mick’s place. The Lamingtons’ house was dark, as it had been most nights since his death, except for the bedroom windows. They went to their separate rooms early. I could imagine them all in there. Julie sitting on her bed with the remote in her hand, watching the umpteenth repeat of some *Kiss* DVD. Mick had been a television star for a long time, and probably Julie thought watching him on TV was actually bringing him back to life, or the sort of life he’d led, in some magical way. She could pretend he was off on a shoot. Like a child, Julie had to believe that he’d ‘gone away’ but would be coming back. In Ranger’s

room, a pulsing milky blue glow: the brat was playing a computer game or more likely participating in one of the Mick Lamington chat rooms on the internet. Little f.ing creep. She used to pose as a fan, nobody knowing who she was, and pour s. on Mick, cackling away when all the hazers came out with their death threats. I guess in her way it was a kind of homage. And Hunter, the kid, his room lit up the brightest, like he needed his ceiling light plus all his lamps on. I couldn't even begin to imagine what he was doing in there.

'Milk?'

I sat down next to Sheena, leaning back against the couch, stretching my legs out on the carpet. By first-world standards our place was a s.hole: couch with springs poking through, carpet an ecosystem of mites and lice. Queensland isn't kind on human habitation if it doesn't have some money behind it.

'Nah, just black, thanks.'

Sheena handed me my tea. The whole set was white with blue Burmese lettering around it. I'd brought it back for her five years earlier, when I'd gone to Burma to shoot some very unusual lizard life. Mick had been huge with the ruling junta there. Several of the generals and their kids were diehard fans, so we were invited in and escorted everywhere and given an enormous entourage to spy on us. The generals weren't worried about state secrets; they were fascinated by what Mick ate, when he went to bed, what soap he used in the shower. They later flogged his bedsheets on eBay, I heard. For all the weirdness of the place, it was fun doing the lizards. The female Burmese tergiman, a relative of our blue-tongue, has no legs, would you believe? Once she's found a mate, she rides around on his back. Great stuff, though the spies got on my wick after a while and the hardest part of the job was stopping the local crewies from eating the wildlife.

‘You okay?’ Sheena said in a low voice, almost like she was speaking to herself.

I just wanted to sit and listen to the cicadas. When Sheena and I were first together, I taught her how to identify them from their chirrups. Anyone could tell a black prince from a brown baker from a green grocer by looking at them, but you had to be a real specialist to know them by sound. Before long Sheena knew them better than I did. She was the ultimate quick learner, and she took to the nature of our country like a possum takes to night air and starlight. But that was in our romance’s first blush. Things had changed a few years ago. I hadn’t been joking, really, about what Rod had said. He’d never have heard ‘I love you’ between me and Sheena. We meant it, for sure, but we never said it any more.

The air tonight was a marketplace of grocers, garden variety. I was home. Standing up, I went to the window again. I told her what I remembered. It was good to get it off my chest.

‘I wasn’t thinking. I was lost in my own head and not concentrating. I’ve put those cages together a thousand times and I spose I figured I could rely on my, you know, my muscle memory. I mean, they’re indestructible. I’ve gone over this in my head ever since it happened, and I can only explain it by . . . I just didn’t follow the correct ordering. They’re like Rubik’s f.ing cubes them cages, and I must have put the gate side where side B is meant to go, and that put everything out of whack, so the gate was inside out and not on top. I mean, the way I set it up, a kid could have opened that cage. I left him for dead. I really f.ed it up, love. And as I was doing it, assembling the cage, I was sitting there thinking how much I hated him. Poor bugger.’

Only the cicadas replied. There was a yellow Monday out there somewhere. It was a muggy Queensland night, the air smelling of

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kangaroo s. and date palms. Even though I'd had a cold shower, the sweat had already collected on my body like a greasy film.

'You'd have thought . . .' Sheena began, but had a frog in her throat. 'You'd have thought Glenn would have noticed it was different when he got in.'

I shook my head. 'You've met him.'

'But wouldn't he have been used to getting into the cage through the top? Wouldn't he have noticed that it opened inwards instead of outwards when he got in?' She spoke with a kind of clipped urgency, as if she wasn't reviewing the event but speculating on it ahead of time, hypothesising. As if it hadn't happened. As if it was a plan.

I didn't want to speak ill of the dead. But what the f. He was dead.

'You could never fathom, in a million years, how thick that boy is. Was. He wouldn't have noticed, no. He never noticed anything. Maybe he was nervous about the shoot, about the show. It was tough for him, he had a lot on his mind. Lot of pressure. Being out in front. Following in Mick's footsteps. Big shoes to fill. You wouldn't wish that kind of pressure on anybody. That's the only way I can explain it. And probably,' now I turned to look at her, 'probably he trusted me so much that even if he noticed the cage was put together differently, he'd have thought, *It's Frosty that assembled it, it's fine.*'

Even though she was participating in the conversation, I could tell Sheena wasn't hearing me. She was hearing some other voice, some Sheena-voice. I could rabbit on about Glenn all night and she wouldn't hear a word because she already knew the real story.

Letting out a sigh I looked back out the window. Soon I felt a rustle behind me and her arms were around my waist. Her hands

were undoing the cord of my bathrobe. When it dropped, I could feel she'd taken hers off too.

It had been a long time—five years if my maths is up to scratch—since Sheena had wanted it this way: on the world's most uncomfortable couch, here among the candles, not just the location but the way, the ways, the tempo and the volume and the f.ing *life* in her. She was a woman possessed, like my old Sheena, the one I'd first known, but with all the pent-up years in between letting themselves out. She did it like she'd just heard the world was about to end. I spose I should have enjoyed it, but I felt myself standing outside and watching this beautiful woman devour me like I was not just a man but Mankind, the Earth. To tell the truth, though it was good and everything, she was scaring me. Terrifying me.

Afterwards we lay in each other's arms with springs punching up into our backs. My head was still swirling, like it was stuck, replaying the scene on the boat where I'd put together the cage out of the flat pack. I couldn't think of the shocking red flower blossoming in the water half a minute after Glenn had gone down. Only about my own actions.

'Thank you,' Sheena whispered.

I tried a good-natured chuckle, my voice wanting to be as normal as possible. 'It's me who should be thanking you.'

'I don't mean that,' she said. I knew what 'that' meant. But what did *she* mean?

'What do you mean then?'

She twirled the hairs on my chest. 'Oh, you know. I just wanted to thank you.'

I felt a cold wind blow inside me, from my lungs out against my ribcage and up into my scalp. Oh J f.ing C. That was what *that* meant. That was why she'd been so soft with me, so tender, and then

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so wild, letting it all go. Bound to me for the rest of our days. Living on the brink. One man and one woman, clotted together in blood.

‘No.’ I shook my head. Her hair was tickling my nose. I blew it away. ‘No, Sheena.’

‘It doesn’t matter.’ She was all balm. She had been making love with something, or someone, bigger than me, and now I bloody well knew what it was. Someone who would do *that* for us, for her, for our family. ‘It doesn’t matter,’ she purred. ‘You don’t have to say anything.’

What could I say that would straighten her out? My own wife. My beloved. Mother of my children. What could I say? I just lay there like a stunned mullet. Was there any point in denials? She wasn’t going to believe me. As she’d shown amply before, in the past few years, my beloved Sheena had a powerful imagination: she could imagine anything into existence. If she believed, now, that her husband was a man who would intentionally set up a shark cage that would kill Glenn Mellon, well, it was no wilder than some of the things she’d believed before.

‘I didn’t, Sheen—’

‘Sshhhh . . .’ She didn’t want me to spoil the moment. And when I thought about it, neither did I.

SEVEN

It never suited us that the world know this, but Mick, before he was Mick Lamington, was a city-and-suburban kid.

What the Americans want from a ‘real Australian’ is a strip of lean weatherbeaten beef jerky wrapped around the salty spirit of a dry continent. As Mick told me, around the time he found The Secret, Australians wanting to crack the States are always fretting about whether they’re being Too Australian or Not Australian Enough. Yanks want it both ways. But what Mick discovered—The Secret—is that what they want from us is what they can never give themselves. They don’t want our cities and suburbs, they don’t want our cowboys, they don’t want our bandits, they don’t want our country and western—‘What they want,’ Mick said, ‘is something they can’t fake.’ That was what Mick gave them. That was what he turned himself into. Where he ended up. But it wasn’t where he started out.

Mick Lamington, their Mick Lamington, your Mick Lamington, was a bush kid from deepest Queensland, raised alongside

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the mangrove swamps and the saltwater crocs and the sharks and the box jellyfish, the savage feral child raised amid the man-eaters. Not that we ever said so in as many words—Mick never answered questions about his childhood and youth, and Phil put it out that there were wounds back there too deep to risk reopening—so Mick's background was a blank screen for the fans to project their imaginations onto. We let them imply the story.

My Mick, whose name was Michael Hollis, was a private-school boy brought up in a Sydney suburb as savage and swampy and death-infested as Peyton Place. It's true that the Hollises' house, a great sandstone-walled pile with swimming pool, tennis court, sauna, billiards room and fish pond as well as rooms for eating and sleeping and watching TV, was on the edge of a national park and saw its share of city-fringe wildlife. But most of what Michael knew of animals came from the box, and he was plenty more familiar with cheetahs and elephants and wildebeest than he was with monotremes and marsupial mice.

You couldn't miss Michael Hollis at that all-boys school, two-thirds day boys, one-third boarders. He was a figure that sounds made up—more so than the figure of himself that he actually did make up. Truth is stranger than fiction. The first day I was in class with Michael, he won a spelling bee against a guy called Felix Henry. Michael won it with 'apogee'. Felix Henry had nothing in his life but spelling, so it wasn't really fair.

Michael had plenty else. He was our school captain in sixth grade. Nobody would have run against him. He was top of English, top of maths, top of science, top of history. His Achilles heel was languages, but he was faking his bad German just so that people wouldn't hate him for being top of everything. Japanese artisans put a flaw into their work to keep it from being perfect. Michael did the same.

Perfect? How can a kid be perfect? I once heard the school chaplain say solemnly to Michael, 'If you were only a Christian, you would be the perfect young man.' See, I thought Michael was perfect anyway, and perfect in his modest response to the chaplain. He laughed his head off. 'Perfect? If you only knew!' See, only someone who is perfect can be so upfront about his shortcomings.

He wasn't a Christian, except when he was up on stage as head prefect reading from Peter's Epistle to the Apostles. But he was a good guy, you know? He topped everything and took it in his stride. He was the captain of the cricket team and vice-captain of the rugby team, he was a star long jumper and butterflyer, he was on the debating team and the student council and did his Duke of Edinburgh—your total all-rounder. He was happy and confident and easy to get along with, he was funny and he was on every kid's pedestal, even the outsiders who wouldn't have liked liking him. But there you go. It's only looking back that I realise how f.ing lonely he must have been.

I never knew why I was his best friend. Michael Hollis was rich, talented and popular. I was just goofy. I've never been able to put myself in Michael's shoes and see me as he saw me. But that didn't matter. I felt blessed, and wasn't going to cruel it. I was the most loyal friend he could have.

The first time I went to his house, I was a little shocked by his parents. We were twelve. Mr and Mrs Hollis weren't quite ancient, but they were archaeological. Michael's old man was a businessman who'd made his money in commercial kitchens. Mrs Hollis was North Shore born-with-it. Mr Hollis cruised around the house with a whisky lodged in the beverage-holder otherwise known as his hand. He must have been in his mid-sixties. Mrs Hollis was in her mid-fifties, and although the old man must have seen her

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as his child bride, she was still the oldest mother I knew. She was a hatchet-faced hawk who veered between sweet and sour with no in-between. Mr Hollis was all elderly indulgence, and Mrs Hollis tried to make up for it, but could only manage it in bursts and then gave up. Michael was their baby, the last of four, younger than the third by ten years. As a twelve-year-old with vintage parents, he was freer than any bird I could see.

His twelfth birthday was a slumber party. I doubt in all the years since, including television and Hollywood film parties and tropical debauches, I've ever been to any party that was such total mayhem. A bunch of us played chasings through the house and Michael smashed through a window. We jumped bombs into the swimming pool off the first storey. We poured fresh concrete (some kind of extension was always going on at the Hollises') into a pit in the ground and buried our own s.-cakes. We hid by the side of the road and pelted passing cars with eggs and cumquats. Michael had a BB gun and we fired at semitrailers and buses. The best thing was when they stopped, and we could run screeching down the bushland paths that only Michael knew. We gorged ourselves on cakes, lollies and soft drinks until we puked. We had a competition with two-litre bottles of flavoured milk to see who could drink them quickest. After puking five times, Michael won. It was his birthday.

We stuffed ourselves with Michael's favourite food, lamingtons—about the only thing his mum could make but she made them perfectly, moist and yellow on the inside, jam and cream between the layers, a miraculous skin of dark chocolate binding it together, not too heavy on the coconut. Michael ate them every day. His father had dubbed him, as a little boy, long before my time, Mickey Lamington, and in their house that was how he was known.

At that party, we stayed up all night watching horror movies. It was all sinister and forbidden to me, and pretty much the high point of my life. When my parents came to pick me up the next day, they said to Mr and Mrs Hollis, ‘Oh, did Michael’s parents have you over to help out?’ They thought the Hollises were his grandparents.

Michael was the king and I was his loyal chamberlain. There’s that arcadian period, between about ten and thirteen, when your eyes are large with heroes. You don’t know anything about limits, and you know even less when your best friend is a boy-sized Superman.

Like I said, you couldn’t see the naturalist in young Michael Hollis. I was the goofy one, the dag. When I wasn’t at the Hollises’ house sampling the delights of pool parties and firing BB guns at trucks, I was a bush-wanderer. I’d go on my own into the national parks around where we lived (Do city parents still allow this? When did the boogieman win out?) and set up cubbies under the arches of blackened banksias. There, I’d collect lizards in ice-cream cartons and fool around with them. I never hurt them—the worst I did would have been to grab a skink by the tail to make it come off, the fake wriggler. I collected tadpoles and grew them into frogs. I had silkworms and a tortoise and an ant farm and a worm farm. I loved all of them. I had to play cricket, like every kid, but when I got out—usually for a duck—I’d wander off into the bush on my own and poke my finger into funnel-web and snake holes. I remember once crouching by a coiled-up sleeping scrub python, just watching it, for hours and hours, now and then stroking its scales with the tip of my index finger, ready to grab it round the neck if it so much as twitched. I missed the whole rest of the cricket match! My coach was spewing, but Mum and Dad let me bring the python home,

even though I was small enough to be a potential food source for her. I kept Polly in the downstairs laundry where she curled up in a disused washtub. I fed her scraps from our dinner and sat there talking to her. She became the founding resident member of my personal zoo, which I enlarged in the next few years: mice, guinea pigs, a cockie, a galah, Bluey the blue-tongue lizard, an aquarium of different freshwater fish, but the star of the show was always Polly. I'd have whole army games going on where everyone had a character—I guess it was what kids did before SimCity and whatnot on the internet. It got so I couldn't have a dog or a cat—they might endanger the animals! I even had an emu for a while, Bob the emu, who used to swallow my marbles, which really peed me off until I realised I could just wait a few days and find them in his poo. It wasn't such a hygienic thing stalking an emu to go through his droppings, though, so I had to get rid of Bob. I think there might have been legality issues too.

My mum and dad, though they were just regular suburban folk, did love wildlife, especially injured animals, and they brought me a tortoise (Terry) that they'd found, a bit battered, crossing the road, a five-legged huntsman spider named Bill who'd got tangled up in Mum's wardrobe, a possum named Percy who'd had his leg mangled in a roof trap, and a whole bottle of stink bugs that had nothing wrong with them at all but Mum wanted out of her lemon trees. As my little zoo expanded, I argued my parents into stopping cleaning the pool and letting it go green, so I could fill it with fish, tortoises, frogs, a whole waterworld. You've got no idea how rich in fauna the average Sydney suburb was in those days. And it wasn't dangerous, I swear, although once I brought home a red-bellied black snake and Dad hit the roof when he saw it in my arms. He put a hessian bag over it and carried it away as if it was a bomb. 'You

bloody, bloody idiot,' Dad said, scowling at me. I sat in the laundry with Polly and cried my head off. When he came back from the bush, Dad was pretty gentle. He just said I had to be more careful. I said I was: how did he think I'd got it home without getting bitten if I wasn't being careful? He gave me a clout over the ear and told me to stop acting cheeky, but I guess after that day he had more respect and trust for me. I could handle myself out there, and to be honest, I reckon any kid's safer with spiders than with rock spiders.

But anyway, I kept all this more or less to myself. I led a double life. The neighbours thought it was a hoot, me and my zoo, but I lived a fair way from school and never invited any of my mates home. So none of them knew about it, and I didn't let on. At school I was a city kid, Michael Hollis's offsider, and animals weren't a cool thing to be into at a time when video games were being unleashed. Totally uncool to be into wildlife past the age of ten or eleven. Animals were what I did when I was on my own.

Here's the scoop about Michael Hollis and animals. He loved television, and sometimes I wondered how he could top so many subjects and be such a champion at sports when he was plainly addicted to the box. In the holidays, he was allowed to spend six, seven hours a day lying on the couch. He liked game shows, sports, sitcoms and some animal shows. He hated the Leyland Brothers—'Why should you be so proud of being such a drongo?'—but he loved Harry Butler. Michael would send him up: 'Beauuuu-tiful,' he'd say, with some piece of nothing like a slater or a grasshopper nestled in the palm of his hand. More than those, he liked David Attenborough shows, the 'real animals'. Real meaning not Australian. Growing up in the seventies—I guess much like growing up

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in the sixties or fifties or nineties or forties—you were accustomed to the inferior quality of Australian stuff. Except for sports, we were pretty p.-weak. Our TV shows, our pop stars, our films were mostly pathetic. Reading Australian books was like heavy-duty homework. I remember having to slog through dry old poems and Henry Lawson and Patrick White for school, and then as soon as I got home I'd head for my bush cubby with a well-used copy of *The Godfather*, or *Airport*, or *The Shining*. Why would you bother battling your way through an Australian book, where nothing ever happened and the air was always hot and eucalypty, when you could read something that was actually great, that picked you up and wouldn't put you down, like Mario Puzo or Stephen King? Why would a kid ever watch *Picnic at Hanging Fing Rock* when there was *Jaws*? Even *Jaws 2* was better, and it was Ess-Haitch-One-Thompson.

And the same for nature shows. Our stuff was always pretty cheap and dry and dirty, whereas David Attenborough would take you into a penguin's nest in Antarctica, or up a bird of paradise's nose in New Guinea, or into a gorilla's lair in a Rwandan rainforest. This was the stuff Michael liked, and he was as hooked as anyone else.

I only remember seeing him get into the bush around his house a few times. Once, when I went over, he and a friend were harassing a goanna. They'd cornered it on the Hollises' AstroTurf tennis court and were waving their racquets in its face. It kind of reared up on its hind legs. The guys howled—antagonising a goanna was as much fun as making a car stop on the road with an egg splattered against its side window, or hitting the grumpy bus driver with your BB gun. The goanna wouldn't do what they wanted, which was to climb the tennis-court fence. Michael and this other guy,

Leo Mattock, wanted to see if they could attach an electric wire from a car battery to the fence and give the goanna a shock. Sounded like a stupid idea to me, but we were thirteen and Leo Mattock was beginning to have his influence.

So anyway, the goanna wouldn't go up the fence. I was standing behind the guys as they menaced it with their racquets. Leo Mattock began hitting tennis balls at it. It did nothing, watching them with this hurt look, like, *Guys, why are you doing this to me?*, and then all of a sudden it ran.

It ran between Michael and Leo. They swished with their racquets but missed. It darted between them and bolted for freedom. I thought it was heading for the gate, so I stepped quickly across and tried to open it. But the goanna, free of the boys, was fast, and when it got to me it did what comes instinctively to a goanna. See, goannas escape from their predators by running up a tree. With my back turned, I must have looked like the next best thing. It bolted straight up my back and clamped its claws on my neck. Its lower legs latched to my hips. I thought, *F. me, this goanna thinks I'm a paperbark*. Wanting to disabuse the lizard of this crazy notion, I figured I'd do what a tree would never do. I ran.

Michael and Leo were literally rolling around on the AstroTurf. They talked about it, over and over, for weeks and weeks until I got a little tired of it. A goanna had run up my back—and the way I bolted was just too classic for words. Michael was a great impersonator and he might have gone a bit overboard re-enacting the scene, over and over, at school that term.

I idolised him, see? When this happens to boys, it's the purest love they'll ever know. It stays with them longer than their love of

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women, which is learnt through trauma—the whole thing a post-traumatic stress syndrome if you ask me. But those male friendships when you're beyond a kid and not yet into puberty, they're sweet. Thirty-odd years on, I find myself thinking about it more and more. Me and Michael Hollis.

And Leo Mattock. I guess Michael was always going to find his Leo Mattock. He must've got sick of the sweetness of goodness. He was an inventor, Michael, a restless reacher, never satisfied with what he already was. What added to his mystique at school was that, as well as being so great at everything, he was a real s.-stirrer. Once he organised us, the whole class, to push our desks forward a centimetre at a time through the one-hour period, crowding closer and closer to the teacher, Mr Brown, until he blew up. It was so funny when he did. There were always teachers with short fuses, and they were the ones Michael tormented. Usually ones whose names were colours, for some reason. Mr Black, our divinity teacher, who was about as godly as Jack Nicholson and dated an ex-Miss Australia, came in for special treatment. Mr Black's way of teaching religion was to put on *Greatest Heroes of the Bible* videos or make us copy out overhead projections of the sevenfold path to enlightenment. (We were meant to study as many religions as possible, to prepare us for life as adult consumers.) Mr Black loved his overhead projector. Before he came in, Michael would point it at the doorway. As Black entered, someone—not Michael—would hit the switch and the blinding light would hit Black in the eyes. Or Michael would plug multiple extension cords into a long rope, attach it to the projector and throw the cords out the window. Black would come in and start talking to us about the class he had planned, reeling in his cord so he could get the projector moving, and talk and talk, and then, the moment he realised there was

still fifty foot of it outside the window—that was the punchline. We'd all crack up.

Michael had a genius for organising these pranks and getting away with it. Even when he did get caught, he still got away with it. Some teacher somewhere up the chain of command would have a soft spot for him. Not least the headmasters of prep and senior school. He was their pride and joy, I guess, even though he loved humiliating their staff. Some days he would reach across to a classmate's desk in the middle of a lesson, pick up all his books and pens and throw them out the window. The joke was that the classmate would have to ask to be excused to go to the toilet, and the teacher would consent. Then, three minutes later, the classmate would reappear 'from the toilet' with all of his books and stationery in his arms.

The joke, see, was always on the teacher, not the classmate. Michael never picked on other kids, but J f.ing C, he was tough on teachers. I sometimes wondered why he had it in for them. Maybe it was because they were so in awe of him, and he held them in contempt for that, wanted to punish them for being so soft on a kid. Or maybe he did it for the audience, for us, because he didn't want to be seen as a goody-goody—always a risk when you were so f.ing good at everything. Michael was, from the start, a showman and he would do almost anything to get that buzz of appreciation from an audience. Later, looking back on those days, though, I wondered if it was more simple (and more complex): he just loved to take a risk. Playing up in class, staging pranks, menacing teachers, challenging the school to do the unthinkable and suspend or expel him was Michael's way of keeping himself interested.

But he had this dark side, which only really came out when he met Leo Mattock.

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There was a guy in our year called Guy Gillespie whose parents had divorced, and so he, Guy, spent a lot of time unsupervised. Guy Gillespie was a bit of a failure in school, but he was more advanced than us in a lot of ways. He'd pashed girls when he was eleven. He had access to real explosives, don't ask me how. He had pornos. He smoked. He had mates who were fifteen and sixteen. And he talked a lot about this legendary figure called Leo Mattock.

Leo Mattock didn't go to our school. He was at a government school and had a reputation as a thug. For a time he'd been a champion rugby league player: when he ran at his opponent, he seemed to have five elbows and three knees. His reputation in the sport had been built on his tongue as much as his hardness. He refused to shake hands with his opponent in the line-up before games, saying it was two-faced to act friendly with someone he was about to belt to within an inch of his life. Instead, he would press up into his opponent's face and say something like, 'Your mum was a great root last night.' And he was quick-thinking. One thug from another team, choosing to fight fire with fire, approached Leo on the field and said, pointing to Leo's partner in the centres, 'So what does his c..k taste like?' Quick as a flash Leo replied, 'I dunno. Why don't you ask your girlfriend?'

But his career as a sports star fizzled out when he found more stimulating pursuits. He'd been arrested and taken to court for shoplifting and then theft from a house. (His mate, a bloke called David McNicoll, got sprung when he took his jumper off while they were lifting a TV set and a video recorder and an Atari—hot work!—and left it in the house. Mrs McNicoll, good mother, had stitched David's name into the collar.) Leo Mattock had stolen cars and fingered girls. The first time I met him, he and Michael were playing pool at the Hollises' house. The room stank of cigarette

smoke and another sweet earthy smell I would later know all too well. A spear of jealousy pierced me right through my heart. Leo Mattock was gigantic and charismatic and tough and worldly. He swore with the eloquence of a sixteen-year-old who's so used to swear words that he gets creative with them. He talked constantly about girls and f.ing. When their game ended and it was my turn to step up and be thrashed, Leo offered me a choice of pool balls to shoot: spots or stripes.

'T.ts or c..ts?' he said.

That's always stayed with me. I mean, I'd heard those words before, but it was the first time I'd heard them coming out of the mouth of a contemporary. I can't remember which was which, the spots or the stripes. It doesn't matter much. I was shocked and thrilled, like I'd broken through into a new world, a snake crawling out of its old skin. Leo beat me, then Michael beat Leo, and it was Michael's turn to offer me the balls.

'T.ts or c..ts?' he said. The pure challenge in his grey eyes. He'd gone over to the adult side, Leo's side, leaving me behind.

I made it my mission to destroy, to humiliate, to obliterate, Leo Mattock.

EIGHT

My plan was simple. It shouldn't have taken me the best part of two years to get there.

The 't.ts or c..ts' episode took place in year eight, when Michael and I were thirteen. Leo was sixteen. From this distance there's something pathetic in a sixteen-year-old hanging out with children, but from a thirteen-year-old's perspective it's like you've been favoured by royalty. In Michael's eyes, I was a kid, an innocent, an embarrassing blast from the past. Leo introduced Michael to overproof rum and Winfield Blue cigarettes and heavy metal and smoking cones from Orchy bongs and thieving and girls. Michael always enjoyed a lot more freedom than his classmates. There was his parents' age and laissez-faire lifestyle, and the insurance of his own raw talent. He wasn't broke, so no one saw any need to fix him.

Leo Mattock was also appealing to Michael because he was impossible to *impress*. Michael's achievements brought from Leo a sniff of contempt. Michael's house, which affected me like a spaceship

transported to Earth from a future planet, drew from Leo Mattock a cold: 'Your olds are rich? Tell someone who cares.' Michael loved Leo for that. It was all a novelty, this working-class villainy, and who could blame Michael? I couldn't. I blamed Leo.

In year nine, the year we turned fourteen, my holiday invitations from Michael dried up. The first time, he had an excuse: his parents were taking him to Japan. But with a link taken out of the chain, the rhythm was broken for good. Michael spent his holidays and weekends and now his wagged schooldays with Leo Mattock. My lame offer was more kids' thrills: making our own firecrackers and egging cars and BB guns. Luckily I'd never let on about my private zoo, which would have been social death. What would it have mattered anyway? I was dead.

Michael had entered the big dirty adult world, where drugs got you girls and girls got you drugs. Leo, who had tight woolly grey-coloured hair and a smashed-in face, lured girls into his house by setting it up as a place where dope was smoked and speed was snorted. Michael fell in with—let's not pussyfoot around—the excitement of the new world that drugs gave him. Being stoned was the best feeling there was. Except for speeding, which was even better. He couldn't make up his mind whether his favourite was speed or dope. It didn't matter. Leo always had plenty of both.

Girls were always around, but they weren't so simple. You couldn't just suck them into your lungs or up your nose. Maybe Michael wanted to fail at something. He wanted to escape being the best at everything. He was impatient with the regular school-and-sport world, sure. He wanted to *fall short*. But I don't think he liked, or wanted, the way it happened.

Here's some breaking news. Teenage girls and boys are superficial in what they like about each other. Boys like girls with pretty

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faces and bodies. Girls like boys with pretty faces and bodies. Everything else, every other shortcoming or flaw, can be accommodated, when they're good-looking.

Poor Michael. Anything else he could have changed. He was used to being a natural, and if he wasn't a natural he had a solid work ethic and a hell of a quickness to learn. But you couldn't learn to improve the way you looked. It'd never mattered to him before. As a nine-year-old, who cares if you have freckles and red hair and small pale eyes and thin lips? It's harder to remember the teenage Michael now, because his face grew into his features and he became a handsome sort of man. Or, to be precise, fame embossed his face into handsomeness. As he said, 'It's amazing how good-looking you become when you're on television.' And his adult image, as an outback adventurer, suited his craggy middle-aged features. But as a fifteen-year-old, some of his facial features were growing out of proportion. He had a lantern jaw and a long fleshy-tipped nose and a powerful forehead. His eyebrows were so pale he appeared to have none. His freckles made his face look like flies had s.e.d all over him. His teeth looked like ivory-coloured Tic Tacs, white on the grazed ends, standing around in his gums like a badly drilled military parade. I won't go on about it. Michael, even by the grisly standards of fifteen-year-old boys, was one of the ugliest fifteen-year-old boys you've ever seen. At a boys school, where marks and scores determined your value and popularity iced the cake, Michael was king. Out in Leo Mattock's world, where the prime aim in life was to pash and finger and f. girls, Michael was a pauper.

Girls didn't want him. Even after Leo had got them drunk and stoned, there wasn't enough alcohol or dope to make them lust for Michael Hollis. He'd make clumsy lunges, and gained himself a reputation as a python-tongue. He made a girl vomit by shoving

his tongue too fast and too far into her throat. The story was she vomited because she couldn't believe she'd kissed such a fugly. The steady stream of girls—cheap tramps who'd give it away for a line of speed—only made things worse for him. These girls were meant to be available. Their only *point* (according to Leo) was that they were available. He'd keep encouraging Michael to 'have a go', but Michael could only take so many rebuffs. He analysed the problem. Maybe girls were intimidated by him. (But they weren't—these girls couldn't give a stuff about what he'd done at his lah-di-dah poofters school.) Maybe he was setting his sights too high. (So he lowered them, aiming at the grossest slappers. Same result.) Maybe he was afraid of a repetition of the python-tongue incident, some kind of technical failure in the sex department. (But he never got far enough to fail, and it wasn't for want of trying.) He was left only with the truth. Just as there were girls who were beyond the pale, too ugly to do anything with, there were boys who were beyond the pale too. And there was nothing, not a single thing, he could do about it.

Once he talked to a very beautiful girl through the whole length of a party, working himself up to ask her to 'go off with' him, and at the end of the night all she would give him was a goodnight kiss on the cheek. Later, exhilarated by having gone that far, entertaining romantic dreams, he over-reached and told Leo Mattock that he'd gone off with her. A week later she had become Leo's girlfriend. Michael knew that Leo would have asked her if she'd gone off with him, Michael, and that she'd have told Leo that she hadn't. So, all kinds of humiliation piled on top of one another.

Girls were his first setback. His failure. What worse could there be? He'd have traded all his trophies and prizes and top-of-the-school marks to be popular with girls, and in effect he did, or he

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tried to. Instead of pulling away from failure, Michael dragged himself down harder and harder. He wagged school to hang out in houses or shopping centres with Leo Mattock and a revolving group of toughs, male and female. They vandalised and thieved. Their idea of a good time was to sit around a skateboard ramp for an entire day and do nothing except smoke bongs and drink spirits. Instead of doing what he should have done—come back to the fold of school where he would be looked after by his real friends and affirmed by his own gifts, where he could put the whole girl thing into perspective—Michael threw himself into Mattockism. If he was to be a drug-taking mall-haunting loser, he would do it in style. If he was to be the ugly boy, he would be the ugliest, the lowest. He would, as he always had, make the most of his natural advantages.

So Michael earnt, through hard work and application, a reputation as the biggest waster in the group. He would perform, as he'd always performed, feats of excess, outdoing anyone else. It was Michael who set up the bucket bong and smoked it until he fell over and cracked open his head. Michael who snorted so much speed he didn't come down for five days. Michael who went out to the suburbs and sourced some datura, pounded down the seeds, boiled them in water, and took so much that he went blind for a day. Michael who went on the massive ether binge that landed him in a police cell overnight. No criminal charges, just kept in there for his own safety. Michael led shoplifting and burglary raids, pierced his nose with rings and his eyebrows with studs before it was heard of, wore the most bizarrely ugly clothes, impressed even these low-life losers with how much time he could waste. He was an achiever. If he wasn't going to be the guy who got girls, he'd be the guy who was so far out there on his own that girls didn't matter to him. Michael was an over-achiever.

I watched most of this from a distance, and the details were vague to me. Michael was missing so much school, and was so stoned all the time, that it wasn't long before his work suffered. He dropped out of football and cricket and debating, and started failing exams. Within two terms, he was transformed from the golden boy into the biggest loser. He didn't organise pranks on teachers any more—he was literally too cool for school. He wagged class after class, and when he turned up he stared ostentatiously out the window, stinking of dope. The school did what it could, but Michael's parents had no control over him. They were an elderly couple, lush and indulgent, and responded to the school's concerns with bland comments along the lines of Michael was going through a phase and he'd grow out of it.

I wish I could say that I, as his friend, tried to do something. But he was out of my reach. I was so angry at him for dumping me for Leo Mattock that I wished he would go to hell.

He did.

Years ten and eleven passed with Michael plummeting down the ladder, top to bottom in record speed. No threat or discipline could stop him. The school didn't expel him, because they didn't know he was crashed-out most mornings on a filthy futon in a share house near the railway tracks which his best mate Leo rented with his dole and drug-dealing money. And Michael had been a star for so long, the teachers cut him slack, like this was his 'wayward phase'.

But he wasn't one for half-measures, and if we were all waiting for his return like a triumphant third act, he hated us for it. Going into our final year, it looked like time had run out for Michael. He'd

missed too much work and done too many drugs. There would be no triumphant return. Or would there? Could I engineer something? Pull him out of the fire? Sure, we'd ignored each other for three years; but I'd have him back in a flash.

Though I'd never been part of Leo's mob, I did have something to offer them. God knows why, but I was fairly popular with certain girls, the pretty and adventurous private-school types who liked to push the envelope. My frost-white hair, dark eyebrows and miraculously pimple-free skin were my passport. I wasn't a great conversationalist—in fact, I was terrified of girls, I preferred snakes and bugs—but it didn't matter. Those kinds of girls chose me. It's amazing when you look at Michael and me now—or how he was before his death—to think that back then I was the chick magnet and he was the pariah. I peaked too early, and too briefly.

Anyway. Through the school-party network, I introduced a lot of girls to Leo Mattock and his crowd. For Leo, I was a supplier of fresh blood. I brought in that rebellious type of beauty who is the highest prize for someone like Leo: the Princess Bitchface. And Leo treated me as a comrade, like we shared hidden secrets. Some womanisers can be like this—their true loves are their fellow womanisers. Like the famous can love the famous, some womanisers band together in a shared suffering. *Only you know what I have been through.* Leo, impressed by the quality and quantity of poppets I brought into his crowd, saw me as a kind of equal, a mate. I played up to it. Sure, Leo, whatever you say.

In the May holidays of year twelve, a group of us travelled from Sydney to the Gold Coast for an early schoolies week. There were about twenty in the crowd, equal mix of boys and girls, some still at school, some, like Leo, older. We hired a bus, which Michael drove, sucking down bongs by the hour. The sound system pumped out

The Doors, Hendrix, the Floyd. This was the early 1980s, before any of that music enjoyed its revival. Some of us believed we might have started it. Once I heard Michael, stoned and speeding, detail a sort of worldwide genealogical tree that proved *he* was responsible for the revival of The Doors. That kind of thing really mattered to him.

It was a magic bus. People would ride on the roof and hang out the windows. Looking back, it was a recipe for young death, but we dodged the bullets we were aiming at ourselves.

Up at Surfers Paradise, we rented the entire eleventh floor of an apartment block overlooking the beach. Every night was a debauch, in that innocent adolescent way. When you boil it down, all we were doing was drugs and drink and having sex and taking risks. The height of humour was the night Michael fell asleep in a white canvas chair, wearing red boardshorts, then woke up and turned towards the balcony. In front of six or seven others, he somnambulantlly pulled down his pants and took a p. He thought he was out on the balcony—he stood on tiptoes and arched his stream over the balcony rail. But he wasn't p.ing off the balcony; he was p.ing into his white canvas chair. He finished, and flopped back down into the chair, asleep. In the morning, the chair had turned pink from the run of his boardshorts in his own p. We had to burn it, destroy the evidence.

That kind of thing.

In the night-times we went to clubs, where Leo and I became hunting buddies. This bruising criminal respected me. We were junior male predators. Leo even spiked women's drinks if he thought it might get him into their pants. I felt out of place as a beast of prey—I didn't actually know what to do with girls—but went along, for the plan. I knew what to do with Leo.

Michael didn't often come to the clubs. Usually he was too out

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of it. The girls in the group liked him as a court jester, the wild class clown who would entertain them with the most extreme dares and then pass out. No threat to them, no danger to anyone but himself. But on the second-last night of the week, the whole lot of us went to a club—the Chevron on Cavill Street—and Michael couldn't find an excuse in time.

So we went there and danced a bit. Girls in the group wandered off and danced with new guys, and guys found what they could. Leo, Michael and I were standing at a table watching. Michael, of course, wouldn't dance. He was getting himself grimly through the night with rum and Cokes and speed. Three local blondes came up to talk to us. Tall Gold Coast model types. After a while, I leant across to Leo and whispered that we should leave Michael with the girls. We went off and danced. I made sure we took our time, every now and then sneaking a look across the dance floor to where Michael was still with one of the blondes.

I won't go into boring detail about the night, but the long and the short of it was that Michael propositioned one of the blondes and she laughed in his face. It wasn't that she wouldn't have gone with him; it was just that she wouldn't have gone with him for free, as he seemed to expect. Until he put the word on her, he had no idea she was working. I made sure on the bus ride home that Leo made a big deal of this, Michael's big failure. Michael drove the bus silently, sobered up by his humiliation. In the rear-vision mirror I fancied I could see tears running down his cheeks.

The next day, I sat next to him and chatted jocosely about the night, managing to convey that the hookers had been a set-up: Leo didn't want Michael to cramp our style in the Chevron, so he arranged for the hookers to divert Michael while he and I went off in search of some fun on our own.

BRIAN WESTLAKE

Of course it was a set-up, and of course Leo wasn't the one who arranged it. But Michael needn't know this.

By the time we got back to Sydney, Michael had quietly resolved never to see Leo Mattock again. He was going to give up drugs, get the metal out of his face and get his life back on track. My plan had worked. Michael had degraded himself, but he still had his *pride*. Going overboard in the fugly stakes, in a perverse way, was him asserting some control over his failure. But this story—Leo and I in cahoots, getting rid of Michael like he was a bad smell, setting him up with a prostitute in order to embarrass him—this made him a laughing stock. I make no apologies. It was the electric shock he needed to break away from Leo.

My victory was a hollow one. While we'd been up the Gold Coast, Mr and Mrs Hollis had died in a car accident in Sydney. Michael was seventeen, and although he could probably have looked after himself for the rest of the school year, he wasn't legally entitled to be his own keeper. An uncle and aunt in Queensland were assigned guardianship, and he was taken to Brisbane to finish his schooling.

I'd saved him, but I'd lost him. He didn't keep in touch when he went to Brisbane. It was fifteen years before I'd see him again.

NINE

They say any publicity is good publicity, but even Phil Barrows knew it had its limits. Our audience was kids and Americans. The flavour of tragedy that Mick's death had given the series was one thing, but Glenn Mellon's death gave birth to the C-word. *People* magazine put it on their cover: *The Curse of the Kiss*.

What was the joke going round? Losing one presenter is bad luck, but losing two is careless. Ha f.ing ha. Tiger O'Malley, of all people, was cracking that one on his talk show, getting a laugh. Thanks, mate.

The truth is, losing Mick was a disaster, but losing Glenn as well was a potential catastrophe. You can't run a nature show when you've slipped down the food chain. It scares the kiddies. It scares the Americans.

Tim Steam and Mandy Rout flew back out to meet with Phil, and this time there was none of the warm and cuddly grieving that had followed Mick's death. This time they were all business. If their

a.s were on the line before, they could sort of live in denial and see Mick's death as some kind of 'opportunity'. Now that Glenn was gone, their a.s were absolutely on the block. All the episodes we'd shot with Glenn couldn't be used, as Tim explained. You couldn't have three presenters in one series, two of them dying. Then it really would look like you'd been hit by the C-word. No. We had to reshoot those nine remaining episodes with a brand-new presenter and with half the budget. We could leave Mick in, but Glenn had to be wiped out. Deleted.

At first Phil looked too weary to go on. In a funny way, Glenn's death had taken more out of him than Mick's had. Being the big man standing after Mick was gone had kind of fired Phil up. But now it was like he was the captain of a sinking ship.

He wasn't alone. Tim Steam had lost a lot of weight, and his blue stubble was showing through. Very un-American, not to have shaved. His mole was growing long hairs, a patch on the side of his lip like a slipped Hitler moustache. Tim was feeling the pinch. When Phil voiced his doubts about finding a new presenter and shooting nine episodes on a shoestring, Tim went up to him and growled through his mole, 'The whole of Pioneer Network's going down, and you're going to break our fall.'

The meeting was again in Phil's office and again, though why I don't know, I was invited. This time nothing was resolved, there were no nasty shocks for me, I wasn't to be shafted in favour of a pretty-boy novice. They were going to do me more slowly. Tim and Mandy asked Phil, more rudely than was necessary, to put together a shortlist of candidates by the close of business. They were flying back to LA the next day and this needed to be fully sorted before they left. Phil and I were, in Pioneer talk, to comprise a 'task force' to select a shortlist.

The ENDANGERED LIST

Once we were alone, it didn't take Phil and me long to list the obvious names: Steve Heath, Brock McCabe, Don Simpson, Sharpie Phelps, Deano Rudd. The Big Five of Australian nature telecasting. There were no others, at least none that were proven quantities. And we were at the stage where we needed Experience, we needed the Tried and the Tested, we needed someone Bankable who the Americans could approve pronto. We needed someone who would get the job done, who was familiar with the demands of production and crew, who could slip into the up-front role seamlessly, who wasn't tied to another network, who'd be here to say yes, right now, I can do it, *I can be on the job Right Here And Now, You F.ers.*

But I couldn't do it. I couldn't open my mouth. Dry-throated, I just grunted along when Phil compared the relative merits of the Big Five. I'm just not a salesman, a self-promoter. I've always needed to wait until I'm invited. Even Sheena had to propose marriage to me. Not only can I not blow my own trumpet, I can't even find it. And maybe if I can't blow my trumpet, then I wouldn't be good enough to go up front. Look at Mick—there was a man who had his trumpet fixed permanently in his mouth. That was what made him great. When you boiled it all down, the presenter was there to sell himself and the show, and someone who couldn't take the first step wasn't going to be up to the job.

Still, as Phil mused over the Big Five, I couldn't help seeing their shortcomings. Brock McCabe was really only a croc guy. How could you base a whole nature show around a mug lair who baited crocodiles, hung his wife's a. in front of them and set up shots to make it look like they'd just dodged death? Don Simpson was good with the snakes, and you could see their international appeal, but he was getting on in years. Even in Australia, the Don Simpson era was pretty much gone. I couldn't see how the Americans would take

to something that was so five minutes ago, as they put it. Sharpie Phelps, I guess, had the star factor, but the guy had a serious A & D problem and was always finding himself on the brink of meltdown. He'd go out in the desert and fire himself up on meth and bourbon, then fang his ute terrorising the wildlife. For all Mick's buffoonery, he was a genuine wildlife conservationist, or at least his organisation was. Sharpie Phelps would be good for a laugh, but the novelty would wear off and all we'd be left with was a public relations problem. Steve Heath was the up-and-comer, and there was a certain allure about the way he listened to those birds of prey. He was a real threat. Sorry, I mean he was a real possibility. And he was the youngest of the Big Five. But the thing with Steve was, he had ambitions. He thought he was King f.ing S. He had his own entourage of managers and spin doctors and stylists and whatnot, and he was a bit of a snotty little p...k. Neither Phil nor I liked him. More importantly, Phil hated his manager's guts. Phil and Bluey Angell could never work together; just releasing Steve from his existing contracts would turn into a war. So Steve Heath was the first one Phil nixed.

Which really only left Deano Rudd, Australia's Spiderman. It always came back to Deano. The Americans already knew him. He'd just done a series that went down well over there. Like Mick, he knew how to pitch himself to teenagers and younger—and in America, your audience is adults with the brains of teenagers and their little kids. Deano had his own catchcries and his big hat and his gold tooth. He was leather-faced and black-haired and looked like he'd never taken a bath in his life. It was all manufactured, but it was what they liked. He was a sarcastic smart-a., but professional, and he was a bloke you knew would get the job done.

But—and this time I raised the 'but'—Deano had been Mick's

great rival and nemesis in recent years. Deano was the only human on earth that Mick Lamington had a bad word for. It's fair to say that the feeling was mutual. So how would it be for us to replace Mick with his enemy-in-chief? What were we saying about Mick's legacy if we handed it over to Spiderman? What would Julie say? What would the press say? And beyond that, even if we got through all of those hoops, if we got Deano Rudd on board it would become a Deano Rudd show. It wouldn't be like we'd got Deano in place of Mick. It would be like we'd hooked ourselves up to the Deano Rudd machine. We wouldn't be taking him on. He'd be taking us on.

'I know, I know.' Phil, having heard me out, collapsed into his calfhide office chair. 'But some part of me says this is the s. sandwich we've gotta eat. I don't know if I can ride all this financial pressure. We're in it deep, Frosty, and there's gunna be more bad publicity when the inquest on Glenn begins. You'll have to give evidence, and I will.'

'We'll meet that hurdle when we come to it,' I said stiffly.

'Yeah, no, but I don't know if I have it in me to take on all that by myself,' Phil said, as if he was the only one in the room, in the organisation. Diddums. 'I've got as little stomach as you do for being taken over by Deano Rudd, but when I sit back and look at it objectively, it might be the best way. We need that kind of muscle. Deano's a legend. So what if he wasn't Mick's cup of tea? This legacy that we're all so committed to preserving—Mick's legacy—well, if things go badly for us in the next six months there won't be any legacy to preserve. If this series goes bad, we might have to sell the zoo even. We need Deano. That's the thing. We need him. But having said that, I'd give my left ball for someone else. Anyone but that bastard.'

BRIAN WESTLAKE

Here was my chance, opening up like a double door. We'd been through the shortlist and pretty much discounted everyone. The inevitable choice, Deano Rudd, was unacceptable. So what were we left with? We were left with the One Who Could.

But I couldn't do it. I wanted to, Lord, I wanted to. And I could hear, in my head, Sheena's voice screaming at me: *Now! Now! You, Frosty! YOU!!!!!!*

And yet it was the sound of Sheena's voice that was also stopping me. I don't know how many people have had the experience of their spouse believing they were a cold-blooded murderer. Now that I think about it, it must be pretty rare. But this was how it was. Sheena thought I'd killed Glenn Mellon, or arranged for his death, to stop him taking over Mick's role at the front of the show. Naturally, I would only do this if I wanted that role for myself. I deserved that role, as Mick's best mate and confidant and offsider. I'd paid my dues. I was a proven quantity. It was my just deserts. And—which I spose I've mentioned—Sheena and I didn't have much in the bank for raising our kids, for building our future. It was all very well for me to ride along with Mick, but now that he was gone I had to look after my family. It was my duty to be the frontman. My destiny. All the ducks were lined up in a row. Here I was in Phil's office, with my wife in the background firmly believing that I'd killed someone to get to this point. I'd got what I wanted, hadn't I?

So why couldn't I do it? Why couldn't I say to Phil, *pick me*?

Was it just because I *didn't* kill Glenn Mellon? Was that all that held me back?

For the moment, maybe. But love is a funny thing.

'I can't believe I'm saying this . . .' I started.

Right then the door swung open. Phil and I both blinked like wombats dragged out of their holes at midday.

The ENDANGERED LIST

‘You’re not going to decide a f.ing thing before you’ve spoken to me.’

Well, I spose she was the other major shareholder, indirectly.

Out of the shocked silence, Phil spoke first.

‘Sure thing, sure thing. We were going to call you up here. Take a seat, Ranger. Anything I can get you to drink?’

She wanted a Bundy and Coke: as everyone knew, her dad’s chosen poison.

TEN

The walk from Phil's office to our demountable takes all of three minutes if you know you can cut up the access road between the Wombatorium and the Echidney Opera House. After our meeting, which wound up well after dark, I took my time, pausing by the Koalaseum to watch the crowd-pleasers have some time to themselves. It can't be easy being a zoo koala—every Tom, Dick and Harry wants to have their photo taken with you and poke you and make a noise in your face through the middle of the day, which is the middle of your night. The sleep deprivation would be a killer. It must be like having ten thousand babies. The guys in the Koalaseum were sticking to their routines, though: Neville No-Friends stretching out for some leaves on the branch he wouldn't let any other koala near; Peter the Meat-Eater wrapping his claws around some kudu jerky, the freak; Loopy Lois wandering down to the ground to try to chew on her own a.hole. Eccentrics and misfits—they all are. It's what we've made them.

The ENDANGERED LIST

When I sniffed the air outside our demountable, I couldn't help thinking of my poor Sheena as another insane-asylum zoo exhibit. She'd put the kids to bed, I knew that for sure. She hadn't lost all sense of responsibility yet. But one day she'd break her promise to me, and spark up before she'd got them out of her hair, and I'd come home to a house of mayhem and Roddy or Rosie asking me why Mummy had fallen asleep on the couch, and that, as per our deal, would be the end of it.

She was stoned to her gizzards when I came in. A game show was belting out of the TV. I went straight to the remote and muted it. Sheena, who'd been staring slit-eyed at the damp-stained ceiling, suddenly discovered an interest in the program.

'Come on, honey, I was watching that.'

I sat down—not beside her but on the armchair, which, thanks to its uneven legs and busted springs, was more like a rocker. From the kids' room there was a fit of sleepy barking: Roddy had his cough back.

'What time did you put them down?' I said, as calmly as possible. It was code. I didn't particularly care what time the kids had gone to bed. I cared what time she'd started smoking. In the ashtray beside the couch were the butts of at least two joints—I couldn't tell exactly how many amid the bottletops and chocolate wrappers. But the deal was, if I caught her lighting up before the kids had gone down, she had to give it away.

'Ah, only a minute ago,' she lied. Taunting me.

I wasn't up to pursuing or cornering her. What was the point? And anyway, I was too stirred up about what had happened in Phil's office. Telling Sheena about Ranger would do me as much good as chewing her out for being stoned again, but I couldn't help myself. I had to get it out of me.

‘You’ll never guess what happened,’ I said.

Sheena lay in her daze while I recounted the events of the meeting, more for myself than for her.

The first thing that shocked Phil and me when Ranger burst into the office was her attire. Normally Ranger bore out the truth of what lurks in the back of every parent’s mind, which is that our children will go out of their way to destroy whatever beauty nature has endowed them with. Ranger’s face, normally, was a pincushion of so many hoops and studs and death’s heads that she could set off a metal detector. Her hair, the same dark blonde as Mick’s, was dyed every shade of the rainbow between black and deep purple, and looked like it’d been cut by a blind shearer having an epileptic fit. Her clothing, also black, was the type that cost a heavy premium to have someone stick lit cigarettes into it and drag it under a tractor. She’d kept some Brisbane tattooist in business with a blight of Japanese and Maori symbols up and down her arms, across her neck, and who knows where else. Honestly, if that girl could have given herself pimples and a goatee, she would.

Not this time, but. Ranger came into Phil’s office with a manila folder under her arm and a Kangazoo windjacket on her back. Her hair was covered up under a Mick Lamington ‘Yow!’ baseball cap. She looked like one of the f.ing staff.

Ranger had come to claim her birthright. She’d been to see a probate lawyer, no less, and wanted to ‘assert my rights’. She couldn’t fool me and Phil—this was nothing but a spoilt brat teenager getting ahead of herself—but at the same time, money does talk. Phil had assumed he could control things pretty much unfettered, paying lip service to Julie of course, but he expected the Lamington clan to sit back as silent partners while he ran the business. Now Ranger was acting anything but silent, haranguing Phil about this and that and

using legal baloney she must only have learnt an hour earlier. Phil would have liked to beat her around her tea-strainer ears and give her a kick in the pants to send her on her way, but he couldn't. Ranger was his partner, his boss even—as she let him know. And Ranger was going to decide—here was the pointy end of her monologue—who was taking over the lead role in the series. She and her lawyer had already met with the Pioneer people and they'd fallen into line. We could check if we liked. So much for the task force.

The penny was kind of dropping for me. As I sat in the office and watched Ranger take charge of proceedings, in the fancy dress of her Kangazoo outfit and cap, I caught this amazing vision: the Daughter Of The Hero takes over his mantle. All the goodwill the public had shown towards Mick would flow, like an inheritance, down to Ranger. She'd keep the kids in the audience, because they'd identify with her, and she'd keep the parents, because the mums would see her as a daughter tragically left without a dad, risking her life to keep the dream going, and the dads would perve on her diving into swamps and waterholes in her wet T-shirt. We'd have to do something about the tats, but they have procedures these days.

I could see it all happening, but it turned out that it was me, not Ranger, getting ahead of himself. She got to her punchline: 'And here's our new star.'

Right on cue, like they'd stage-managed it, the door opened and in stepped Deano Rudd himself, complete with croc-skin vest and black Akubra, glistening brown in the evening light, looking like kangaroo hide stretched out on a trellis of p. and wind. He was a fraud, he was Mick's enemy and nemesis and irritant, he'd drag the show down into the mud, and he had a f.ing newfound American accent. But he was big in the States. And more importantly, as Ranger announced with a hand on his leather-clad thigh,

he was her new boyfriend. She curled into his side like Doris Day into Rock Hudson. Phil and I sat there with our chins on our chests. She was seventeen. Deano was thirty-two. We didn't have to say it aloud.

'Whaddaya mean?' Ranger sneered. 'We got off after the funeral. We're engaged.'

I'd needed some time to myself before going home because I was still in a state of total paralysis. Ranger, who'd never shown an iota of interest in wildlife in general or her dad's great career in particular, had chosen the aftermath of his death to reinvent herself as a perky little Miss Wildlife Warrior—correction, *Mrs* Wildlife Warrior. She had it all worked out. She was going to co-produce the series with Phil, and Deano would be an even bigger star than Mick. Eventually she'd take some cameos in the show too, as Deano's damsel in distress—'You know, sit in a croc's jaws and scream my head off while he drags me out,' she said, while Deano mugged away behind her. (He said three-fifths of f.all during the whole affair.) This was a takeover, all right. You ask me, that home-schooling wheeze has got a lot to answer for.

After I finished spilling it all, Sheena lit herself a fresh joint. I couldn't stop her. Whatever you call it—her grim hobby, her recreational self-medication—it was a f.ing tragedy that a certain event five years ago had left her like this. She didn't know the way back to undo it, and neither did I.

But much as I'd have loved my wife to return to reality at least for a couple of nights in a row, right now it was all I could do not to join her in a choof. I was rocked to my core.

She took some long drags until the thing was half-smoked,

and drawled, 'So, poor little Frosty, is there gunna be anything left for you?'

'Ranger said,' I said, and gulped. 'Ranger said I could have my segment for the time being, and also do some rigging and location-scouting. Behind-the-scenes stuff.'

I couldn't force myself to say the rest. It had been humiliating beyond my wildest nightmares. This brat I'd known since the day she was born squalling and unsatisfied, this spoilt ungrateful skid mark on her father's proud record, this embarrassment to her mother and disappointment to all who knew her, this little *Goth freak*, had pouted and purred at me: 'Poor old Frosty, we'll find something for you to do, don't worry.' Like I was some faithful old family retainer, her dad's mangy dog. She didn't have the nerve to have me put down. Instead she'd put me on light duties until I slit my own throat.

'So we're f.ed then,' Sheena said, slumping back into the couch after the momentary industry of mulling, rolling and lighting.

'We'll be all right,' I said, but I didn't believe myself.

'No we won't,' Sheena said patiently, like she was talking to a simpleton. She should have been losing interest, retiring back into her dope haze, but sometimes the weed does the opposite, gets the smoker into a state of hyper-alert over-intense concentration on a problem. She began talking about our so-called finances, listing our assets and liabilities like it was the day of f.ing judgement. I won't bore you with the details except to say that Sheena's assessment of our future was closer to the mark than mine. We had two young children, still to go to school. When we'd first got pregnant, me in my mid-forties and Sheena mid-thirties, they were a cause of joyous celebration, a miracle, our second chance in life. But that was when Mick was alive and everything was Mick 'n' Me

and Pioneer Network and America and our glowing future. Funny how quick things can change. When Mick was alive, the fact that we owned nothing meant nothing. We were safe. Now that Mick wasn't with us, we were entering middle age with two dependent littlies and no money in the bank, nothing but debts to our name, and hanging our survival on the caprices of a tough and turf-jealous ex-journo at war with a seventeen-year-old born-again megalomaniac. I couldn't say I was going to sleep easy that night.

'Well,' Sheena said after a long silence, during which she'd found the energy to roll herself yet another joint. Boy, can that woman smoke. I was getting dozy just sitting in the same room. And to think, she'd only taken it up after having children. 'I guess you can start on Deano and work your way down the list, until they've got no choice but to give you the show.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' I snapped like a saltwater croc on a leg of pork.

'You know.' She winked at me, a dope's dope wink, meant to show complicity in some sick plan in her addled mind. 'What you did to Glenn. You compiled the shortlist. It's all in your hands. One by one, starting with Deano.'

'Get away with you,' I said. I stood up and walked across the room to her. To be honest, it was only three steps from one side to the other, so it's not that dramatic. I snatched away her burning joint. She got up and grabbed for it. I held it away. I'd touched her weak point. She lunged at me and I stepped away again. She tipped over the coffee table, flinging the full ashtray onto the floor.

'Give it!'

From the kids' room there was another extended bout of coughing. Roddy.

'Shut up or you'll wake them,' I said.

‘Give it to me!’ She lunged again and this time I’d run out of space. She had her claw around my hand, and I let her take the joint back. She plugged her mouth like a baby with a dummy and took a great long pull. Her eyes fluttered and closed like she was getting her best f. in ten years. That one.

‘It’s not funny,’ I said. And it wasn’t. My own wife thinking I’d killed Glenn Mellon. Nobody—not Phil, none of the crew who were there, none of Glenn’s family, not even the vultures of the press—had even whispered so much as a word suggesting I’d messed up the assembly of the shark cage on purpose to further some sick design I might have had on taking over Mick’s role. Nobody except my wife, my darling Sheena, who I will never leave as long as we both shall live, thought I was capable of murder. And I reckon in her case it was wishful thinking. Does that make it worse or better?

Her eyes were still closed, purple eye shadow pushed into the corners like silt in the bend of a dying river.

‘Nothing’s funny any more, eh, Frost?’

‘I mean it,’ I said. ‘You start talking that way, it gets out, and . . .’

‘And what?’

‘Just quit it, Sheen.’

‘Oh, fine,’ she said, moping back towards the couch. ‘Fine, fine, I won’t mention a thing.’

Then she squared those blue eyes on me and something passed between us again—something neither of us quite knew what to do with, like when she’d come into that steamy bathroom in the outback and told me that Mick had gone; something unearthly, almost like we both knew we were putting on an act ninety-nine per cent of the time, our outer adult shells, and behind it all Sheena and I were on the level.

BRIAN WESTLAKE

‘I won’t mention a thing,’ she repeated, ‘so you won’t get any ideas.’

I couldn’t take any more for one night. I wanted to tear something to pieces.

‘I’m going,’ I said, and for once I meant it. I went to bed. The minute my head hit the pillow, little pieces started falling off. I was cracking up.

ELEVEN

Ranger wanted to get the new deal with her and Deano up and running and publicised as soon as possible, but Phil Barrows was nothing if not a master of politics and he convinced her to wait until they'd gone through the proper channels. Of course what Phil wanted to do was buy himself some time while he got six moves ahead of her. Ranger was more bluster than back-up. It didn't matter that she was Mick Lamington's firstborn and she'd been home-schooled and she'd been through a quarter-acre of tattooing—the kid was seventeen. She had to be scared. Phil was banking on it.

She agreed to go with Phil to Los Angeles, Deano in tow, to make a 'proper presentation' to Mandy and Tim and the bigger-wigs at Pioneer Network. They also had to get Deano out of his existing contract with Animal Planet, which could have been done in two phone calls but Phil was gifted at making things sound more complicated and involved than they were.

By my estimate that left us three weeks, maybe a month at the outside, before the series would be grandly relaunched and the Ranger 'n' Rudd show would be on its merry way. Once that happened, I'd have to start looking for a place to live and a new job.

The celebrity naturalists' community is a tight-knit one, but, and word began to spread that something was in the offing. The idea of Ranger stepping into her dad's shoes, with Deano as frontman, was shocking and bizarre at first but as soon as people got it into their skulls they could see the scope. It was natural, wasn't it? A Lamington dynasty, absorbing our next-most-successful nature presenter into the Lamington camp and neutralising the opposition. They'd be an Aussie nature juggernaut, in time maybe even bigger than Ranger's old man.

Word got to Steve Heath that yours truly might be looking for some new employment. His series on birds of prey, *Death from the Skies*, had done well in Australia but had yet to break through in the States. Market research had said that in the minds of sixty-four per cent of Americans, the phrase 'Death from the Skies' conjured up visions of their own B-52 bombers, which had been dropping not exactly information leaflets over the Middle East. It wasn't that Steve Heath wouldn't change the title—he was adaptable to any market research, especially American—but his main problem was that he had no other strings to his bow. His shows were good on hawks, eagles, even vultures and plovers, but that was pretty much it. So in my opinion, the reason he hadn't cracked it in the States had nothing to do with the death thing. It was that he had no variety. He'd just wander out in the desert or the bush and fossick around for some bait while intercutting scenes from the

The **ENDANGERED LIST**

prey's daily struggle with the life of the hunting bird, then bring the two stories together in a standard climax of bird dive-bombing and murdering the mouse, snake, spider or worm that we'd grown to love. It was a fair idea for a one-off show. I'd never thought it made much of a series.

Steve's manager—this pirate who called himself Bluey Angell if you can believe that—gave me a call and invited me out to a scrubby no-man's-land in western New South Wales called Silvercap. There had been some mines out there but now it was a ghost town: very filmic. And there were sure to be some birds around. If not, they could fly them in.

I flew out in Steve's private plane—a twin-prop, not a jet mind you, like Mick's Gulfstream, 'Kiss The Sky'—and Bluey Angell met me at the red-earth airstrip. He loaded me into his Land Cruiser and we set out along a corrugated road for a cosy two-hour ride to the camp outside Silvercap where Steve and the crew were set up. It gave Bluey a chance to grill me.

'So,' he said. 'Deano Rudd, eh?'

I didn't know how much had got out. Phil Barrows couldn't stand Bluey Angell, so it hadn't come from him. I played dumb, staring out the window. It must've rained recently because there were the red trumpet-shaped flowers of sticky mistletoe hanging around gum trees, white corkwoods in bloom and even some quandongs with their purple berries. Though you couldn't see them from the car, the place was crawling with edible ants, bugs, saps, nuts, berries and seed pods. You could eat like a lord out there. I'd have loved to dump Bluey in it to see how he'd go—or better still, Steve Heath.

Having made him suffer for a while, I said, 'I'm the last to know, Blue. Way down the food chain. The high-ups make these decisions and eventually they come down the line.'

‘I heard,’ Bluey paused to steady the Land Cruiser, which was fishtailing all over the shop on the curves, ‘I heard Phil had taken Deano and Mick’s little girl over to La-La-Land and they’re packaging a new girl-boy show for the Septics.’

Australian nature types are always openly contemptuous of the Yanks until we crack it there. Then, the moment the contract’s signed, we turn from no-BS tell-it-like-it-is cynics into the world’s greasiest lapdogs. We’re good at bagging America but we’re even better at licking its a.

‘You know more than me,’ I said, squinting out the window. We were headed into some nice desert colour, purple and crimson mineral sands with some white and yellow wildflowers. Against the disused mineheads out here it’d come up well. The Yanks’d love it if they could only *get* Steve.

‘You’re a cagey one,’ said Bluey, who was of course a flaming redhead, curly mop and a bushranger’s spade-shaped beard over his Hawaiian shirt and boardshorts. They said he was a raving queen and he always seemed to me more of a theatre type than an outback man. But a bloke can’t help the way he speaks, and Blue did have a wife and three nippers, or so they said. Come to think of it, it was only Phil who’d ‘confirmed’ for me that Blue was a pillow. Some blokes just are that way and they’re as straight as the Birdsville Track.

As if reading my thoughts, he went on, ‘You know, the thing about Steve is, we don’t care if the Yanks don’t buy us. It’s better to live on your feet than die on your knees, you know?’

I waited another while, long enough for him to get worried, then said, ‘Not sure what you’re getting at.’

‘Oh, sorry, sorry!’ he simpered, taking his hands off the wheel to wave me down. ‘I didn’t mean anything about Mick. Mick

was the real deal, never compromised himself one teensy bit! But these others—I mean, Deano and his ilk—they pander to what the Americans want to see. They play up this parody of the Australian bushie, and it's all a load of bull, it's feeding the monkeys, it's corny and it's,' he took a breath for profundity, 'it's not *real*. And that's the thing about Steve. And our show. We *keep it real*.'

They *keep it real*. The phrase, as far as I knew, was fresh out of the US of A. But Bluey clearly didn't know that, and I wasn't going to enlighten him. Even though I agreed in principle with what he was saying—except for the bit about Mick, who'd been the biggest American s.ck-hole and a.licker this side of the Prime Minister—I didn't believe it applied to his star. Steve Heath was a prissy little show pony who would, like all of us, drop his pants and touch his toes if an American network head walked by. I'd only accepted his request to come and help out because I needed some cash and couldn't stand being in the demountable with Sheena right at the moment. There was no point Bluey Angell trying to sell Steve and *Death* to me. I wasn't coming on board.

'You know what's going to happen, though,' he went on. 'Local content rules are being watered down as we speak. The new free-trade deal we have going with the Yanks means that in five years' time there'll be sweet FA television being produced and funded here in Oz.'

I hated that 'Oz'. It was so American.

'That's a bit alarmist, isn't it?' I said.

'Oh no, not at all,' said Bluey in his fussy queenly way. I bet his three kids were tough butchy boys. 'You watch. It's rationalisation, like anything else. It'll be too expensive for Australian TV networks to make any local product at all, so they'll be importing more and more programs from the States. Of course, there'll always be a call for

our “identity” to be preserved and the usual outcry will go up. But they’ve already anticipated that. That’s why Mick and his show was so important, and why they need to get something up like this new Ranger ‘n’ Rudd thing. Because in the next couple of years there’ll be a shake-out and consolidation so that only one nature series is made here in Oz, and it’ll be made with American money, for American audiences, and it’ll be piped back to us here in Oz and that’ll do us for our “own identity”. You watch, Frosty. It’s got us all worried.’

‘I can’t believe it,’ I said. ‘Steve, Sharpie, Brock, all those blokes—they’re rock-solid.’

‘And they cost one-fifty grand an episode to make, for local audiences of half a million. The networks don’t make a cent on any of us. There just aren’t enough people in the country to raise the advertising money. The only margin’s in the merchandising. The networks have only stuck behind us because the government has forced them to keep up local content.’

‘Mick’s show costs more than that,’ I said.

‘But it goes to an audience of thirty, forty million!’ Blue whined, throwing his hands up off the wheel. ‘And into syndication! But *you* don’t need to know that. *You’re* on the right side of the ledger. You’ve got it made, a trusted member of the Lamington empire. I envy you, mate.’

‘So what happened to Scotty Pascoe?’ I said, changing the subject to get his mind back on the road. And besides, he was getting up my nose. Bluey hadn’t got me out here to offer me ongoing work. He thought I had points in the ‘empire’. He envied me. He only had me here to pump me for information, of which I had none. None for him, anyway.

‘Scotty’s having a week off.’ Bluey went all tight-lipped, shrugging and driving on without saying anything more.

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Scotty Pascoe was Steve Heath's usual rigger. It was because Scotty had fallen mysteriously ill in the middle of this shoot that they'd sent out a mayday to yours truly.

'He got sick?' I persisted.

After a while Bluey said, 'I'll leave it up to Steve to tell you about Scotty.'

Well, mission accomplished: he didn't say another word for the rest of the trip.

At the camp, Steve Heath was set up in his road-train-sized silver caravan with his usual retinue: hair stylist, make-up artist, 'imagist', whatever the f. that was, wardrobe assistant, and someone to make sure he didn't have any parsley stuck to his teeth. The common factor in all this was that each assistant was female and each was under twenty-five years of age. I don't know what Steve did with them all, and being a young man with a show of his own and no wife or kids he was entitled to get what he could. I'm no wowser. Though I'd heard he pretty much left them on their own, the girls. He was too interested in his mirror. My own suspicion was that he kept the girls in tow to allay any rumours about him and Bluey, which, I repeat, I wouldn't believe for a second.

'How are ya, Stevo?'

I walked into the caravan and, yes, two bunnies were working on him. One on the fingernails, one on the bouffant. That's stardom.

'Frosty the Snowman himself!' Steve cried, as if he was as happy as a kid, but didn't get up. There were important procedures taking place.

I got a couple of beers out of the fridge, sat down and listened while Steve talked about himself. He loved an audience, that kid, and maybe that was what the girls were for—so he wouldn't have to talk to himself all day, save him from his personal echo chamber.

He talked tearfully about Mick, and Glenn Mellon, and by implication about himself. He talked about global warming, and rising sea levels, and by implication about himself. He talked about money—i.e., himself. It was all about Steve. After half an hour or so, I'd had enough.

'So what happened to Scotty?' I said when he drew breath.

Luckily, at that moment Steve had finished with his personal hygiene, and he shooed the girls away like they were blowflies. So now we were alone in the van and Steve Heath, the famous Hawkman, was curled up on the couch next to me, feet tucked under him.

'He's in St Vincent's, in Sydney,' he said thickly.

For a second I thought the worst. This was why Blue and everyone had been so coy.

'No way,' I said. 'He's got . . . AIDS?'

Steve laughed his head off and slapped my wrist. 'Silly,' he giggled. 'Nothing as bad as that. He just got bitten by something.'

'Oh,' I said, happy to stand corrected. 'I just didn't know why everyone was so mum about it.'

Steve looked at me closely. The kid was twenty years younger than me, but had been in showbiz since he could walk. He'd been a child star in a show called *Jukebox Heroes*, one of those talent programs that grossed squillions a year before anyone over eight years old had heard of it. He'd been a singer-dancer, little Stevie Heath. Then he'd done some soaps as a pre-teen, and disappeared when his nose and eyes grew too big and he had the adolescent's ack-attack. Teenagers are ugly—there's only a few exceptions—and it seemed like the end of Little Stevie Heath's showbiz career. But he'd been reinvented by Bluey Angell in musical theatre, and then they'd had the brilliant idea of the nature show for the under-tens

audience. The Hawkman started out on afternoon television, just a spot in a kids' pseudo-infotainment show called *World of Wonders*, and *Death from the Skies* had been a successful spin-off. Steve was pretty vanilla about the whole mortality thing—it was all sanitised and cast as a kind of epic survival of the fittest Attenborough-style, in the service of educating kids in how the food chain really worked. And you could get worse educations, I've got to say.

'Let's take a walk,' Steve said.

We left our beers in the caravan and went out into the dark. Low on the western sky there was still a smear of gold, like the glow of a distant city. Overhead, more stars than you could poke a stick at but it might be fun to try. The crew were at the nearby minehead, a hundred yards or so away, setting up their lighting and camera positions. The shoot would take place the next night. Birds of prey, particularly in the desert, are at their best nocturnally. It can be tricky, production-wise, but Steve and his team did get some good stuff. As I said, if he had an extra dimension he might have made it Stateside. The kid knew how to sell a record.

He gave me the full story, which was 'for your ears only, Frost'. Not even Bluey Angell knew what Steve was about to tell me, though his confidentiality made me laugh inside. Showbiz: it's all smoke and mirrors.

Scotty Pascoe was Steve's closest mate since childhood, in much the same way as I'd been Mick Lamington's. These big stars, they need someone they can trust with their secrets. Just one mate. You're worth your weight in gold. Until the star dies, and then you're worth a piece of s.

One of Steve's stunts was to show how he'd find the prey for his bird. They got these two filmed narratives going at once—the bird, circling around, taking food to its chicks, living its daily routines;

and meanwhile the mouse or worm or whatever does its thing. The formula was that the show started with Steve crawling up some cliff-face to find the nest, and he'd do a spiel on how the bird mated and reared its young and all that. Then, once the bird's character was established, we'd have a commercial break and Steve would come back down to earth, crawling through the bushes. Crazy, he'd stick his hand down some hole and come up with the desert vole or witchetty grub or scorpion or whatever the bird ate. Steve's stunt, as it was with most of the presenters these days, was to appear to take great risks to get close to the animals. The closer and the riskier, the better.

As he explained it to me on our walk under the stars, though, it wasn't that risky. 'What, you reckon I'd really stick my hand down some hole in the middle of the outback?' he laughed. That was what Scotty Pascoe was for. Scotty would do the scouting, find a hole and clear it with Mortein or Ratsak or some other poison, then, just before the shoot, stick in a jar with a one-way lid containing the 'prey'. Steve would reach in and, hey presto, he's grabbed himself a juicy lizard. Mick did this kind of thing with me all the time. I was Mick's rigger. And it has to be a secret because the star is vain, he likes to preserve his 'mystique'. He needs everyone on crew to think he's some kind of witch doctor. So the rigging up of the critter in the hole was an absolute state secret held between Steve and Scotty. While doing one of those rig-ups, Scotty had been bitten by a venomous but non-fatal scorpion. That was why nobody had been allowed to know what had happened. They'd told everyone, from Bluey Angell down, that Scotty had been bitten while he was in bed.

I was here to do Scotty's job, then. To be the rigger and to keep the secret. I asked Steve where he wanted me to look and when.

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He already had the ‘prey’—this time, a western desert earthworm—in a jar in his bar fridge in the caravan. He told me there was a series of burrows, ‘probably just rabbit holes’, around the minehead. I had to get there the next evening before the crew set themselves up for the shoot, during their dinner break. It was all okay by me. That’s showbiz.

All through the next day, Steve and Bluey and their crew were off somewhere doing their thing with the bird. It must have been straightforward—Steve didn’t need me to help him pull any magic. So I stayed in his caravan and killed some time. He had the walls covered in pictures of himself—not from his old song-and-dance career, but as the rugged animal hunter. Often you couldn’t tell the difference. At the end of his show, the big bird would swoop down and take the prey from Steve’s own fingertips. It was like the shows we put on at the Kangazoo, you know, with trained cockatoos and galahs and chick hawks and ibises and jabirus doing their crowd-pleasing antics all for a piece of sugared snack. Smoke and mirrors, this business. But among the nature presenters, Steve was the only trained actor, and he managed to make it all look fresh and risky, like he was dicing with death. We lived in the age of actors now. Mick, after all, had been the king of all the actors, so I couldn’t begrudge this kid his fortune. And I didn’t believe for a minute in Bluey Angell’s prognostications about the Australian nature presenters being an endangered species. Some of them—of us—certainly were, but others would survive and flourish come what may. I counted Steve Heath among those. As Sheena would say, he was definitely a threat.

Nightfall came, and Steve tipped me a wink when the crew were going off for dinner. I had a fifteen-minute window to get

out to the minehead, clear the burrow, stick in the worm in the jar, and mark it off so that Steve knew which one to plant his bare hand into. I could see why he and Scotty did it like this: no way in the world would I, or Mick for that matter, have stuck my hand down a hole in the desert. Too many sharp teeth down there. Be about as safe as a bloke turning up at mothers' group and asking where's his tea. They've been there for fifty million years—the snakes, that is, not the mothers. Why would they be happy for some actor/singer/dancer to pluck them out and feed them to his TV audience?

Looking both ways to make sure I wasn't being watched or followed, I crept out of the van and up the narrow path to the minehead. This was country so beautiful it made my hands tingle—red sand dunes reaching hundreds of miles in both directions, shaped by winds that had not a mountain in their way for a whole continent's free run—but I was too busy to stop and reflect. I had a can of hairspray, a pair of gloves and the jar with the worm in the pocket of my army surplus jacket. As I crawl-ran I felt like a kid again, a real army commando doing my war games with Polly, Bob, Percy and the rest of my menagerie mob. My dad was in the army reserve during Vietnam and when I was young I used to boast that he'd fought in the war. It wasn't until I was older that I found out he'd been a drummer in the band and hadn't got further than advanced training at Puckapunyal. Don't think I ever forgave him really, though it wasn't his fault.

So I ducked below the scrub line and cased out the scene. Umbrellas, tracks and lights and whatnot were set up. Minehead in the background, the shaft's entrance all lit up. Steve had been down there and they'd filmed him in this claustrophobic old goldmine. Good local colour. Tonight he was going to pretend to come up out

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of the mine, then pretend to stick his hand down a hole and pull out a ruddy great worm.

Nobody was around the minehead so I acted quickly. After some fossicking in the scrub I found the holes—a network of rabbit or maybe snake burrows under the camera's eye. I put the heavy gloves on and shoved my hand down one. It was too shallow—must have collapsed as the lighting crew were setting up. Clumsy buggers, lighting boys—a menace to nature, doesn't matter which show. Mick once had a key grip who trod on a platypus, broke its back. I stuck my hand down the next hole and it was narrow, stopping the jar from going too deep. You couldn't have it seem too easy. Steve had told me that the jar had to be down at least forty centimetres—from his fingers to his biceps—to look convincing.

A few other holes were no more suitable and I was beginning to run short of time and get worried. The last thing Steve needed was me getting caught out here, blowing his precious mystique with my worm and my jam-jar. Finally I found a hole that was deep and wide enough and curled round in a kind of S-bend when I was elbow-deep. It'd have to do. I was just about to pull my hand out when I felt this almighty *snap!* on my ring finger. I whipped my hand out but the glove stayed down there. With my other gloved hand I reached in and pulled on the lost glove. It was like I was fishing—like catching an eel, a sea taipan, I thought ironically. Whatever it was wasn't letting go of my glove.

I yanked and yanked, and I didn't need to get my glove all the way out to know what was happening. This wasn't a rabbit or rat burrow—it was a f.ing snake hole, an entire catacomb under my knees—and when I finally extracted the glove and inspected the punctures I could see the parallel scars and reverse-barbed serrations of the deadliest snake on the planet.

That was a new one. I'd never known a rust cobra, *Parademansia thanatepta*, this far south. Usually they didn't stray much past the Gulf of Carpentaria, and not this far inland. If I'd had my wits about me I could have claimed a discovery. Last sighting of a rust cobra had been in the 1960s. These things kill you in about the time it takes your bowels to release. Here's a comparison: the fierce snake, or western taipan, has venom fifty times more potent than the Indian cobra, and the venom from one bite can kill forty healthy adult humans. The rust cobra, which is actually related to the taipan but is called a cobra due to the flared gills around its head when in the strike position, has venom fifty times more potent than that of the fierce snake. It's a bloody angry reptile too; if you've heard someone described as 'mad as a cut snake' then they must have been thinking of a rust cobra. If this one's fangs had come down a few millimetres higher, I'd have been dead before I got my hand out of the hole. They are nasty, nasty snakes, I'll tell you that. Steve would never expect one here. Nor would anybody else. Yow!

I only had minutes up my sleeve. From the bottom of my heart I cannot tell you what my exact thought processes were in those minutes. The person I was seeing and hearing in my head wasn't Steve, or Scotty Pascoe, or Blue, or Mick, or Phil, or anyone in the game. It was Sheena, my soul, my destiny, the one love of my life, and it was our kids. I knew what I had to do. It hit me with the force of a revelation, like I was Paul on the road to Damascus. That's the only way I can put it. An irresistible truth. Nature. Survival.

I just had time to lay down the marker—a tiny chip of quartzite Steve had given me because it shone under the lights; a lucky charm he and Scotty had owned since the very beginning—on the rim of the hole. I used the hairspray to hold the sand in place around it. I crept through the scrub and just got back to the caravan before

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I heard the voices of the crew, well-fed and on a high for the night's shoot, emerge from the mess hut.

As they were a little late setting up the shoot, Steve didn't have time to say g'day to me. He had to do his final hair and make-up. He had full and total trust that I'd done the job, as asked. Why wouldn't he? I'd been doing this for Mick for donkey's years.

When I heard Steve leave the caravan, I stayed put. I didn't want to go up and watch the shoot. I was shaking too much. I sat on the step of his van and took the jar out of my pocket and spilled the worm out onto the dirt. I tried to calm myself by watching it wriggle across the desert sand, sniffing out sanctuary, the prey and me in our private little world, watcher and watched, and I almost lost myself in the moment before all hell broke loose.

TWELVE

Fifteen years and twelve days—not that I was counting—passed between Michael Hollis leaving Sydney and his reappearance as Mick Lamington. You know what? Sometimes I grieve less for Mick than I do for Michael. We lost our twenties. You ask me, growing up together defecates all over growing old together. I missed out on Michael, and when I saw him next he was Mick.

When I left school I went to uni and studied zoology. Right up my alley—I got a government grant to have fun—but the exams and whatnot were a bit academic. They teach you more about Latin than they do about animals, and you're dealing with a lot more dead flesh than live. Graduate with a zoology degree and you'd make a terrific Pope.

But thanks to my private zoo, I had an in with the real world.

In my twenties my folks got their laundry back when I donated everyone in my menagerie, from Polly the python to Terry the tortoise, to the Dreamtime Wildlife and Reptile Park on the western

outskirts of Sydney. My parents had taken me there as a kid because it was cheaper than the zoo and in their eyes more ‘Australian’ and therefore a better education for a young kid endangered by American TV. Dreamtime was your basic Besser-block reptile park with the added attraction of a few mangy wallabies and possums. The goannas, blue-tongues, monitors and snakes were housed in concrete tubs painted with colourful dots and splashes, hence the ‘Dreamtime’ theme. It was a daily struggle for survival—not so much for the animals as for the owners, Ken and Beverley Dibbs. Dreamtime only opened on weekends and averaged about a hundred five-dollar entry tickets on a good Sunday. It made its margin on dollar-fifty Vegemite sandwiches and dollar cups of Cottee’s cordial. Eventually it got swallowed up by land releases for housing in the fastest-growing notch of the mortgage belt, and in the mid-eighties, when I was just out of uni, the Dibbses sold up and moved it all, lock, stock and barrel, to Queensland.

I went with them. I’d jagged a part-time job working for Ken and Bev while finishing my zoology degree—weekends and public holidays cleaning out snake cages, collecting tickets, selling ice-creams, and standing by in case Ken got his python scarf too snug around his neck and needed help.

Ken and Bev were Old Australia through and through. Ken was a plumber by profession and Bev a nurse, but they were animal crazy and had always collected reptiles. Dreamtime was where they lived—originally a beetroot farm inherited from Ken’s parents—and the reptile park just expanded as they collected more snakes, tortoises, lizards and whatnot.

They say these wildlife parks are havens for weirdos and kiddie-fiddlers but I honestly never saw any of that. Mick used to say I’d spent my life with my head up a snake’s arse, hence my blindness to

the people around me, but honest to God I never saw any untoward goings-on.

Ken was the showman—he'd go round kids' birthday parties with a truckload of reptiles and scare their mums until they screamed. He'd slip a skink down a lady's top or put a blue-tongue under her chair. The sight of a grown woman screaming was what got him off, that's for sure. The kids loved him too. He had a tight brown old face and a mouth sunken in across his false teeth—which became his best prop, as he'd fix his gleaming white dentures onto a snake or a baby crocodile and scare the living daylight out of some yummy mummy. Real character, Ken Dibbs.

Bev was more your mothering type, a big ship in full sail who wore floral house dresses even in the park. It was Bev who'd painted the 'Dreamtime' scenes on the concrete, and she collected Aboriginal warriors as garden gnomes which she'd set up among the exhibits to add a bit of colour. (That's how she put it, and without a quarter of a double-meaning.) Bev also collected injured marsupials—roadkill orphans mainly—and she'd sometimes have fake-fur pouches hanging off the chairs all over their house with kangaroo joeys inside them suckling from baby's bottles. She ran a whole orphanage of sugar gliders, baby birds, baby koalas—anything a Good Samaritan would bring in. When people found roadkill, say of a kangaroo or wombat, they got to searching the body in case there were babies left with a dead mother, and if they found any, they brought them pronto to Bev Dibbs.

Bev managed the souvenir shop and sandwich bar, making milkshakes and spreading margarine and flipping the till even while she had a joey under her arm sipping from a saucer of milk. She could do it all without the joey missing a drop. It was sad beyond belief that Bev had that mothering instinct, because she

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was built (and dressed) for maternity but unable to have any kids of her own.

With my out-and-out enthusiasm for animals, she and Ken more or less adopted me as their de facto son. I was the kid they'd have loved to have, if they could, but without the baggage of them always seeing me as their baby. Best of both worlds—for me, anyway. I could even impress them with my university-earned Latin and habitat knowledge and my can-do attitude to veterinary matters. Nothing you can't do with a good hacksaw, pliers, needle and thread, eh! They used me just quietly as the emergency park vet—not that it would have been very legal, but Ken and Bev trusted me. I practically lived in the place on weekends. Because I was so often climbing trees and shinnying up power poles to bring down some injured animal, Bev would say, 'If you're looking for Frosty and you can't find him down, look up!'

So when they upped stumps to the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, I went too. They offered me full-time work—a hundred bucks a week and free bed and board. I couldn't think of a better job.

For people who you just knew were cast as life's losers, things took a remarkable upward turn for the Dibbses once they got to Queensland. First of all, they'd made an absolute packet on the land in Sydney. A developer could build a suburb of two-storey detached houses on the old Dreamtime parkland, and Ken managed the sale well enough to enable them to buy four or five times as much acreage in the hinterland of the Sunshine Coast. All they had to do was stock the joint with more animals. This was at the time when the conservation movement had reached Queensland and people were up in arms about the culling of crocodiles up in the north. To that point in time, crocs were fair game for every type of gung-ho poacher who wanted to flog some skin for a handbag or a pair of shoes under the guise of 'protecting people from savage animals'.

One drunken galoot jumping into the Daintree River and getting his arm bitten off would trigger a crocodile massacre across the whole of Far North Queensland and the Northern Territory. In the eighties, crocodile numbers, both freshies and salties, were down to critical levels, and the National Parks service got a huge slab of funding to go out and save them. When they brought the crocs in, they needed somewhere to put them while they recovered and bred. And Dreamtime Reptile Park needed attractions to fill its empty acres. It was a marriage made in heaven.

Dreamtime expanded rapidly and my responsibilities increased. I became park general manager, supervising a permanent staff of twelve. Ken, who was expert at riding a tinnie up north, spotting crocodile eyeshine with his torch, and jumping them with a topjaw rope, performed re-enactments of his captures for the crowds in the crocodile enclosure. He also did snake shows, and Bev collected injured wildlife—Dreamtime soon turned into a vet-hospital-slash-amusement park-slash-educational centre. By 1986 we had more than two thousand visitors every weekend, and started to open on weekdays. The Japanese caught on as Ken's snake shows made it into the tourist guidebooks, and it was all up and up.

I was just an oversized kid anyway, so to be able to play with animals all day I was a pig in poop. Ken and Bev were eccentrics, I spose, overgrown kids like me, but they just had a pure love for the fauna, and we were a family. These were my happiest days, that's for sure.

Not that I knew it at the time. At the time I thought I was bored s.less. Does that make any sense after what I've just said? I don't know, but it's often the case that boredom and happiness go hand in hand. I, as a young buck in my twenties, was filled with that revving bulge of potential that is simultaneously a motor and irritant

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for a young bloke. I wanted us to get bigger and bigger. I wanted us to have more visitors and contribute more to preservation than just housing injured wallabies and sick pythons and crocodiles too randy to realise they were endangered. And at the same time I had this deep suspicion that life was passing me by.

Fired up with this unfocused sort of ambition—big engine, no steering wheel—I kept my eye on all the other wildlife parks, zoos and performers. I even went to Seaworld when it started up, to see if we could learn anything. (We couldn't. Seaworld was Ess-Haitch-One-Thompson, and still is.) In 1991 I took a trip up north to see Bob Crosser's Shark Show up near Townsville, and that's where I bumped, after all those years, into Michael Hollis.

Bob Crosser was famous in Australia, one of the original sixties' nature TV stars. His show, *Feeding Frenzy*, screened every Sunday night up against *Disneyland* and very often won the ratings. Bob was this bearded Tarzan who'd go down in a shark cage with nothing but his boardshorts and a bowie knife, have his crew toss a few buckets of chum into the water, and goad great whites like a f.ing idiot. For us kids he was hard to take our eyes off—this complete maniac with a brown beard and mad blue eyes who loved the sharks so much and raved about them with such enthusiasm that you'd forget that all he was doing was stirring them up for entertainment. His eyes would pop as he told stories of killer sharks chewing people up, and they'd re-create scenes of him, Bob, being menaced while spearfishing or snorkelling. He had smiling scars in his torso and limbs to prove his bona fides. But his popularity had peaked post-*Jaws*, in the late seventies, and by 1987 when I went up to Townsville he was running these pretty sad shows in his aquarium with a couple of

old grey nurses, a wobbegong and a pretend mako that was actually a green-eyed dogfish.

I waited after a show and introduced myself to Bob, you know, one naturalist to another. I went up to him and said, 'Hi, Mr Crosser, my name is Brian Westlake and I work at Dreamtime down on the Sunshine Coast. We're the biggest animal attraction down there and you're the biggest up here. Between us we've got all of Queensland covered!'

Bob Crosser looked at me and his eyes were actually a shark's: dead and lidless. I was looking at a fellow professional, and Bob was looking at an upstart who reminded him of how pitifully small Queensland was after all his big dreams in the seventies (he'd had one movie made in Hollywood, but it flunked and that was that). In short, I was a fresh-faced reminder of what a futile exercise it all was.

'Yeah right, well f. off back down there.'

As I watched the grizzled legend limp away and slam the PRIVATE door adjoining the grey nurse tank, I learnt my first lesson about the fickleness of fame. A kid from the outside, who still had Bob Crosser's books and could remember his TV specials and the movie, would think that there was a guy who could dine out forever on his achievements. When you'd done nothing with your life, you could burn with envy at being able to one day boast a Bob Crosser-type career behind you. But celebrity is a mask that eats into the face. It had pigged out on Bob Crosser. Bob was fed up with the world and fed up with kids like me.

'When you tire of nature, you tire of life. That man is tired of life. Ya reckon?'

Was that a thought bubble and was someone reading it? I spun round to where the voice had spoken.

‘G’day, Frost.’

‘Michael?’ I blinked. There was no mistaking him, though he’d done everything to make it a possibility. Where I remembered a freckly redhead with a big nose, thin lips and small eyes, this bloke standing before me was a rugged Aussie blond, all sun and crag, penetrating blue eyes set in a permanent amused crinkle, hair sweeping down over his lined forehead, nose strong and masculine, skin the colour of all the freckles fused together into one. One big freckle. He’d grown into his features.

‘How are ya, matey?’

His hand was coming towards me like a cobra’s head, a pod shape. I stood there gobsmacked until I realised he was expecting me to shake it.

‘Michael?’ I said again, stupidly. I wanted to burst into tears. It was like the love of your life walking back in the door after all these years. But I couldn’t say that of course. I hadn’t realised until then how much his absence had been hurting me.

He was a fast mover. He threw an arm around my shoulders and guided me out of the musty dimness of the Shark Show into the full-bore FNQ outdoors.

‘We’ve gotta have a chat, Frost. Let’s go to the pub.’

I followed him across the empty car park. He was wearing a blue shirt that I only then realised was a uniform for Bob Crosser’s Shark Show. Michael opened the driver’s door of his ute and hopped in. The vehicle was painted with the Bob Crosser badge—a diver putting a great white in a headlock—and in the tray was a bunch of ropes, lobster pots and pieces of a mangled shark cage.

I got into the passenger seat and Michael gunned the engine.

‘It’s not Michael Hollis, by the way,’ he said. ‘It’s Mick Lamington.’

THIRTEEN

Mick drove me to the pub in Bob's ute and we talked and drank for two days straight. There was that much to catch up on. I had to tell Mick about my days in the Dreamtime Reptile Park with Ken and Bev Dibbs, and about our unexpected success after relocating from Sydney to Queensland. Funny, but—although I felt I had a full fifteen years behind me, when I was recounting it all to Mick it sounded pretty thin. Animals, animals, animals: that was all I'd done in my twenties and early thirties. How long can you talk about Polly the python when she's your best friend as a thirty-three-year-old? It wasn't long before I started to feel insubstantial. Mick was bored, I could tell. He might have been wearing a Bob Crosser T-shirt and driving a Bob Crosser ute, but Mick wasn't all that interested in wildlife stories, or at least not mine.

When he got his turn to talk, that's when the thing started. Of that two-day conversation, I spent one per cent talking and ninety-nine per cent drinking. As it turned out, Mick wasn't working for

Bob Crosser. Vice versa: Bob was working for Mick. Since moving up to Queensland after his parents' death, Mick had worked in a number of sales jobs up and down the Gold Coast—real estate, computers, pharmaceuticals, advertising and media, a lot of other stuff he was a bit vague about—but by his late twenties he'd realised that property was where the action was, and he was buying assets up and down the state, 'turning them around' and selling them, and he'd done pretty well.

I could tell he'd done well—he had this kind of glow to him that he'd never had as a kid. Michael Hollis, for all his achievements at school, had been painting over a deep layer of insecurity. The whole girls thing aggravated it. When he went off the rails with Leo Mattock and the drugs business in his late teens, a lot of people thought it was a blip, an aberration, and Michael Hollis would soon be back on track. I saw a different Michael, though. I had a suspicion this wild man was his real self pushing through—puffy, ugly, self-hating. You can say that a man's outward ugliness doesn't matter at all, and you can also say that it's the thing that matters most out of everything, *in his eyes*, and you'd be right on both counts. Being such an ugly teenager shouldn't have mattered to someone with the gifts of Michael Hollis. But it did. It really did. That was who he was at the bottom of it all—at least, the way he saw himself—and Leo Mattock helped him achieve what you might call his self-actualisation.

But you can only grow up after you've bottomed out, and once he'd got his plunge into the abyss out of his system Michael had discovered a new path. He'd become a businessman, that is, an actor. He was an artist of bull-s., a BS artist. What I'm trying to say is, he was a salesman without much focus or expertise but one overwhelmingly successful product: Mick Lamington.

As I sat getting slowly macerated in that Townsville beer garden, I was hesitant over how much to trust him. Michael, or Mick, was chattering away as if the fifteen-year gap hadn't happened; he was taking us back, not to the last days when he'd fallen in with Leo Mattock and dropped me, with my animals and other uncool habits, like a stone, and not to the days when I'd cruelled Leo's reputation for Mick, but to the early years when we'd been best mates. It wasn't like we were fifteen or sixteen, or seventeen, again, but like we were eight or nine or ten. In other words: the golden years. I didn't know how far to trust him. I didn't know if he was as enthusiastic about life, about opportunities, about me, as he seemed, or if he was just taking me for a ride. But come on. I didn't have a hope.

He'd become handsome in a lined, craggy Australian way. He and the sun had bleached his hair blond and grown it long, and his skin colour had turned biscuit-brown. His muscles, under his shirt, weren't big but they were hard, like those old-time Australians who got muscly in a mine, back in the times when the only people who did something as bloody useless as lifting weights were in jails. Mick looked like a surfer, or a surfwear entrepreneur: he had that easy way of Queensland success about him. He figured he was on the cusp of something big.

'These shark shows,' he said. 'I only bought the Crosser property because of its location, but there's more to it . . .' He told me that his contacts in the Queensland government had given him a tip about upcoming zoning changes and a new highway, so that he would triple his money on the Shark Show site even if he left it untouched. 'Once I started to get involved as Bob's landlord, you know, I realised how much potential there is in this stuff. I see busloads of Japanese who roll up thinking they're going to see the real Australia. There are backpackers from Sweden, Germany and Britain coming

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in this semi-ironic way to see something pretty cheesy that might also be fun. There are American mums and dads who remember Bob's shark docos from the seventies. And,' he twinkled, 'there are stacks and stacks and stacks of parents with little kids who don't know what to do with them on their holidays. There's bugger all for them to do after a few days up here! Kids need stimulation. Parents are desperate. So they bring them here.'

He'd pretty much described the formula of our success down at Dreamtime, so none of Michael's—sorry, Mick's—summations of the audience and market was new to me.

'Well, with all that market out there,' I said, 'you'd think the Shark Show would be doing a bit better.'

'I know!' Mick said excitedly.

'It, um, it looks like it hasn't had a clean since 1979. And grey nurses? The teeth are kind of scary for a first look, but they move like zombies. Sharks sleep while they're moving anyway, but with a grey nurse you can't even tell when they're awake.'

'Exactly!' Mick said, his blue eyes surging out of their sockets. Were they always blue? I seemed to remember them being more grey. Maybe he had those newfangled contact lenses. That was the difference. Michael Hollis had grey eyes, Mick Lamington blue.

'And there was nobody there this afternoon except for me,' I said.

'Right! They all get peed off and leave quickly and tell everyone they know that Bob Crosser's Shark Show is a heap of abalone!'

'I mean, Bob just seems a bit . . . It's hard for me to say this, but he seems *over it all*.'

'Right on!' Mick slapped me on my arm as if I'd delivered good news instead of bad. 'Bob's the problem! We just have to get rid of him!'

‘But Bob’s the big attraction,’ I said, feeling embarrassed that I should have to explain this little flaw in Mick’s logic. ‘He might be what’s turning people away, but he’s also what’s bringing them in.’

Now Mick narrowed his eyes and leaned close. We were in a shitty pub west of Townsville and it was 1987 and I was getting a lesson from a man who was making money hand over fist.

‘No,’ Mick almost whispered. ‘No, he’s not.’

Bob Crosser died a month after that meeting. Nothing suss about it: his liver packed it in, he went to hospital and discovered he had non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, just about the deadliest cancer there is, the rust cobra of cancers. It was the most convenient of occurrences for Mick, however. Two months after our meeting, Mick Lamington’s Deadly Creatures! opened, a seven-day-a-week spectacular of oceanographic lethality: tanks of sharks, sea snakes, Portuguese men-o’-war, electric eels, saltwater crocodiles, stonefish, dreamfish, moonfish, blue-ringed octopuses and stingrays. There was one rule to the collection: if it couldn’t kill a human, it wasn’t in. We expanded it within six months to include lethal land snakes and spiders and changed its name to the snappier Mick Lamington’s Deadly!. By the end of the year it was Queensland’s third-biggest tourist attraction for children, behind Seaworld on the Gold Coast and Dreamtime Reptile Park down on the Sunshine Coast.

I say ‘we’ because I was the manager and chief animal-handler of Mick Lamington’s Deadly!. He made me the first offer at that meeting in the pub. I said no. I was firmly and happily committed to Ken and Bev down at Dreamtime. Also, Bob Crosser had given a hint of being a difficult man to work with. ‘Just think about it,’ Mick said, not taking no for an answer.

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A month later, when Bob died, Mick came down and took me and the Dibbises out to dinner. They absolutely fell for him. These crusty fair-dinkum Old Australians, pure animal-lovers, welfare-campaigners, good souls who'd turned a backyard reptile park into one of the best in the world, distrustful and eccentric and individualistic, were, by the end of the dinner, ready to sell the lot to Mick Lamington. They had the just-f.ed look I've seen so many times since. They felt like they'd had a brush with rolled-gold celebrity—people who didn't give a rat's about celebrity, who didn't have a TV and wouldn't know one end of a *Women's Weekly* from the other. They were gone.

And so was I.

He was too smart to poach me from Ken and Bev. Mick was so many steps ahead, it wasn't funny. Or it was, really. For a while. He persuaded them to 'subcontract my services' to him on a part-time basis, so that I'd be managing both Dreamtime and Mick Lamington's Deadly!. They didn't want to lose me, and they'd fallen head over heels for him, so they'd have said yes to anything. His enthusiasm as he laid out his plans was hypnotic. We were eating out of the palm of his hand.

As it turned out I spent most of my time at Mick Lamington's Deadly!, because he really needed my help with the animals, about which he knew practically nothing and was in constant danger of getting himself savaged or stung. I had to stay up there to save Mick's life when he dived into the tanks. I had to make the shows work. I had to supply him with material. One day I told Mick about how I'd been diving down in South Aussie once and nearly vomited into my facemask when I saw the most horrible thing in my life: a graveyard of sharks, definined by shark-fin fishermen who dragged them on board, amputated their fins while they were

alive and chucked them back in the water to bleed to death. There were twenty or thirty of them writhing around on the sandy ocean bed, just dying. It made me sick. Next day, Mick was regaling his audience with the same story: except that it was Mick who vomited into his facemask, Mick who had been there. Anyway, he told it more vividly—more lifelike—than I told it, and he was the one who got the crowds in. Let him have my stories, it wasn't as if I was doing anything with them.

So I was a bit of everything for Mick, up there in Townsville. Meanwhile I also kept my eye on Dreamtime, as I owed my first allegiance to the Dibbses.

But don't you worry, Mick had his eye on Dreamtime too.

As for the public, what did those busloads of Japanese, those ironic backpackers, those wholesome American couples and those desperate sweaty families with kids care that the Mick Lamington of Mick Lamington's *Deadly!* had been invented no more than three months earlier? What did they care that Mick Lamington was only famous because we said he was famous? What did they care that most of his daring stories of life-and-death incidents in the wild were borrowed from someone else, namely me? They didn't give a damn, because he gave them exactly what they wanted: a great show and the scariest things they were likely to see in the flesh; something their kids would talk about and talk about and tell all their friends about when they got home from their holidays.

Correction: *we* gave them what they wanted.

FOURTEEN

By the time of Mick's death, the Kangazoo working arrangement between me and him was loose. We didn't need more than a handshake—not even that—and Mick would have taken offence if I'd asked for a contract. As long as we had each other, there was no need for paperwork.

Along with doing my spots in the show, I still held the official title of Kangazoo director. This was how I sang for my supper (and my breakfast, and my lunch, and my princely demountable). Filming segments for the shows was great, because it got me out into the bush or the sea doing what I loved and, quite frankly, what I was best at. Everyone acknowledged that. But we were only shooting fifteen to twenty weeks of the year, and even with the publicity tours of America, which could take up another five to seven weeks, there still remained six months where I wasn't working on the show.

With wildlife parks like ours, celebrity is your big competitive advantage. If you're on TV, the rate of visits shoots up like

an echidna's tongue up a beehive. Mick's television fame transformed the Kangazoo. Before TV, we had more lizards than visitors. After TV, we stood alongside Seaworld, the Sunshine Coast, Surfers Paradise and the Superbank as south-eastern Queensland's must-see tourist destinations. They came from everywhere—Japan, the States, Europe, even China and India. We had a bloke from Nome, Alaska, who dressed up as Mick and thought he was him. Pretty weird, eh? To keep up with the visitors, and to spend some of the money that was coming in, we expanded by fifteen hectares in three years. We were buying up real estate hand over fist with the stated aim of creating wildlife sanctuaries, but Mick decided to sit tight for a while and watch out for some council zoning changes. By the time Mick died, we owned more land than the king of Belgium. Our visitor capacity went to twenty thousand per weekend. And we could charge them four times as much. We couldn't stop them, no matter what we did.

Even putting me in a thrice-daily show couldn't turn them off. They came to see Mick, of course. His big mug screamed out of the billboards and all the advertising, and anyone coming to the Kangazoo was geared up to see a bit of Kiss and 'Yow!'. When he was first on television, Mick would appear at the zoo six times a week in a routine late-afternoon matinee—everyone'd know when he was on. But as his fame spread, we couldn't let people know when Mick would do a show—the potential for traffic jams was too great—so it was all done cloak-and-dagger, as if Mick appearing on stage was like the Rolling Stones turning up at some local pub. By the last days, he was showing up at the zoo four or five times a year, though I can guarantee that every visitor who paid their sixty-five bucks to walk through the gates three hundred and sixty-five days a year believed they were going to see him.

His non-appearances didn't harm our popularity. They still came. And shows with Frosty were the consolation prize. The rarity of Mick's performances made it all the more crucial that I kept stepping up. They had to see *someone* from the TV show. It's an amazing thing, television. You can save the world from poverty or cure cancer and no one will know it. But if you host a game show at five o'clock on weekdays you are a celebrity. If you do a home-shopping hour in mid-morning you are better known than the Governor-General. Once you're on the box, you are famous.

And so I was famous, or sort of. It wasn't just my nature telling me the teenage girls weren't *quite* as rabid and didn't scream *quite* as hysterically when I appeared, compared with Mick. And I'm not being overly self-critical when I say my tendency to suffer dry-mouth and spoonerisms sort of limited my banter with the audiences. Mick told me I was too earnest. 'Come on, Frost, they don't want you showing them how amazing it is that the marsupial mouse can sniff out a bull ant from five clicks. They want the marsupial mouse to stick his nose up his own clacker. Or catch a ball. And if he can't,' Mick concluded, anticipating my objection, 'you gotta find an animal who will.'

In other words, I wasn't much of a crowd-pleaser in a world that wanted, more and more, to be pleased. I was an educator. I wanted to share my wonder and amazement at the riches and variety of the animal world; instead they wanted to see a bandicoot wearing a pirate's hat walk the plank off a fake galleon in the Koalaseum, or a spiny anteater pop balloons to the beat of 'You Light Up My Life' in the Echidney Opera House. But I fell into line, as always, and did what I was told. If you couldn't beat Mick and Phil—and nobody could, except death and Pioneer Network—you had to join them. I became an organ-grinder,

a lion-tamer, a gimmick-artist, an *entertainer*. Except I never entertained myself. I reckon the audiences saw through me like I was a sheet of f.ing glass.

So two days after Steve Heath bought it at Silvercap, I was back treading the boards: midday, three o'clock, five o'clock, factory-produced pantomime. Onstage I spose I presented a reluctant figure, stiff in my own crust. Mick once told me I had to 'work harder at *selling* the show'. I thought he meant going to the mall and flogging tickets, and it really tested my loyalty for a minute, but apparently what he meant was the way I acted on stage. I had to get them laughing, crying, cheering and sighing. Just like him. I couldn't be Mick. Never have been. Never will be. But there was something inside me, something original that I couldn't sell off, something true and Australian that I knew was better than anything Mick had done. I just figured my time was yet to come. But it would. It would come. And that was a large part of why I hung in there as nothing more than Mick's dusty crusty fusty frosty Old Australian sidekick—because I believed the world would turn again and my day would come. The times would suit me. And they will.

That day, two days after I was hustled out of Steve Heath's camp in Bluey Angell's twin-engine like a dirty secret (which I was—Bluey didn't want anyone to know Steve had needed to use Mick Lamington's rigger), I did my standard three shows. I was Ess-Haitch-One-Thompson, that's for sure. The kids weren't laughing—they rarely did, but this time even their mothers weren't trying to make them laugh. They were sitting there clock-watching. The happiest I made them was when I said I'd finished.

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I headed home after the five o'clock 'performance' to find Sheena feeding the kids. We hadn't spoken since I'd come back from Silvercap. We hadn't had time.

The scene when I came into the demountable was the usual bedlam. Rod was throwing stuff, Rosie was tipping her soup bowl over her head. Sheena wasn't stoned yet but she'd gotten into that short-fused end-of-day rut where she'd be more use to everyone if she was. Stoned, that is. She was all curt efficiency, not picking fights—'Rod, come on, into the bath. Rosie, let's shampoo your hair'—because she just wanted to get them away and in bed so she could fire up. Amid all this, as usual, I opened a beer and sank into my rocker to watch the news. Rod and Rosie came to play with me, which was just a stalling tactic to keep out of the bath. Rosie started dancing around and singing a song by Pink—'Stupid Girls'—which was pretty funny but also a bit weird coming from a three-year-old. And I jiggled Roddy on my knee making him laugh himself silly until I had to stop when he had a coughing fit. And so on—the daily witching hour of bringing up youngsters.

Once they were down, Sheena came and sat on the couch and pulled her kit from under the coffee table. She had her papers, dope, filters, matches and whatnot in an old-fashioned Arnott's biscuit tin. Another great Aussie firm gone American. Another success story. It stank like a rank old bong.

'So,' she croaked through her first and always happiest puff. Sometimes I wondered what other employees thought of the smell coming out of our place. Did they know it was only Sheena, not me? Should I have put a sign out? 'It's not me, it's her'? 'I'm with Stupid'?

'So?'

'So . . . a journo called today, wanted to talk to you.'

‘Hope you told ’em to f. off.’

‘Sure did. He said he was writing a story about the “epidemic” of nature-presenter fatalities.’

‘Hope it’s not catching.’

She smirked sarcastically, playing along, humouring me. ‘That’s what I said.’

‘Before you told him to f. off.’

‘After. F. off was the first thing I said. But he kept talking. Spose they’re used to it. I said, how’s it an epidemic? And he said, in journalism if something happens twice it’s a trend, three times it’s an epidemic. We had a bit of a laugh at that.’

‘Good for you.’

‘Don’t worry, Frost. Then I told him to f. off again. He said he might try you tonight, but I said we’d screen calls and not call him back.’

I shushed her—there was a news item about Steve. He hadn’t rated like Mick, top of the bulletin for the best part of a week. For Steve Heath there was no CNN, no BBC World, no Ned Clegg. But he got a respectable coverage on the locals. His funeral was going to be the next day. There was the obligatory reference to Mick Lamington and Glenn Mellon—for anyone who’d been on the moon for the past couple of weeks—and an expert, a uni professor, making the astonishing claim that ‘the natural world can be extremely dangerous’, which they must have put in just for laughs. And then they were onto the cricket. That’s the thing when you’re famous: your demise can be measured by the column inch, by the frames of footage, and then, puff, you’re gone. There was no mention of me. Bluey Angell had said nobody would ever know I’d been at Silvercap. Good for him. Nobody—not Blue, not anyone—would ever know I’d had my hand down that hole a few minutes before Steve. The only man who knew would tell no tales.

But then there was my wife, stubbing out her first doobie. It always put her in a playful mood. She'd made it to the end of the day. Time for celebration.

'You know what he was going to call his story?' she said.

'Who?'

'That bloke who rang.'

I'd forgotten about him.

'"Who's killing the great nature presenters of Australia?"' she said, and laughed. It was a stoned laugh, hollow, more between Sheena and herself than with me. As a joke.

We were sitting in our usual positions, like boxing opponents with the television as referee: Sheena on the couch, me on my rocker. Outside, cicadas were playing back-up to a whipbird in the aviary and a pair of kangaroos fighting in the Marsuperdome. The evening show: they put gloves on them. The Queensland night was sticking to me, no end to it in sight.

A cockroach made its way out from under the couch. Cockroaches had been a bone of contention in our marriage since the early days. Sheena hated them with a personal intensity, as if each had done something to her, only to her. She'd go out of her way to chase them round the house and not rest until she'd smashed them under her shoe or pulverised them with a rolled-up TV guide. I, on the other hand, am a live-and-let-live man. If Sheena doesn't want to share the demountable with cockroaches then I will happily gather them up and release them outside. But I won't kill them, and she hates me for it.

Before she saw this one—a big armoured-vehicle of an American cockroach, the giant flying kind they'd send into Iraq if they had the balls—I bent down and saved its life. Using a peanut bowl as a cage, I trapped the cockroach, slid my hand underneath and held it in till

I got out the door. I dropped it into the garden, ‘so it can come right back in’ as Sheena would tell me. Well, let it. Cockroach, there is room enough in this world for you and me.

When I came back in she was giving me the beady eye.

‘What?’ I said, settling back into my rocker.

‘Amazing.’ She shook her head. She was onto her third joint now, the point of the evening where the euphoria subsided into the addict’s quest, the ebbing into disillusion that can only be kept at bay by upping the dose. I’d never have thought a mere weed could dictate a person’s total pattern of thinking and behaving as ruthlessly as heroin, or Serepax, or television. My poor darling. This wasn’t her. This was something else. It wasn’t my Sheena.

‘What?’ I repeated, more challenging.

She was still shaking her head. ‘The miracle of nature’s design, eh, Frost?’

I looked away, at the television but not really at it. She was repeating back to me my own speech—how nature has put as much work into designing the cockroach as it has into humankind; the miraculous complexity, the sheer improbability of any of us being here at all; that cherished freakishness applying as much to the cockroach, the bird, the quokka, the snake or the ant as it applies to *Homo sapiens*. We are all miracles. It was an ethos I wanted to impart to our children, no matter what Sheena said. If I could leave them anything, it was this respect for the miraculous.

‘You’ll save the life of a cockroach on the one hand,’ she said, a nasty burn running through her words, like a cross-examiner knowing what was coming next, ‘but on the other . . . on the other . . . a man’s life . . .’

I hissed through my teeth, a vicious sound that I hoped would end the conversation there. And she had nothing else to say. What

was she going to do, tell the police I'd killed Glenn and Steve? Why would she do that? Of course she wouldn't. For a start, I was the father of her children. Not a particularly good father, not a great provider, but preferable to doing it on her own. No, I undersell myself. Sheena and I had enough past behind us, enough *good* past, to keep us going a while longer. She did love me, I believe. The memory of the night of Mick's funeral was still only a few weeks old.

And besides, let's say she did want me gone. What could she or anyone else do, even if they knew the entire truth? I had assembled the cage in which Glenn Mellon died. The cage malfunctioned and he was crushed by a shark. I had directed Steve Heath to put his hand down a hole in which a deadly snake lurked. Steve screamed like a twelve-year-old girl watching *Friday the 13th*, ran around in three diminishing circles and dropped into the sand for his final fling. His mouth foamed like a badly poured beer. But had I done it? No. To say I'd killed either Glenn or Steve was to say that I had such command over nature's beasts that I could appoint a shark and a snake as my personal hired assassins. All right—I do have a certain Force, a quality of understanding that goes beyond the ordinary, and which even I am in awe of sometimes, but it doesn't extend to contract killings. I didn't kill Glenn or Steve; I didn't order them killed; I had nothing to do with it. Officer, are you listening?

But my wife thought me capable of murder. That was the truly scary thing. My Sheena, my love, my life, who'd known me through so many ups and downs over the years—she thought I could kill men, out of pure petty jealousy or ambition. How could she think that? Didn't she know me better? Well, maybe she didn't. That's what was hard to take. Maybe she didn't.

When she got into this wry, accusing mood, I just walked away from her. She might think I was a killer, but I wouldn't dignify such a terrible accusation with a reply in case it might seem I was taking her seriously.

So this was the pattern we fell into those nights after Steve Heath's death. We'd sit in our chairs, a normal long-term married couple, silent in front of our television, nothing to say. She didn't really want me to speak until I gave into her accusation and admitted I was a killer. It's a tough thing, knowing that telling a lie is the only way to kick-start your marriage.

And then, one night about a week after Heath's funeral, we heard a cough.

'Rod's sounding scratchy,' I said.

Sheena gave a hostile grunt as if I was trying to change the subject: the ever-present elephant in the room.

The sound came again, a dry bark like the warning cry of a mallee duck. I found myself enjoying it, curse me, out of spite, as if Sheena and I were sitting in a theatre and the sound effect only existed to underline and aggravate the distance between her and me. Our little boy had had a few persistent coughs, nothing too serious, but if I'd stopped to think about it I would have realised that this one had been going on for more than a month, longer than a four-year-old should have to bear. But I hadn't stopped to think about it. My self-preoccupation since Mick's death had been as tight around me as a wasp's cocoon. And Sheena's was in her bloodstream; she'd let it in five years ago when she started inhaling that pure green selfishness.

'Do you want to check him?' I said after we had listened to our son coughing for an irresponsibly long time.

Sheena grunted again and was preparing herself to say something nasty when she looked past me, to the hall doorway. Her face crumpled and she rushed across the room.

I don't want to dwell on what happened next. It gives me too much pain to relive the dawning on me of what a total s. I had been. It's a little boy's suffering we're talking about. Rodney emerged into the living room ghastly grey, shaking, blue around the lips, reaching out for one of his stupid parents to notice him. He was suffering what the doctors would tell us was an acute and potentially fatal asthma attack. We had let this attack continue an hour longer than was safe without taking him to a hospital. Another two hours and he would have choked on the inflammation of his own lung tissue, those little passageways and branches narrowing like highways with all their lanes shut down till they were as wide as towpaths.

Sheena and I were with it enough to pick up our gasping boy—his breath beat in the hollow of his collarbone as rapidly as a racing pulse—and bundle him and his little sister into the car. We got him to hospital where he was medicated and, not to be too dramatic about it, pulled back from the brink. We sat there all night without looking at each other.

As Sheena straightened out, she became angry and impatient and finally, as fatigue set in, collapsed in a misery of shame and guilt. We had a reconciliation of sorts. She flogged herself for being a useless mother and begged my forgiveness. I blamed myself for my part. We were bad parents together. That was a making-up. She promised to give up her dope, which I'd heard too many times before to take literally, but I appreciated the thought, as I'd appreciated it every other time. And who knows, I thought, maybe this time she does mean it, maybe the sight of your son tubed up in a

hospital bed is enough to really change a human being. I mean, if it can't, what can?

When dawn broke she took Rosie home. I stayed by Rod's bedside. Several other children were brought in with asthma attacks. Was there some kind of epidemic coming on, a silent plague? There were a lot more than three: plenty for the papers to make a meal of. The doctor who took me aside for my serious briefing, a young man called, if you can believe it, Dr Proctor, said Rod's case wasn't a run-of-the-mill asthma reaction. Our son had something they hadn't seen before. At least one Westlake was making a star of himself. The doctors flocked in like pilgrims to the virgin of Lourdes.

They kept Rod in hospital for a week while they did tests. Every result was worse than the previous one, in the sense that they were all inconclusive, meaning another one would be needed. I stayed in the hospital each day, only coming home to sleep and update Sheena. She spent a lot of time in the hospital with me but her primary focus was taking care of Rosie and getting her own s. together. We lived in a hazy dream world, life kept at arm's length, waiting until we knew, saving up the recriminations.

Rod was stabilised, but he wasn't better. His asthma was controllable but his skin was rosy with eczema, inflamed and raw in islands mapping his face and his body. He had to lie very still, and was helped to do so by the medication, his exhaustion, and an awful look in his eye as if he was accepting his fate. Four-year-old boys aren't meant to accept their fate. It is a terrible thing to see a young child as calm and wise as a hardened, experienced adult. The light dimmed in his eyes. For every time I'd roused on him or wished him to grow up and stop putting crayon on the walls or tipping his food or throwing a tantrum, I now wished

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his energy to return. He could throw his dinner from here to kingdom come, kick me in the nuts whenever he liked. I wanted my four-year-old back.

Everything else was put on hold—which was lucky really, because everything *was* on hold for me while Phil, Pioneer Network, Ranger Lamington and Deano Rudd prepared to relaunch the series. Phil's staff kept us supplied with food and the necessities at home, for which I should have been grateful, but they all seemed a long long way away.

Hospitals can feel not just like the waiting room for eternity, but eternity itself.

Finally, after a week, we had a result. Dr Proctor sat us down in his office and explained. Sheena gripped my hand as if she was floating away from a doomed ship and I was a piece of driftwood, her last hope.

Rod had an extremely rare tropical complex of allergies, Dr Proctor said. Medical science was still at a primitive stage of understanding the cause of allergies and why they affected individuals so differently, but Rod, to cut a long explanation short, was in danger of having to live the rest of his life, or at least his childhood, in a sterilised bubble. Among the more certain causes—what could be said for sure—was his closeness to animals. Living in the zoo was making Rod sick. Living with a father who brought home with him so many spores and hairs and the fine fuzz, the dusty air, of animalia was killing our son.

Why hadn't it affected him until now, we asked.

Dr Proctor looked at us searchingly, with that examination that stops short of judgement but is somehow worse, and said it had

been affecting Rod for some years but we had only noticed it now. He seemed to be saying that if we had been watching Rod more closely we would have been able to nip it in the bud. He might have been right.

But I didn't want Rod to live in a bubble, and there was no way we could live away from animals. What else did we have? Where else could we go? It was impossible to accept. I begged Dr Proctor to give us some way out, some compromise.

He softened, only a little, but enough. He said there were some experimental treatments going on overseas on this kind of thing, and he would be happy to prepare Rod as a subject.

'What kind of treatments?' Sheena asked.

'Medication, radiotherapy.'

'Radiotherapy? Like he's got cancer?' I said.

'This is a degenerative condition that has a serious long-term outlook for Rodney,' Dr Proctor said. In other words, not cancer but not much better. Maybe worse. How come they can't ever give you a straight answer?

'Where is this trial taking place?' I said.

Before answering, Dr Proctor said that medical trials of this kind were not usually covered by Medicare. If we chose to participate, it might cost us a lot of money.

I wished he'd just tell us how much, rather than needing us to squeeze it out of him.

'How much?'

'Could be forty, could be fifty,' he said.

'Thousand dollars?'

He nodded.

To save our little boy, we needed fifty thousand dollars. We didn't own our home and, thanks to a long and glittering

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professional career alongside the world-famous multimillionaire Mick Lamington, we had about two thousand in the bank.

‘Where is the trial taking place?’ I said.

Dr Proctor looked at me steadily.

‘America,’ he said. ‘California.’

And I tell you, that was when it all became clear to me, as simple as a switch of a light.

The way Sheena was looking at me I knew she was thinking the same bloody thing.

FIFTEEN

Mick and Sharpie Phelps went a long way back. Too far for comfort. Sharpie, the one and only desert rat, had been best mates with Bob Crosser since forever. They'd both done *Australia's Dangerous* TV programs up and down the east coast in the seventies, and had both had travelling roadshows. I remember Bob and Sharpie the way other kids would remember Starsky and Hutch or Lillee and Thommo. They were my gods.

Mick met Sharpie through Bob in the eighties when both of them, Bob and Sharpie, were on the skids. Mick told me all about it the day I ran into him at Bob Crosser's Shark Show in the late eighties.

I was thinking about those old days as I drove out toаланjuk Downs, the station where Sharpie Phelps lived, five hundred and fifty miles north-west of the Kangazoo. Sharpie had hated Mick, detested him. He could remember the time before Mick Lamington, and knew that Mick wasn't a fair-dinkum naturalist like himself, or Bob Crosser, or even me for that matter. Sharpie's memory was long

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enough to know that Mick was a Queensland real-estate salesman who'd turned to showmanship when he saw a buck in it, and he'd watched in horror for a decade and a half as Mick's fame, instead of imploding up its own fundament, had instead mushroomed like an atomic cloud over Queensland, spreading across Australia and then the world. Sharpie, I'd heard, believed that Mick had somehow knocked Bob Crosser off. Which was BS. You can't give someone cancer like that. But Sharpie wouldn't be shaken. His envy of Mick drove him into a bitter little corner inside himself, where he began to rot away. Mick hadn't killed Bob Crosser, but year after year he'd been killing Sharpie. Sharpie was eating his heart out. And Mick was to blame.

My drive was a long and lonely one through the Australia that is more typical than what we show on television: flat, hot, featureless, the colour of vomit. Dust storms blow up in your face, mummifying you in sand, and then when it settles you're over-run by flies. And then it'll rain so hard the roads will become impassable within two hours. The heat is so rugged you could fry an egg on your head yet the nights can be cold enough to kill you. For most visitors this is a f.ing dismal country. Which is why I love it so much. The rest of the world doesn't get to see the boredom, the numbing spaces in between the great outback attractions, because we who make the images don't show it to them. They think it's Disneyland out here.

I prefer the boredom of the flat spaces, the badlands, I guess because they're *mine*. While I was driving the last few hundred miles to Sharpie's, I saw two cars. Two cars in one day. That's pretty darn good.

Setting the old ute on a straight line through miles of featureless scrub, I let my mind wander to the past, and to the future. I was pretty rocked about the news from Dr Proctor. That morning I'd

told Sheena I needed to go to Brisbane to start arranging our plans to take Rod to America. I'd have to stay overnight. It was a pretty flimsy excuse to get out of the house, and wouldn't have stood up to much questioning. What could I do in Brisbane that I couldn't do by phone from home? Why did I need to stay overnight? Where was I going to get the money? What, exactly, was the plan?

But Sheena was in no mood for interrogation. She was distracted by her new efficiency as a mother—looking after Rosie, getting to the shops to buy a treat for Rod, organising child care for the little one while she kept up her vigil at the hospital. She only knew extremes, Sheena. One minute a raging pothead, the next Mother of the Year. That's how it's always been. She's a slave to her enthusiasms.

She just let me go.

Beyond, or beneath, this was an understanding grown between us since we'd learnt of Rod's illness. In the complex and fuddled yet somehow quicksilver workings of Sheena's mind, I had done away with Glenn Mellon and Steve Heath in some kind of prescient vision of what was happening to Rod. I'd killed them to save our family. I had a plan, or at least in Sheena's head I did. It must have been planted there by that journo. Who's killing the great nature presenters of Australia? Well, if a journo's asking the question, then there must be an answer. There must be a who. And in Sheena's dazed and confused state, that who was me. Which would have been simple enough to dispel if it had shocked her and she'd confronted me with it. But the problem was, she *liked* it. She was turned on by the notion that I was knocking them all off. So now, if I was concocting some kind of BS story about going to Brisbane, it was because I had more of this kind of work to do—for the family. Sheena, God help her, held me in a new kind of awed respect which I hadn't felt since our very first days together. I had a kind of masculine

father-husband mystique about me. That was okay. I didn't argue too hard. Let her believe what she wanted, if that was what'd get her through.

I'd dropped in at the Kangazoo's veterinary surgery—I had my own key—and picked up a couple of things. I paused while I was there, just a moment in the formaldehyde smell, to reflect on our achievement. Once a pineapple storage shed, this hospital now fixed up more than five thousand native-animal cases a year, from frogs with broken legs to kangaroos with lockjaw. Kangazoo animals were the best looked after on this earth thanks to our ten-million-dollar vet hospital. It's something to be proud of. Over and above all the other stuff.

Anyway. With the ute packed, I'd set out from the zoo, not towards Brisbane but in the opposite direction, north-west, towards Sharpie Phelps.

Nobody, not even Sharpie, knew I was coming. This one I had to do secretly. I'd been lucky with Steve Heath, who, due to his own paranoia, had kept my presence at Silvercap to himself. Bluey Angell could be trusted. Revealing that Steve had needed a rigger would, in our naturalists' world, be like speaking ill of the dead. Steve's funeral had been a couple of days ago, and as part of the myth-making they had to keep all of his little helpers in the shadows. Scotty Pascoe, the real keeper of Steve's secrets, was cooped up in hospital, and I wasn't invited. That was fine. That suited me.

But I couldn't rely on being invisible every time. Even now, if someone got wind that I'd been with Steve Heath when he died, and put that together with my work on Glenn Mellon's cage, they might see a pattern begin to emerge. Sheena already had. Others

would follow. They only had to start looking. So I couldn't afford to be seen around Sharpie Phelps tonight. There was already one 'Who's Killing the Great Nature Presenters of Australia?' story out there, and it was only going to get bigger. I didn't need to be linked to any of the Big Five. People might think they had an answer to what was a pretty stupid question.

See? Already I was thinking like I'd had something to do with Glenn's death, and Steve's. I hadn't, had I? But the thing is, present intentions can work backwards. I even started to wonder if in some way—telepathy?—I could be linked with Mick's death too.

As I drove out to Jalanjuk Downs, though, there wasn't much doubt. I was going there with a certain plan. Was it a plan, or just something I'd fallen into? It didn't matter now. From here on, I could see my mark and how I was going to hit it.

There was only one nature presenter who was fit to take over the *Kiss* franchise. Yours truly: Brian Frosty Westlake. It had taken me a few weeks to admit that to myself—to accept my destiny. It ran against my grain to push myself to the fore like this. But now there was no doubting it. Rod's illness had been sent as a message from above, to get me off my a. I needed to look after my family, and I needed to look after the wildlife of Australia. I was a wilderness warrior and there were certain distasteful things a warrior had to do for the good of his tribe. My tribe were Sheena, Rod and Rosie, and behind them the worried ranks of Australia's thousands of native species. They needed care. They needed to tell the world that they would no longer be menaced by these TV cowboys, these stuntmen, these pin-up boys. The joke about Sharpie Phelps was that he'd say, 'Here I am in front of a thorny devil's burrow, which you can't see because I'm standing in front of it.' The fauna of Australia didn't need that. They could survive well enough on their

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own. That was why Sharpie must not, under any circumstances, take over the *Kiss* series.

So this was my mission. My tactics were also clear. I couldn't just wait for each new *Kiss* frontman, and wipe them out one by one until the call came to me. I do away with Glenn Mellon, I do away with Deano Rudd, I do away with everyone down the line until they get to me? That's impossible, ridiculous, not to mention dangerous. The *Kiss* label would gain a pall of doom around it, and the Americans wouldn't want to touch it. If I did it that way, I'd be engineering its collapse, killing the goose that would lay its golden eggs for me from now on, if I played my cards right.

No, what I would do was to eliminate the competition *before it became competition*. The Big Five had become the Big Four after Steve Heath's downfall. From tonight, they'd be the Big Three. I'd work my way down through the contenders until I got to Deano Rudd, and he'd be the last to go. Then, with him eliminated, Pioneer Network would only have one place to look: me.

But I had to act fast. For the good of the franchise, Deano had to go before he was announced as Mick's official heir.

And for Deano to go, I had to do the others first.

So I had about three weeks.

Which would coincide nicely with the time we were to take Rod to America. I could sign my new contract while we were there.

Kill two birds with one stone.

One of Mick's favourite sayings.

SIXTEEN

After seven hours' driving, broken only by a single stop for petrol (I wore a cap and sunglasses and made sure to stop at a small out-of-the-way servo where they didn't have security cameras), I arrived in mid-afternoon at Jalanjuk Downs. It was Sharpie's own station, about the size of Fiji. He'd done well enough for himself in his fifteen minutes, but it wasn't that that enabled him to own such a huge pile. It was family money. Like Mick, Sharpie created the myth that he was self-made, but he relied on a hand-me-down for the start-up capital and now, when he was on his last legs and he'd spent all of his TV money, it was the hand-me-down that was keeping him in pills and booze.

Jalanjuk Downs was nearly an hour from the nearest township, Darville, and I hadn't seen a car on the road since there. I let myself in the property by crossing a cattle grid. I don't believe in cattle grids, having pulled more than one mangled cow out of them. Not to mention the kangaroos and emus, the collateral damage. Imagine—

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your ankle snapped, you're left in the sun to die of blood loss and thirst, all for the grand crime of trying to cross a line where someone was too lazy to build a gate because it'd mean they'd have to unpack their a. from the driver's seat. Cattle grids are up there with torture chambers if you ask me, the difference being that the CIA don't torture people just because they're too lazy to open a gate.

Anyway. The dirt driveway led another half-mile or so to the homestead, whose rusty red roof throbbed in the distance. I didn't want to alert anyone by sending up a plume of dust, so I pulled over near a bore drain just inside the grid. I parked behind a corrugated-iron feed shed, picked up my bag of goodies and slogged through the scrub towards the homestead. It was crappy land. Once it would've supported ten or twenty sheep an acre, but now it would be less than one. I didn't see a single farm animal. Which wasn't surprising: I'd heard that Sharpie wasn't taking such great care of the place any more.

About two hundred yards from the homestead, I found a slight rise in the scrubland and sat in a vantage point where I could see the entrance and front rooms of the house through my binoculars. Mick and I had been here a few times. When Mick got famous, Sharpie had tried to swallow his pride and install himself as a kind of mentor figure, having been to the States and done it all himself. He probably wanted to sabotage Mick under the guise of alerting him to the pitfalls. But it was hard to take Sharpie seriously: he'd moan on about the Yanks and their forked tongues, and the rip-off agents and snake-oil merchants who'd done him in (and who would do Mick in if he wasn't careful); but two bottles of scotch and a handful of pills in and you knew that Sharpie's sharp decline hadn't had a lot to do with the Americans. His own worst enemy, Sharpie was. Those nights sitting listening to him with his out-of-

date information about Hollywood were fun at first, but on the second and third hearing they began to drag on the eyelids. Mine, anyway. Mick never had a bad word to say about him. Mick never had a bad word to say about anyone. But Mick was also the one who'd been too busy to visit Sharpie in the last ten years. Which killed Sharpie, being ignored. I reckon, under the genial skin, Mick worked out that Sharpie actually wanted to control him, not help him, and by turning his back on Sharpie's friendship Mick was getting his revenge. Anyway, that's just my theory.

I set up on my grassless knoll. This was truly crap country. It reminded me of the first time I'd gone to a station, as a kid, to some distant cousins of my father's. When we'd arrived in this godforsaken hole, my father had said to his cousin, 'Can you find something for Brian to do? Rake the paddocks or something?' Dad meant it as a joke, but the thought of it gave me nightmares, bad needle-in-a-haystack dreams of raking a gibber-filled paddock the size of a small country. Sometimes the Australian land can be so vast it makes you physically ill, like seasickness on an ocean.

There were a couple of utes parked in front of Sharpie's home-
stead and a station wagon and tractor in the shed. Impossible to say if he was alone or had company. Sharpie's wife and kids were long gone—I remembered a *Woman's Day* exclusive where Margie Phelps called him an 'abuser', whatever that meant. The more hurtful thing must have been the story his kids told, where they more or less said that if he wanted to contact them again it was up to him, they wouldn't be making the effort themselves. The hidden meaning was clear: they'd talk to him again when he cleaned himself up.

* * *

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I'd been perched on my crow's nest for two hours, and the sun was getting low, when a beefy white woman in a house dress came out and left in one of the utes. Either his housekeeper or his root, it didn't matter to me: she was gone. But that suggested the two utes in front weren't Sharpie's. I had to wait for the other one to leave, or else wait until dark and go in closer.

I squatted there like an insomniac owl waiting for nightfall. Without anything much to do, my eyes wandered to the ground beneath my feet and the glorious animal kingdom going about its daily business. Even out here, the earth was alive with insects, rodents, reptiles, birds, even the odd mammal. I kept thinking about my plan. Was I really up to it? I couldn't say until I'd done it. The Glenn Mellon and Steve Heath knockdowns, I could easily tell myself that they hadn't been my intention. That was nature taking care of itself, defending itself. The shark, in Glenn's case, and the snake, in Steve's, were simply agents of the wild letting a couple of unprofessional show ponies know where they stood. Sure, I was a witness, or a spectator, or maybe at worst a facilitator. But I hadn't killed them. I hadn't had anything to do with it.

I was going to kill Sharpie Phelps, but. I was going to do this one myself. Wasn't I? I couldn't rely on animals doing my dirty work. For a start, nature doesn't work that way. If any nature presenter knew this, it'd be me. You can't bend animals to your will. They're not puppets. You can't hire them as assassins any more than you can hire them to pay the bills or fix your computer. And even if you could hire an animal as an assassin, you can't rely on the prey to stumble in as blindly or as conveniently as Glenn Mellon and Steve Heath had. Those were just pure luck. Right place, right time. Or wrong, depending on your point of view.

Anyway, I didn't have time to let nature take its course. Twenty days left, and Ranger and Rudd would take the keys to the castle.

Now, if I was making this story up, at this point, while I was crouched near Sharpie Phelps's bore drain fooling around with a knob-tailed gecko I'd found, some encounter with the animal world would teach me a lesson. Here's how it would go. I'd see spinifex ants building their ingenious nest, a concrete construction of grains of sand glued together with spinifex resin; inside the nest the ants' larvae suck the leaf sap, process it through their microscopic bodies, then crap out a sugary waste juice which the adult spinifex ants then feed on. It's a perfect closed system, a symbiosis of ants (both unborn and mature) and the vegetable kingdom, a marvel of the desert that's been going on for gazillions of years.

Just across from the spinifex ants' nest, I'd see a sleepy desert dragon scooping the same red sand over his back for an end-of-the-day hot bath, stocking up on heat for the night. The dragon's colour is changing, from the pale browns and golds that reflect heat during the day to the darker browns it needs to absorb and retain heat during the night. Night-time is also when our dragon gets hungry.

Across the dry gully I'd see some rainbow cockroaches come out to feed on the spinifex litter—these would change your opinion of the cockroach, if you had a bad one. Up close, they're as vivid and as brilliant and multicoloured and hallucinogenic as the Great Barrier Reef. Then there'd be a mulga ant, bloated with nectar, sitting by while the worker ants come and tap it like a reservoir to transfer energy from the tanker to the proles for their productive night ahead.

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But the message—I was getting carried away there—the message would come out in the form of the desert dragon wandering over to the miraculous glory of the spinifex ants' nest and, with one flick of its tongue, eating it for dinner. So much work, all gone to the appetite of a higher species. Finito.

But what goes around comes around. Up above, a central hawk has been waiting with bottomless patience for the desert dragon to show its hand. Flying between the dragon and the dark side of the sky—so as not to throw a warning shadow—the hawk swoops and, in the blink of an eye, takes the desert dragon for a one-mile flight to its nest, by which time the dragon will have asphyxiated from the grip of the hawk's beak on its throat. At least the dragon went out with a full stomach. The energy it consumed will now go to the nest of hawk chicks.

Meanwhile, the rainbow cockroach has been ambushed by a trapdoor spider. The cockroach walked across what looked like a bed of spinifex blades, but they had actually been laid across the spider's trapdoor as an alarm system. The vibrations running down the blades into the nest are like a dinner gong. Up pops the spider, goodnight cockroach. The spider scurries back down its hole to digest its meal *á la cucaracha*. So absorbed is it, it doesn't notice a second set of vibrations: a black scorpion has seen the spider and followed it down its burrow. Yum!

It's murder piled on genocide out here. Unprovoked slaughter and we call it beautiful. Within shouting distance there will be twelve kinds of gecko foraging in termite nests and spinifex litter, hell-bent on decimating entire populations of innocent insects. But who's innocent? Is anyone innocent in nature? Not the gecko, which pays for its crime by being consumed minutes later by a legless lizard, which, coincidentally, evolved from the same gecko.

Nothing like eating your ancestors. Revenge is a dish best eaten cold. Or maybe the gecko will survive by dropping its wriggly tail, or, if it's a knob-tail, having its tail impersonate its head so the predator doesn't know how to approach it from the rear, or, if it's a spiny-tail, firing into the predator's eyes a gluey spiderweb-like membrane that stings and confuses the poor legless lizard, rendering him the bumbling equivalent of a twenty-schooner drunk. Legless!

If I was making this whole story up, I'd say that when I was sitting there contemplating Sharpie Phelps, nature would have shown herself as a killing field of unimaginable cruelty and efficiency. Everyone dies. Everyone is eaten. In the scale of things, no individual life can possibly matter, and in fact the best use of a life is to be consumed in order to enhance the energy of the next level up in the system. Survival of the fittest, in other words, is good. It's nasty, it's brutal, and it's good. So I climb up onto my hind legs and walk towards Sharpie Phelps's homestead, a visitation of nature.

But I didn't see any of this. I just saw the spinifex ants building their sweet honeyed nest for their young. And I wondered how it would be if your eyes were on stalks and you had six legs and a sweet tooth, and what kind of consciousness you would have of your daily existence, and how evolution has equipped you never to grow bored or lazy, how you're always on the job, you never question what you're doing, you never suffer depression or self-doubt, you never look back and mourn the loss of your sixty-eight twin brothers to a gecko raid, you just go on doing your thing, one step after another, six at a time. That, to me, is what's really and truly amazing. Having six legs and eyes on stalks and eating your babies' sweet caca.

* * *

Night was well fallen when I climbed down from my hideout and made my way towards the homestead. I could smell lamb chops burning and, underfoot, kangaroo s. Overhead the stars were sparkling in that outback way, where the dark points in the night sky are outnumbered by the light, so the whole thing doesn't look like white spots on black but black smudges on an underlying infinite canvas of white.

The homestead rambled over a series of buildings connected by covered walkways, but all except the main house were dark and I could safely bet that they were empty. Sharpie was a recluse on a mission: to drink and drug himself to death. He wouldn't be doing a lot of entertaining.

But he did have one guest. I squatted outside the lit-up kitchen window and peered over the sill. Inside, in an untempered neon light, Sharpie sat at a speckled red melamine table with another man, who I recognised if not personally then generically as the kind of listener every outback drinker needs and often gets. A journalist.

How did I know? He wasn't wearing a slept-in suit and a pork-pie hat. That's how they used to be. Now they're young law graduates who want to do something 'interesting'; they dress in trendy inner-city outfits and have shaved heads and glasses. They're smart as tacks and don't know anything about anything. And they only drink when they have to. This guy was taking nervous sips from a coffee mug no doubt filled with scotch and tap water, his prim young face pinched up with fear of Sharpie's hygienic standards. Having to drink it was his payment for listening to Sharpie. Oh, and he had a small digital microphone recorder propped up like a third guest on the table. It had to be the bloke who'd called Sheena.

So Sharpie, who *is* killing the great nature presenters of Australia?

Sharpie, who'd always hated journos and loved pulling their legs with made-up yarns to see if they'd print them, was running an epic monologue. Nearly dying of cramp in my haunches, I settled myself on my veterinary bag. I could hear Sharpie quite clearly through the flyscreen. It was easy to tell that this was one of those monologues, like a priest's prayer ritual, that repeated itself every evening forever and ever. He'd let the journalist come in because he needed fresh meat. Even farmhands find excuses to avoid another night with a bitter old gasbag like Sharpie. He talked about how the Yanks had done him in in the seventies—their 'perfidy'—and how his then-agent had cheated him out of his royalties. Then he railed against the younger generation of presenters, giving the journo some handy potted character assassinations of Deano Rudd, Brock McCabe and the rest, even the poor late lamented Steve Heath. While bile oozed out of him, I couldn't help agreeing with a lot of what Sharpie was saying. He stroked his gingery beard and adjusted his hat—his trademark moth-eaten Akubra which he'd worn on all his shows and even indoors, even at home. Every performing man has his vanity and Sharpie's was his baldness. Write about that, Jimmy Olsen! There's a scoop for ya!

Sharpie, quite the literary man, was rambling on about Steve Heath's 'glossy surfaces', not that he wanted to speak ill of the dead but he couldn't help himself. He and the journo were on their third litre of scotch and Sharpie was on a roll, also working his way through a couple of bottles of pills, I noticed with some relief. They weren't headache tablets, that's for sure. The journo (with whom Sharpie wasn't sharing his pills) wasn't saying a thing, merely nodding and occasionally mumbling something like 'Too right, cobber'. You can tell a city wanker by the way he slumps into strine at the first opportunity. But Sharpie wasn't

listening closely enough to take offence. This was his soapbox and he wasn't giving it up. This is how a lot of bush conversations go. There are roles to play, talker and listener. They can go on forever.

And this one was showing signs that it might. Sharpie's place in the Big Five—or Four—was guaranteed by his past more than his present output. He hardly did a stroke of work nowadays, but every kid—or, to be precise, every adult—in the country knew his name. They remembered his heyday. Why did I ever see him as competition, I wonder now. But he was. He was because he was famous, and because I couldn't take any risks.

Approaching midnight, he took a long pause and then moved onto his attack on the sacred cow, 'that c. Mick Lamington'. Ah, I thought: here we go.

The journo's ears pricked up and the skin on Sharpie's face tightened with fury.

'That f.ing c. Lamington, Yow, yow, yow, mate, I sank on my knees in prayer the day I heard he'd got his just deserts. That f.ing c. was a terrorist, you hear what I'm saying, he was a terrorist and his victims were the fauna of this great country. He was a pantomime clown and he couldn't give a s. for the animals, he'd as soon run one over in his ute as put it on his show. Y'know, when he copped it from that eel—and don't forget, it was only a f.ing eel that did him in, not a "taipan", just a friendly little wriggler—I was silly enough to think that the world was going to wake up to that miserable c. and agree that he'd got what was coming to him. Nature's revenge. Ha! Was I wrong or what! They've turned him into a saint, like he was some kind of conservationist! Conservation! Try to find out what those miserable c.s have done for conservation! Look it up! Go look it up on the f.ing internet!'

I'll give our junior Woodward & Bernstein the benefit of the doubt: he wasn't nodding off from the soporific cocktail of Sharpie's conversation and the amount of scotch they'd put away. No, he was nodding attentively. He *would* look it up on the internet. As soon as he could tell one end of the computer from the other.

'That Kangazoo mob,' Sharpie went on, almost frothing, 'they register themselves as a conservation charity because it saves them from paying a cent in tax. That Phil Barrows is a crook if the Pope's a Catholic. Listen to me. They're thieves, common crooks, and I will tell you I was as pleased as Punch when I heard Lamington had copped it. Just deserts. But you look at the way the world treats him and it's like he was some kind of saint. It's politics, you know? He'd sucked up to the PM—out of pure enthusiasm, sure thing, no calculation in it, Mick Lamington, he just can't help saying what he thinks!—yeah, right, BS. He was in it for the bucks, pure and simple, and he'd say whatever Phil Barrows put in his mouth. A ventriloquist and his dummy. And listen to me, mister. I'm telling you this and one day you'll thank me in your speech when you've won a big bloody award for scoop of the century.' He leaned across the melamine and grabbed the slightly shocked journo by the wrist. Then he turned the recorder so that he was speaking unmistakably into it. 'Mick and Phil,' Sharpie said with a voice of steel, 'they knocked off Bob Crosser. You make a few calls. You do your investigating. Don't tell anyone I told you, but don't forget you heard it here first.'

As I sat there listening, as mute as the sozzled young journo, I had mixed feelings about Sharpie. The Bob Crosser thing was a load of BS, an old junkie's wishful thinking, and probably a wild goose chase in store for the journo—hey, maybe this was one of Sharpie's wind-ups!—but on the other hand, a lot of what he was

saying I agreed with. He was saying things that I'd thought but hadn't allowed myself to say. I couldn't help feeling sympathetic. Yet looking at him stewing himself to death in a broth of hatred and resentment and jealousy, I also couldn't help seeing myself ten or twenty years further down the line—the worst of myself come home to roost. If I wasn't careful, I'd end up like Sharpie, with an audience of one, ranting on and on every night about how I'd been robbed by the Americans and Deano Rudd and Ranger Lamington. It was a hateful future, and when you see the worst of yourself reflected in another man I challenge you to stop yourself from turning on him with a homicidal fury.

And then he started on me.

'That pathetic spindly little wimp, Frosty Westlake,' he said and left a long silence. He shook his head like that was enough. But it wasn't. With blokes like Sharpie, you can always rely on them carrying their point through to the end, and beyond. 'There was a man I thought had principles. You know, those segments he did on Lamington's shows—they were good. That was my style of bringing the viewers in touch with the Australian fauna. I reckon he copied his style from me. He could have been something, Westlake. But what did he do? He sold out to Lamington and the American money. He could have been a star, but he preferred to be Mick's bumboy. You know, I heard they were, you know . . .' He made a zero with the thumb and middle finger of his left hand and jiggled his right index finger in and out of the hole. Bastard. Whatever else there was between Mick and me, it wasn't that. But I wasn't angry, I tell you. I was sad. And you know, I *was* Mick's bumboy. I *had* thrown away my life for that bastard. But I didn't need Sharpie Phelps with his finger-in-the-hole lowest common denominator to tell me. I'd already been told, and I'd been told

in a way that had left scar tissue that not even Sharpie's crude innuendos could punch through.

'Sad case.' Sharpie shook his head, meaning me. To be called a sad case by this sad case was pretty funny, that's for sure. He went on for a while longer about how pathetic I was, like he knew I was out there waiting for him and he only needed to give me my last reason, to break down my last qualms.

Anyway. For a while I was worried that they'd both pass out on the table. But Sharpie was popping some kind of go-fast pills, along with the usual tranquillisers and anti-depressants. He was in for the long haul.

At around two in the morning, nearly dying from the cold and my bum feeling like a frozen pizza, I had my chance. The young bloke got up, his chair screeching on the linoleum like a wounded barrier kingfisher, and went out, possibly for a long-overdue p. but more likely to escape the kitchen and pass out on the floor of the first room he came to. Taking advantage of the break, Sharpie left the kitchen too. I'd only have a few seconds, but I was ready. I took what I needed out of my bag and scuttled around the side of the kitchen to the screen door. I remembered the layout from my times here with Mick (when Sharpie had bowed down to the lord and master like a courtier hoping for a minor diplomatic post; you wouldn't believe it to hear him now. I almost wanted to remind the old bloke, to set the record straight . . . But why? Why would I bother?). In a shot I was through the door, doing what I had to do, and out again. I bumped a chair and my footsteps clacked on the floorboards, but I counted on each man thinking it was the other. If either was in any kind of state to notice anything, which they probably weren't.

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Once I was back at my post, I stayed just long enough to make sure that Sharpie was going to finish his drink, rather than spoil my plans by turning in for the night.

He sat down again, alone, as if he had a while to go. He'd continue this conversation whether the journo was there or not. He picked up a bottle of pills and tapped a couple into his hand.

Sharpie and his pills—I'd always said they were going to be his downfall. I wasn't the first to say so, and at his funeral a few days later, which I attended with Phil Barrows and, annoyingly, Ranger Lamington, I sure wasn't the last.

And what a stroke of luck that that journo was there, on the spot. Talk about a feeding frenzy.

SEVENTEEN

When I brought my car out from behind the feed shed and took off down the road back towards Darville, keeping the headlights turned down until I was miles out of range of Sharpie's homestead, I took a moment to say the words to myself.

'I am a murderer. I have killed a man. I am a murderer.'

With Glenn Mellon and Steve Heath, I had my excuses. But now there was no backing away. I'd killed a man.

All right, I tried. I told myself it was his choice. He didn't need to take those pills. He didn't need to take any pills. He had an addiction, a disease if you like, and *it was his decision to pick up that bottle and shake out those pills*. I hadn't stuffed them in his mouth, had I? He did it to himself, and it was the natural end to what he'd been doing to himself for years, decades.

It didn't work.

I can't say I was feeling much except a blank elation that it had been so easy. The other feelings were yet to come. On the drive

towards home, I was pretty detached from it all, as if I'd watched it happen on a TV show. Unbelievable that it was so easy. The horse tranquillisers I'd taken from the Kangazoo vet surgery were commonly used by druggies like Sharpie anyway. In lower doses, sure, but there was a pretty simple diagnosis for him. He'd taken too much of one of his party drugs. He swallowed a whole pharmacy's worth every night and day anyway, so it was hardly surprising that he'd lose count. The journo, as it turned out, was my best accomplice. Terrified that he'd be fingered himself, being the only witness and all, he cooked up a story that Sharpie got so pissed he'd begun to play around with his pills and swallow handfuls just to show how tough and daring he still was. The best part of it was, the journo dropped the whole 'Who's killing the great nature presenters of Australia?' wheeze. He couldn't point to a pattern or a prime suspect now, could he?

But on the drive home, I didn't know that yet. All I knew was that it had been child's play. Which made me angry. It shouldn't be so simple to kill a man, a good man really. With his record of accomplishments. Nobody's safe these days.

I was feeling a little philosophical, too. The way Sharpie had been talking, it was like we were all enemies—him, McCabe, Rudd, and of course Mick and me. We were all rivals for a limited piece of pie, and we'd cut each other's throat to get at it. His life's regret seemed to be that he hadn't cut Mick's throat while he had the chance.

And how could I disagree with him? I shared a fair bit of Sharpie's view. As my actions proved. Yet at the same time, I felt that we were all in the same boat and equally wronged in some way. Our enemies shouldn't have been each other. Our *real* enemies weren't each other. Our real enemies were the forty million Americans who tuned into Pioneer Network each week and cast their

vote on the Greatest Aussie Nature Presenter. The Americans consumed our 'fauna' (I loved how Sharpie used that term, as if it made him a kind of a scientist, more substantial than just another TV mug)—they consumed fauna like it was potato chips or popcorn with their oversized Big Gulp of Coca-f.ing-Cola. Our animals, our wildlife, were just more fodder to put through the great American meat-mincer. If we cared about our fauna, we should realise that the enemies of nature weren't the frontmen like Mick and Sharpie, but the meat-mincer itself. The whole apparatus. Stardom and consumption. If I wanted to kill people, I should have started with Tim Steam and Mandy Rout, then moved onto Phil Barrows. They were the operators of the real killing machine. But I also knew that as heinous as those types were, they were totally replaceable. They were just the arms of a starfish. Chop one off and another will grow. By killing the Pioneer people or Phil, what would I be achieving for myself or my family, or for the animals? Nothing.

The people I had to get out of the way weren't my enemies, but they were standing between me and what I needed. So they had to go. But I had to make sure I didn't let myself get eaten up with hatred for my rivals, like Sharpie had. Sure, I had to kill them, but I didn't have to hate them. My enemy wasn't them, it was the system. But you can't kill the system. You can't get it out of the way. You have to find your way inside it, make it work for you. It's too big to kill, too big to get outside of. The time to wind back the clock passed a hundred and fifty years ago. Too late now, cobber. You can't just jump up and down against capitalism or consumerism. They're here to stay. At least that was the way I saw it. I wasn't a revolutionary. I was a contractor.

* * *

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Dawn broke while I was still driving. Sheena was expecting me home from 'Brisbane' that day and, not that it would have mattered to her if I'd stayed longer, I did want to get back to visit Rod in hospital. So I stopped at Gympie, the last big town before the Kangazoo, and made some calls from a public telephone, just so I could show Sheena I had been making the arrangements I'd said I'd make. You can't be too careful. I might need an alibi one day for my movements that night. The news about Sharpie Phelps hadn't yet broken, but it would, and Sheena would of course put one and one together. But it seemed important to maintain this façade of innocence, so that if she was ever asked where I'd been she could lie with a clear conscience. She could say, 'Frosty went to Brisbane to make some arrangements, and these were the arrangements he made.'

I was doing it for her.

When I got home, Sheena wasn't asking any questions. Rod had improved a little, but the doctors didn't want him to come home to the Kangazoo. Being so close to the animals had a good chance of aggravating his condition. Though he'd lost weight, he wasn't quite sick enough to keep in the hospital either. Where were we going to take him? Everyone we knew either lived in the Kangazoo or in the animal community. Neither Sheena nor I were close to our families any more. My parents were long gone, and I didn't have any brothers or sisters or other relatives I could rely on. Sheena's family lived too far away to be any help, and she hardly ever talked to them anyway. When we'd thrown in our lot with Mick and the whole caravan, we'd burnt all the boats behind us. It was so f.ing exciting. That was Mick's charisma. He needed us to commit totally

to him, the cause and the show. He made sure we had no time for any other life. And we'd fallen in. We'd committed. But where had it landed us now? With a son who was allergic to us. Allergic to the life we'd brought him into. Allergic to our *commitment*.

Sheena was in quite a state, panicking wildly about what we'd do when the hospital discharged our little boy. We had about eighteen days before the trial program would be ready to accept him in America. If we could show we had the money to pay for it.

Things couldn't have got much worse, but they soon did. Sheena and I had a flaming row the moment I walked through the door. It was like I'd deserted her in her moment of crisis, even though I'd only been away overnight. She was hanging by a thread, I could see that. One more bump in the road and she'd be thrown back to her comforts, her habits. She was trying real hard to be a good mother at last, to be conscientious and brave, but her hardness was the brittle kind, like glass, and if she broke she wouldn't just warp or bend or crack, she'd fragment into a million little pieces.

I'd have liked to scream back at her that what I'd been doing was purely for her and Rod and Rosie. What I'd been doing, when I deserted in the line of duty, was fighting in our defence. This was the way I was telling my story to myself now. I had killed Sharpie in self-defence. I would go on and complete the job, in self-defence. The oncoming forces left me with no choice. It was life or death out there, and I would choose life *in defence of my young*.

But I couldn't put it like that to Sheena. She was screaming at me, and I screamed back about minor issues like phone reception and flat batteries.

Could I take it out on her? Sharpie Phelps would probably have wished me to. Sad case like me—Sharpie'd have wanted me to lash out. Even Sheena had that look in her eye, like she was taunting

me to have a go at her. She stood in my face and mocked me. She'd done this before, a long time ago, and back then also she'd have been happier if I'd hit her. But I couldn't. I loved Sheena, loved her too much to even think about raising my hand against her. Despite everything, I would walk through fire and lay down my life for her. It was a kind of a deal I did with myself: as much as she'd have liked me to lash out at her, as deep and powerful as my fury was, I was going to channel it away from her. She was not going to pay. Others would. Every ounce of my furious energy that I was diverting to others, I was keeping away from Sheena. In doing what I'd done, and what I was yet to do, I was shielding Sheena from the force of her husband's true nature.

But J f.ing C she made me mad. I stormed out to take a walk around the Kangazoo. Everything was going on as normal. The night-safari visitors wouldn't have heard our quarrel: we'd have been drowned out by the cockatoos, the whipbirds, the ambient cicadas. A zoo gives your domestics a good cloak.

The place was crowded, still basking in the afterglow of Mick's death and public funeral. Rather than destroy the zoo, his death seemed to have given it an extra cachet, like it was now a place of pilgrimage. People were coming here to pay their respects to the Aussie icon. That's what Australians are like: we muck in to help out during a crisis. By shelling out their sixty-five bucks, each of these people believed sincerely that they were helping the zoo, and Mick's family, and the preservation of everything he'd stood for. Well, I suppose they were. They just didn't know exactly what he'd stood for.

But their money wasn't helping us. Or it wasn't yet. I could swing a possum in front of the Echidney Opera House, where I was now standing, and I'd hit two thousand dollars in clear profit. Where was it going? To where it was really needed? No way.

Financially, we were stuffed. Sheena'd been making huge efforts to economise, and maybe this was what was driving her spare. I'd noticed the No-Name cans in the cupboard, the smaller cartons of milk and juice in the fridge, the on-special beer. She'd stopped going to the movies, one of her weekly treats, and had cut out cigarette-smoking as well as the dope. (Well, to be honest, the dope had never cost her anything. She'd got that from the source of all things toxic and mind-altering in the Kangazoo, Mr Phil Barrows.) She felt she was playing her part, bless her. For all her weaknesses, Sheena had an underlying faith, especially when one of our little ones was in trouble. She was great in a crisis. The rest of the time she was a bit of a worry, but in a crisis she was a rock.

The problem was, she had no idea of the actual scale of our problems. All the effort she was putting into the household economies—and it cost her a lot of effort—only saved us ten or twenty bucks a week. Maybe thirty. She was cutting our weekly budget from about two hundred bucks down to the mid-one hundreds. A big effort, but I felt sorry for her: it was a drop in the ocean. We needed tens of thousands, not tens of dollars. We had two grand in the bank. I think Sheena believed there was some secret reserve I could draw on in times of trouble. Like I could go back to my family and put my hand out and fifty thousand dollars would magically materialise. But like I said, I had no family any more. The small inheritance I'd got from my mother and father we'd spent years ago during our trips to LA with Mick. There was no secret stash. There was no miracle waiting to happen. That was why I needed to be the agent of change. I had to go out there, like a family leader in the Stone Age, and hunt and gather.

I found myself, as if sucked down into the pit, knocking at Phil Barrows' door.

‘Enter,’ he called out in that bog-imperious way of his, and I went in. Phil was sitting behind his desk as stiffly as if he was strapped in for execution, and Ranger Lamington was all over his white lounge.

‘Frosty,’ Phil said.

Ranger gave a bit of a whiffle through her nose and looked away from me. Never my biggest fan, that kid. Well, the feeling was mutual. We both had our reasons, and I can’t say that any one of them was unjustified.

‘Beer, mate?’ Phil wrestled himself to his feet and went to the bar fridge concealed behind a stuffed wombat in the corner. I never understood his thing for taxidermy and the native fauna. I guess he did it ironically. He’d learnt irony in the States.

I cracked the can and sat in the crocodile-hide corner chair, as far as I could get from Ranger, who was twiddling the ring on her left-hand third finger and staring out the window like a kid waiting for class to finish. Clearly she’d been bullying Phil—the air smelt of middle-aged male fear, a distinctive odour—and I was interrupting her, to Phil’s relief. He was acting too happy to see me.

‘How’s Roddy?’ he said, trying his best. A born politician, Phil. He’d been with Mick when he went to the White House to meet Bill Clinton, a big fan of the show. They’d come back raving about how the President ‘made us feel like we were the only people on earth’. Clinton had been briefed up to ask questions about their families, their kids and so on. Ever since then, Phil had copied the method.

‘Not too good,’ I said.

‘But he’s coming out of hospital, right?’ Phil knew that much.

‘Right. But we’re not allowed to bring him back here. Too many allergies.’

‘Sheece,’ Phil said. Poor bastard was trying to sound sympathetic, and I believe he truly could have been, but he was overshadowed by the company we were keeping.

I waited for the next question—so where would we take Rod? But Phil was too distracted, and Ranger couldn’t give a stuff. With a strength and determination that surprised me, I forged ahead.

‘We’ve been told the hospital has a halfway house for kids in Rod’s condition. A kind of semi-hospital rehab joint,’ I said. ‘But it comes to five hundred and change a night, and he’ll need to be there for three weeks before we can take him for the trial in America.’

I’d’ve liked to mention the cost of the trial too, but one thing at a time, Frosty, one thing at a time. It was already killing me to drop such a heavy hint about the cash I needed right now. Let Phil—and Ranger, if it had to be—get used to this initial payment, and I’d build up to the big ask.

You have no idea how humiliating this was for me. Or maybe you do.

Into the silence I leapt. ‘That means at least twelve grand for his medical costs in the next month.’

‘Not covered by Medicare?’ Phil said.

I couldn’t suppress a dry laugh. It wasn’t covered by Medicare, and Phil, ever since he’d been to America, had loved to go on about what a crime and a waste a public medical insurance scheme was, and how we ought to catch up to the States, where employers took care of health insurance through HMOs (which Phil always misspoke as ‘H-O-M-Os’, without saying it as a word or realising what he was doing). Well, now was his chance to put his money where his mouth was.

Tight as a bunyip’s a., Phil changed the subject.

‘You’ve heard the news?’ he said.

I looked innocent.

‘Sharpie Phelps OD’d.’

‘He’s OD’d before,’ I said, ready for this. ‘Lots of times. They just pump out his stomach and he’s right as rain, ready to go back for more.’

Phil shook his head, downcast. He couldn’t give a flying f. about Sharpie Phelps, but he was a big man now and had to act like he was always in front of an audience, the subject of stories, a man with a reputation.

‘He didn’t make it,’ he said.

Ranger made her first contribution since I’d come in: a nasty hoot from the couch.

‘Dropping like flies!’ she said. ‘The way things are going, Deano and I’ll have the market cornered. No more competition. Hey, Frosty, you’d better watch your back.’

I couldn’t look at her. She’d better watch hers.

‘I’ve known Sharpie for nearly twenty years,’ I said. ‘You shouldn’t speak ill of the dead like that. Sharpie deserves our respect.’

Ranger snorted again. The young have no idea, especially spoilt little tart princesses like this one. She needed to learn a bit about mortality. Clearly her father’s death hadn’t broken her skin. It had only made it thicker.

I locked eyes with Phil, who was trying to summon up some crocodile tears for poor Sharpie, but was torn between the Clintonesque impulse to share my pain and the Clintonesque dizzy confusion of having a young girl curled up on his couch with her feet beneath her a.

‘Poor old Sharpie,’ I said. ‘Spose it was inevitable, with his life-style and all.’

‘Yeah.’ Phil pinched his lower lip. ‘His lifestyle.’

‘Anyway,’ I said, to change the subject back again.

‘Oh right, yeah. Okay, Frost.’

Phil sat down and pulled a chequebook out of his drawer. I was surprised by the decisiveness of his gesture. In the old days, when Mick was around, Phil at least had to pretend that Mick was the controlling shareholder and big expenses had to go to him for his approval. Now, with Mick gone, Phil could pull cheques out of his drawer like a Hollywood mogul.

He pushed the cheque across the table. I had to walk over the Yogi Bear-skin rug to get it.

‘Ta, Phil.’

He’d written me a cheque for fifteen. The cogs in my mind worked fast: if I put down eight for Rod’s treatment for two weeks, I could use seven to cover my expenses for the rest of my mission. Croc Brock McCabe lived down at Rainbow Bay, a morning’s drive, and Don Simpson, the snake man, was a few thousand miles away in Perth. Deano Rudd, of course, was a budget deal, here or hereabouts.

‘Ta, mate,’ I said again.

I didn’t stay to finish my beer. It was too horrible having to beg like this. Still, I thought, it won’t be like this for long.

As I left I could feel Ranger boiling over. That little strumpet, she had no respect for Sharpie. She had no respect for her father and what he’d done. If she had, she’d have respected *me* a little more. I was talking about the survival of a four-year-old boy, and all Ranger could see and feel was old fights with herself at the dead centre. It’s all about you, isn’t it Ranger? Well, she was a seventeen-year-old girl.

As I closed the door to Phil’s office, I heard her tee off. She was incoherent but loud. I could picture Phil shrinking behind his desk.

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She was calling the shots now, and she wasn't going to let him pull out the chequebook any more. I'd come at the worst possible time. I'd put Phil on the spot. To his credit, he'd come good for me. But now he was paying for it. Fifteen grand was nothing compared to what he was paying now.

I walked down three flights of stairs, through the admin offices and outside into the zoo. It was only then that Ranger's bleating and mewling faded away, swallowed up by the honest needs of our Australian fauna.

EIGHTEEN

If you've seen big flocks of migrating desert birds, like kirrilies and monkors and the swallow-tailed akash, native to Australia's Simpson Desert, and you know diddly-squat about them, you'd think they each had a homing device locking them into the flight pattern and were as tight-knit as a Jewish family. The reality for these birds is not so secure. If they become separated from the flock, individual desert birds can fly around for days, weeks and even months in the hope that their flock will find them again. A sole bird is just a speck of hope fighting for survival in a hostile climate, prey to larger birds and snakes and lizards and even bird-eating spiders, flapping around on its own, hoping against hope (Can hope exist in a desert bird? I believe it can) that the grand adventure of the flock will once again sweep it up and away and across the continents.

I think of us as desert birds—me, Mick, the lot of us. Sure, I had a pretty fulfilled existence managing Dreamtime for Ken and Bev Dibbs, but until I met Mick again at the age of thirty-three there was

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something in me that had become separated from the flock. I'd been left behind, and was flailing around trying to stay alive until that moment came when the great adventure swept me away.

By 1989, I was thirty-five years old and I'd been splitting my time between Townsville and Dreamtime for two years. Up in Townsville, Mick was everywhere—he'd paid for billboards that had an almost 3D effect, his big tanned mug and blue eyes surging out towards you with sharks, rays, eels and box jellyfish in the background, making you part of his life-and-death adventure. The people up there, the holidaymakers and the tourists, didn't carry a lot of what you'd call collective memory. With some animals, in fact most animals, collective memory is the only thing they have; as individuals they don't know who they are and can't remember what they did five seconds ago, but they know innately what their great-great-ancestors did and how they survived and where they went to breed. It's like an advanced form of Alzheimer's. They can only remember the most distant past.

People, or at least the people who paid our bills, were the opposite. They had no idea who Bob Crosser had been, no idea about the Leyland Brothers or Ben Cropp or Harry Butler or Les Hiddens or any of the great Australian naturalists—but once they arrived in Townsville and saw Mick Lamington's mug on every billboard and in the local papers and on the local TV stations, they knew that Mick Lamington was a celebrity naturalist and they had to get to his Deadly! show ASA f.ing P.

In the early nineties he attracted the attention of the national media, and a bloke from Channel 10 came up from Sydney to do an interview special for some weekly wildlife program. It screened

on Saturdays at 6.30 pm so it was obviously for kids. The journo who interviewed Mick fancied himself as a bit of an investigative newshound, however, and he followed Mick around all day with this narrow-eyed look as if he couldn't be fooled.

This interview, which felt like surveillance, made Mick nervous, and when he was nervous he made mistakes. Now, Mick couldn't afford a mistake because he didn't know what the f. he was doing. When he swam with the sharks, he needed me to dope them up or fill their bellies beforehand so they wouldn't get nasty. With the jellyfish, he relied on me to operate an unseen water fan that created a forcefield around him. It fired the current perpendicular to the front of the tank, pushing the boxies away from Mick. He'd swim around behind the current, with the box jellyfish between him and the audience. The audience wouldn't see the water fan, and from their foreshortened angle Mick appeared to be among the lethal tentacles, so they gasped at this amazing sight of a bare-chested wildlife warrior risking his life to swim amid stingers whose one lash could paralyse a herd of elephants. The sea snake was similarly deadly, but the audience weren't to know that I'd defanged it, were they? Mick got away with that one by explaining that the sea snake was naturally timid and would only bite if cornered. He did corner it, being Mick, and it would strike out at him and he'd recoil like a lion-tamer, but it was all smoke and mirrors.

Anyway, this TV journalist, name of Phil Barrows, was sitting with the kids and the Japanese and the Americans and the squealing Swedish backpackers, getting a taste of how they drank it all in. But Mick, cognisant of the cameras and the journo, was shaky in the water and when he was doing his stunt with Lexy the grey nurse shark, he provoked the bad-tempered old dame once too often

and she came right at his facemask and bunted him with her nose. Grey nurses are a hard-nosed shark, especially this old intensive-care matron, and she stove in his facemask and bloodied his mouth. Sharks' skin, not many people know, can shear off a human's skin like four-ply sandpaper. A brush with a grey nurse won't take your leg off, but it can keep you out of the water for a fair while, that's for sure. Mick, careless in his nervousness, looked like he'd been swiped by an orbital sander.

But he was nothing if not quick on his feet. Blood filling the water, he thrashed about as if it was seconds to death. Everyone was screaming: they knew how blood sent sharks into a feeding frenzy, didn't they? Lexy was as likely to go into a frenzy as a dead wombat, but the Japs weren't to know that. Mick created the frenzy himself in the water, churning it up with arms and legs going every which way, then he surged to the top, panting, pulled off his shattered facemask and, addressing the Channel 10 cameras directly—he always knew where the camera was—bellowed: 'That was the best French kiss I've had since I was thirteen years old!'

Crap. No girl had gone near him till his twenties.

Later, when we sat down with Phil Barrows for the formal interview, Mick didn't bother cleaning up or gauzing his wound. He made as if it was all in the day's work and the 'kiss' was part of the act. Phil, who'd been playing the part of a sceptic, was completely won over by Mick's courage and, well, his chutzpah. They chatted for two hours and kicked onto the pub. I tried to hang with them for a while, but there was no keeping up once they got onto the Bundy and Cokes. By the end of the night Phil had been talked into quitting Channel 10 and coming on board as the 'media manager' for Mick Lamington's Deadly!.

It was a marriage made in heaven. Phil Barrows had done a stint as Channel 10's Los Angeles correspondent, and his real 'metier', as he put it, was in the 'global entertainment industry'. That was where his contacts were and where his dreams were—in the sense that a speckled reptile like Phil could have dreams. Stationed down in Sydney, he started getting Mick gigs on all the talk shows and current affairs programs. The Channel 10 segment with the 'kiss'—which was the wildlife show's highest-rating episode ever and got repeated in mid-week prime time for the grown-ups—got airplay on all the news bulletins (Phil said anything was news if they had the pictures—'A Mexican teenager blowing up his face with a fire-cracker in Outer Chihuahua will be news if we've got pictures,') and was shown introducing Mick whenever he appeared.

Within weeks, Mick was Mr Everywhere in the Aussie media. Formerly his celebrity had been strictly local, but suddenly he was the 'outback legend who not only risks his life with our deadliest creatures, but gives every lethal animal a kiss goodbye'.

He was on *60 Minutes* and got the female interviewer so creamed up that they sent the tape to America. Phil Barrows was on the next plane to Los Angeles, talking Mick up to his old contacts in the entertainment press. It was just one of those moments-in-history things. *Crocodile Dundee* had come and gone, and every American believed that if Dundee wasn't based on an actual real live Australian man then he was based on eight million of us. They were hankering for the 'real Crocodile Dundee'. As Phil said (Phil was great on these improvised lectures about the state of the world), 'There is always a historical trend from fiction to reality—once people's imagination is taken by a fiction, they want to see the reality behind it.' Fifty squillion Americans had fallen for Crocodile Dundee, but their appetite wasn't up for Paul Hogan—great

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bloke, we met him, but really just lived for his suntan and his beer and his kids and knew how lucky he'd got—their appetite was up for something real. And Phil was ready to give it to them.

Or at least, as real as Mick Lamington ever could be. Mick insisted I go with him on the first trip to LA, in March 1992. He told Phil that I had to go because I was his best mate and animal-handler. What Mick didn't tell Phil, at first, was that he needed me because he was terrified of the animals. What he didn't tell Phil, until a couple of years later—by which time Phil knew how to keep a secret because that was where his bread was buttered—was that I had to rig up every single trick that Mick pulled. Smoke and mirrors. None of it was real. There was only the one magician there, and it was the bloke nobody'd ever heard of.

The '92 LA trip was a blast. Phil hooked us up with his mates from NBC, Warner Bros, plus a few bands, and they showed us the sights: Hollywood Boulevard (the greatest s.hole on this earth, a cross between Parramatta Road and Kings Cross), Sunset Strip (second greatest s.hole, nearly as many billboards as the freeway to Melbourne airport), Malibu Beach (the gravel shoulder of a six-lane freeway), the Hollywood sign (smaller than you'd think), Melrose Avenue (no there there), Venice Beach (poor man's Bondi), and so on. For me, all it had going for it was that you could get a good cold cheap beer right around the clock and the strippers—cop this for a laugh—kept their knickers on! That was a good thing, at least as I saw it.

But for Mick, LA was magic. You'd drive by the tackiest laundromat on Lincoln Boulevard, and Mick'd point at it and say, 'Hey, that's Googie-style architecture,'—being the big architecture

fan that he was—and at that dump of an intersection that is Hollywood and Vine, Mick would just go all starry-eyed and silent, his synapses clogged with sugar, orange cheese and BS.

Googie-eyed.

When I say that trip was a blast, I say it under advisement, because professionally it didn't go all that well. Phil didn't seem able to break us through into network TV or radio. We did a little bit of cable, but didn't make enough of a splash to get second invites. The appetite might have been there for the 'real Crocodile Dundee', but Phil couldn't work out yet how to find it and feed it. He said Mick had to have 'a thing'—everyone who makes it in America has to have 'a thing'—and we decided that Mick's 'thing' was the Kiss. We set up shows to make it look like he was kissing every animal, the deadlier the better. But Mick was too s.-scared to do it, and I don't blame him. The nearest we could get him to kiss a taipan or a stonefish was to clip the animal down with a vice, and even then Mick's Kiss looked as real as those old Hollywood fistfights. You know, where you can see the daylight between the fist and the face, and hear the 'clack' sound that's the same in every show, every fight. We were forty years too late to get away with that kind of fake.

We suggested all sorts of stunts, like putting some tiny baitfish in Mick's mouth to lure a shark close enough, but Mick wouldn't come at it. He hated animals, I sometimes thought—he feared them and used them and needed them, but deep down, compared with every other naturalist I've known, and that includes all of them, Mick hated animals.

Back home, talking up our LA adventure while knowing that we'd failed to crack it, we went on marketing the commodity that Mick had become locally. But after that first surge when he met

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Phil, Mick's celebrity hadn't really caught on in Oz. He was just a passing thing, a 'Queensland curiosity' let out of his cage for his fifteen minutes and then boxed up again, safely back in Townsville. I think for Sydney and Melbourne people, he was a bit embarrassing. (They weren't to know that he was a sophisticated Sydney guy himself, but they weren't *meant* to know. Michael Hollis was dead and buried, a closely held secret. And if anyone from the old days recognised him, they didn't give enough of a s. to tell the press. He had three older siblings, a brother and two sisters, who could have blown the whistle but they were such prize snobs they talked themselves into believing Michael Hollis had gone walkabout and Mick Lamington didn't exist. There are some advantages in going to a private school.)

But in Townsville we told the world that Mick was a celebrity, and so he was. Rather than subdue him, the failed trip to LA fired him up. 'I've got a taste of it,' he'd say, 'I've got a taste of it.' Meaning, he was just beginning. The way he talked about LA to local reporters and people we knew, you'd think we'd been schmoozed by Warren Beatty and Jack Nicholson at pool parties full of starlets in the Hollywood Hills, we'd been staples at the Polo Lounge and the Chateau Marmont. The truth was, we'd stayed in a cruddy motel near the airport and lived like backpackers. But Mick wasn't talking strictly about history. He wasn't pumping out a false version of the past. He was talking up a real, truthful version of his dreams.

But no matter how much he talked himself up, we'd stalled. We were in a death spiral. Yeah, right, we could have gone on with Mick's Deadly!, but he'd have got bored with that, and, as I think I've said, he didn't have enough genuine love for the wildlife to keep wanting to do it for their sakes. He wasn't like me. The animals

were just a means to an end. If he couldn't use them to achieve that end, he'd move onto something else. And so would Phil.

What saved us, and turned our salvation into a miraculous death-defying stunt, a *performance*, were two unrelated events.

I can't pretend I didn't get the heebie-jeebies from Mick's developing friendship with Phil. What can I say? I was jealous. It was Leo Mattock all over again, except that, unlike Leo, Phil had a lot to offer Mick. And, via Mick, me. I couldn't undermine Phil like I'd undermined Leo because I'd be cutting off my nose to spite my face. Not that I wasn't tempted. The power of my feeling for Mick Lamington, Michael Hollis, whoever he was, is something I'm still coming to grips with.

Goons like Sharpie Phelps reckoned I was in love with Mick, that he was the love of my life and there was something 'homo-erotic' in my devotion. Now, I don't know about that. I'd seen Mick naked often enough, in our youth and as adults, to be quite familiar with his equipment, and may God strike me down with a thunderbolt if I'm not telling the truth, but I never for one second fancied the idea of doing anything with, to or in the vicinity of Mick's sexual apparatus. Let alone kissing him. (I know where that mouth's been!) Seriously, you can cite every example you like of male-to-male coupling in the animal world, but you won't change my view that it is unnatural and not to be tinkered with.

I know what Sharpie meant, but. Even Sheena reckons I fussed around Mick like I was his wife. I did love him, see? And I loved him unrequitedly. To him, I was the guy who rigged the stunts, and he had to keep humouring me—with free housing, with a segment on the show, with my little slice from the pie of fame—so that I'd

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stay onside. I was just another obligation he had to meet, another ball he had to keep in the air. We all need our dose of unrequited love. Mine was for Mick and Mick's was for America. He loved that place, and he wouldn't rest until it loved him back. And even when it did love him back, he had to cling onto it like some pathetic grateful mistress. That was where Mick's heart lay: America.

But my heart lay with Mick, and I was mightily peed off by Phil's influence over him and Mick's—let's face it—basic enjoyment of Phil's company. They were two musketeers, out for what they could get. I didn't realise the full extent of this until they duded the Dibbses.

I can barely talk about this, so let's get it over with quickly. By the 1990s, Ken and Bev were ready to pack it in. They'd been asking me for years if I wanted to take over full control of Dreamtime—having no kids, they truly did see me as their adoptive son. But I couldn't do it, out of respect for the effort they'd put in over their entire lifetimes. I didn't trust myself. I was also too committed to the daily work of stopping Mick from getting himself killed. Ken and Bev kept knocking at the door, and I kept turning them away.

They, of course, fell in love with Mick the way everyone did. I think I've mentioned that. They went as Googie-eyed over Mick as Mick went over Hollywood. It was a relief at first, because it allowed me to serve two masters. Ken and Bev were happy for me to spend so much time in Townsville 'for that lovely Mick'. What I didn't know was what happened towards the end.

Phil Barrows somehow got wind of the Dibbses' wish to retire and hand Dreamtime on. He broached it very carefully, an inch at a time, the way Michael Hollis used to lead the desk-charge on our teachers. He learnt that they wanted to bequeath the whole park to me. Phil got Mick to talk to them about it, and Mick promised to

talk me round. He never said a word of it to me, but, then went back to them to report that I hoped they'd pass it on not to me personally but to the Trust that Phil had set up, as Mick's manager, covering ownership of Mick Lamington's Deadly! as well as a range of other assets up and down the coast. Mick sold the idea to them as a way of giving Dreamtime to me without my having to say yes or no.

That satisfied the Dibbses spot-on. Ken and Bev signed the papers over, and by the end of 1993 Mick and Phil were able to incorporate the Townsville and Sunshine Coast attractions.

If I'd known the effect this would have, I'd have consented, for sure. But what I didn't consent to, and maybe wouldn't have, was that I had absolutely zero interest in the Trust and therefore not one skerrick of ownership in what might have been mine. I'm a bit of a dope in financial matters, in case you haven't noticed. Finances, they're too human for me.

For all the success of Mick Lamington's Deadly!, Dreamtime was a far bigger and more profitable tourist attraction. Thousands more families each week went to the Sunshine Coast and needed distractions for their kids. When the Townsville site hit three thousand visitors a week, Dreamtime was bumping twenty thousand. I also like to think that was because at Dreamtime there was a solid core to the project: Dreamtime was about protecting wildlife, saving injured animals, and promoting the cause of conservation to every single visitor who passed through. Mick Lamington's Deadly!, by contrast, was a freakshow.

Not that this made any impression on the star and his manager. By early 1994, Dreamtime had been renamed Mick Lamington's Wild!. Most of the animals at Dreamtime weren't, strictly speaking, deadly, and Mick didn't want to scare the kiddies. He also had personal reasons for desiring to get out of the Deadly! business.

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So, using the same celebrity-promotion apparatus that had worked so well up north, Mick and Phil brought their dog-and-pony show to a bigger, more established zoo, with a much larger built-in audience, in a more populous and popular part of the world.

Phil discovered the art of merchandising now that the daily crowds had passed a threshold where our income could easily exceed our up-front manufacturing costs. So there were Mick Lamington T-shirts, Mick Lamington tea-towels and teaspoons, Mick Lamington caps, Mick Lamington shorts, Mick Lamington tracksuits, Mick Lamington ugg boots, Mick Lamington thongs, Mick Lamington stubbie holders, Mick Lamington drinks, Mick Lamington's (famous home-made) pies, the full catastrophe of Mick Lamington videos and CD-ROMs and puppets and coasters and posters. There were even Mick Lamington lamingtons. If the Sunshine Coast hadn't heard of him before, they would now, whether they wanted to or not. Soon there would be the action figures and the Mick Lamington's Wild! pinball machine, though that kind of large-scale manufacturing didn't come in until he cracked America. Phil even organised for Mick to become a Queensland Tourism Ambassador, and nominated him for Queensland Australian of the Year. (He didn't win, but has been awarded the honour posthumously.)

So the first of the two hinges around which the 1990s swung was Mick and Phil getting their hands on Dreamtime—or Wild! as it now was—a much bigger and more profitable asset than Deadly! and a springboard for Mick's next leap overseas. To tell you how that leap happened, I have to backtrack a little.

See, I haven't said anything about Mick and the ladies. This is tough. Listen.

NINETEEN

When Mick and I re-encountered each other at Bob Crosser's Feeding Frenzy back in the eighties, I was still a virgin—which I don't mean figuratively or like some metaphor for innocence, which is usually how it's meant these days—because no one believes anyone can be an actual virgin past the age of about twelve. Or at least that's how it feels to me sometimes. I wonder what it's going to be like for my kids.

See, I'm trying to wander off the track. It's tough to talk about, this bit.

I was a virgin, never been with a girl, when Mick dragged me off to the Townsville pub that long-ago afternoon. It might seem crazy or unbelievable that I'd got to my thirties without ticking that one off the list of life's experiences, but think about it for a second. I'd lived for my animals since I was a young boy. Animals had seen me through the ups and downs of adolescence, and animals had guided me through the perils of early adulthood. I'd been fairly

popular with girls at school, but I just wasn't *interested*. When I needed to know what to do with my life, it wasn't girls but animals that gave me my answer and my direction. We're all guided by love, and I was too. I loved animals. I didn't go much on humans and still don't, if you want the truth. At uni, I hung out in labs and stinky cages. When I worked for Ken and Bev Dibbs, I was so busy I had no time for girls. Oh sure, I could have gone out on big drinks with what Bev called the other 'young folk' on Friday and Saturday nights, and I knew where those drinks led, but the whole thing just didn't fire me up. I spose the psychoanalysts out there would say I was using the animals to avoid girls, and it wasn't so much that I was obsessed with my interests as obsessed with the fear of sex, but I'd imagine the psychoanalysts would have better things to think about now, after everything that's happened. The birds and the bees seem such a non-event when you're looking back.

Mick, on the other hand . . . Well, you'd remember how I said he was a bit of a hip-pocket on a singlet with the females back at school. Totally f.ing useless. He was physically unappealing, aggravated by putting himself into a dope haze twenty-four/seven with Leo Mattock. If he was going to fail, he'd fail spectacularly. I, on the other hand, was fairly popular, though I never did a thing to deserve it. As things turned out, what had been the high-water mark of my sexual potential was the low-water mark of Mick's. While I'd withdrawn into my life among the reptiles and rodents, Mick had enjoyed a kind of awakening.

It helped that he'd started to earn some dough, but with girls, as with everything else, Mick'd learnt what he called the key lesson of attitude. 'It's nothing to do with talent,' he said. 'Talent helps when you're a kid, but the longer you live, the less talent matters. Instead of talent, there's only one thing that matters in this world.'

Then he'd pause for you to make a guess. You had to play along. It was all about call-and-response. In another time Mick would have made a crackerjack religious leader, one of those wild charismatic f.ers who leads his flock to Jonestown or Waco. Micktown, Guyana.

'Guts?' I guessed. You had to make a try or else he'd get shirty.

'Not far off,' he said, patting his stomach. 'Same part of the anatomy. But it's *hunger* you need. Everything's there for the hungry. Just fruit waiting to be plucked. It helps that the competition falls away, bit by bit, year by year. People get satisfied in their twenties and thirties, with their family and house and kids and job and mortgage. It's all left for the hungry to take, and if you're prepared to stick at it, and *want* it enough, it's all yours. I promise.'

Of course I thought he was gibbering on about his investments, his real-estate work, his salesmanship, but at that particular moment he was talking on another subject entirely.

In my time, many interviewers have commented on Mick's love of wildlife. It's interesting that they've never *asked* the question. Nobody ever said, *So how much does Mick really love the wildlife?* They always said, by way of preface to something else completely different and irrelevant, *It's obvious how much Mick loves wildlife . . .* There was never any doubt, he was that good an actor. And if I'd been asked, I'd have lied to protect him. So it was interesting that when he talked about females of the human species, which he undoubtedly loved with passionate enthusiasm, he referred to them as wildlife. Just an observation.

In those early days in the eighties he'd become something of a stud. All that pent-up frustration from the schoolyard—he'd been taking it out on women ever since. He was always going on about having 'trapped a cheetah' or 'wrangled a cougar' or 'woken up next

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to a hyena'. Sometimes he'd 'bagged a heifer'. Other times, more happily, it was a 'she-wolf' he'd ended up with. I never heard him refer to his conquests any other way. When he'd been in what I saw as a fifteen-year exile, when he'd reached his sexual maturity and gone out there fuelled by the winning ingredient, *hunger*, he'd fallen in with a bunch of those blokes who are always out on the tool—who had this whole zoological vocabulary for women. It didn't stop at chicks and birds. A 'cheetah' wasn't just a term of endearment. A 'cheetah' was a woman of more than one-seventy centimetres in height and less than seventy kilos in weight, more than twenty-six years of age but less than forty, and categorically with hair beyond shoulder-length. In other words, a cheetah was a tall, slim ex-model type. A 'cougar' was the same thing, but aged between forty and fifty. A 'heifer' was aged under twenty-five but weighed more than eighty kilos. There were water buffaloes, walruses, minks, sloths, rabbits, wallaroos, dingos, king browns, funnel-webs, box jellyfish, moonfish, sunfish, manta rays, blue whales, humpbacks (of course), herons, flamingos, baboons, mandrills, thorny devils, Tassie devils, manatees and water boatmen. Believe me, these terms were not general. Each one was specific. Absolutely specific. These guys talked to each other in this language and they always, *always* knew what each other meant.

Phil Barrows, it turned out, belonged to this society. He's one of the plainest men you'd ever see—even plainer than Mick in the old days—with a long torso and short legs, and a face that could turn a migratory bird right off its route, but that didn't matter. *Hunger*. Phil took and kept one Polaroid photo of every single female he slept with, and believe me they weren't fashion shots. Often he'd snap them as they were getting dressed, or in some other unaware, humiliating gesture. Phil kept all these photos on a corkboard, 'for

the memories', he said. It was nothing for Phil to open a conversation at breakfast with something like, 'So this morning I was hustling that Hereford calf out of my place and nearly forgot to take my happy snap, and we were in the shower and I was standing there pissing against her leg, and said to her, just wait here a sec, darls, I need to get my shaving cream, and so I grabbed the old Polaroid and . . .'

Where do you start? Does pissing on her leg sound any more normal or forgivable when it's buried in a breakfast-table conversation about sneaking up to take a Polaroid of a nineteen-year-old overweight freckled redhead girl—a *human female*, don't forget, though they seemed to have? Call me a prude but I was shocked that these guys considered it less than nothing, hardly mentionable, to urinate on the leg of a woman you have just anally penetrated (don't ask me how I know that: it goes with 'Hereford calf'). I don't know, I always thought I was off the pace. I was a virgin, wasn't I? My inexperience should have kept me pure. Instead, I felt awe and inferiority towards blokes like Mick and Phil. However low they and their mates stooped, at least they were out there doing it. That's how I felt.

And don't think it stopped there. There was a whole zoological lingo to do with what they did with these poor girls. A 'turkey slap' was when they, meaning Mick and Phil or whoever, would use their thing to hit the girl across the face. A 'monkey face' was when they'd leave some sticky deposit on her face, rip out her pubic hair and scatter it on her cheeks and chin, where it would stick. A 'donkey punch' was doing her 'doggy' and hitting her in the back of the head while she climaxed. A 'red snake' was when, during a 'donkey punch', the girl pulled violently away from the man and suffered a prolapsed . . . Well, I apologise, I've gone too far.

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But it's been building up for a while. Mick, I could just . . . No, I'll stop there.

It flowed both ways—from wildlife to women and back to wildlife. Once Mick was on a US late-night talk show, in front of twenty-two million viewers, holding a giant southern anaboa, the biggest snake in the world, native to the Daintree rainforest region in northern Queensland. The host, Tiger O'Malley, leaned across confidentially and said, 'So, Mick, how do you tell if it's male or female?' Mick, shooting Tiger a roguish man-to-man wink, put his hand under the anaboa and said, 'Well, Tiger, if I stick my finger here and she smiles it's a girl, but if he turns around and bites me it's a bloke.'

Luckily Tiger didn't ask him for a demonstration. Mick would never put his finger up any snake hole. He was too s. scared. But his joke brought the house down.

I guess it's lucky that none of those interviewers ever asked the question on a bad day. *Does Mick Lamington really love wildlife?* Well, let me think for a second.

Anyway, all of this isn't to defame my old buddy but to set the scene for our big life-changing experience. In the eighties, Mick didn't have girlfriends. He had countless floozies, but there was no room in there for a steady. He lacked the sincerity to carry it off. He lacked, how can I put it, the *hunger*. He didn't actually like women—if that's not already obvious. His teens were heart-broken, when he was rejected and rejected and rejected because of his looks, and from there on he set himself single-mindedly on revenge. If he treated women as animals, he'd have said it was because they'd treated him like an animal. But you'd never have that conversation with Mick, because he didn't like to talk about the past. Certainly you couldn't risk mentioning Michael Hollis.

I reckon if I'd ever tried to wake up that sleeping dog, he'd have killed me.

It all changed when Mick took on a computer consultant. It was when we were still based up in Townsville, before Ken and Bev sold out of Dreamtime, but after Phil had come on board. So it must've been late '89. Phil had persuaded Mick that we needed to computerise all our records, and Mick, not knowing the first thing about computers and not really willing to have a go, let Phil go ahead and commission a consultant to come in and set the whole thing up.

Well, this was a test: the consultant who came in was a woman, and Mick didn't usually like to employ sheilas unless they were well down the food chain. He 'distrusted the quality of their advice', he said, more to Phil than to me, like it was some kind of coded joke. So it was challenging for a female to come in and be educating Mick.

It was also a test in that she was the best-looking sheila north of the Tweed River. That's just my opinion, but I wasn't alone. Julie Ransom was a big strong lass, brown-haired, green-eyed, tall, freckled and fearsome. Right out of my league. Out of all of our leagues, truth be told, but for Mick there was no such thing. The way he saw it, she was a prize lioness who'd wandered unawares into the king of the jungle's den.

It started with professional respect, if you can believe that. Mick was awed by new gadgets, right up to the suit of armour he wasn't allowed to put on down in Tasmania. He'd sit there at the computer like an obedient student while Julie showed him what was what. She'd been a computer science whiz at James Cook Uni, and when her mum died she'd stayed in Townsville to look after her elderly dad. Otherwise, Julie would have been in Sydney, if not some world-famous computer lab in Massachusetts or Silicon Valley.

She was that smart, I'm telling you, but she was stuck here in Far North Queensland.

At first Julie only popped in for a few days a month, to tidy up our systems and undo all the damage Mick and Phil had done in her absence. Mick got to rely on her: whenever his computer crashed or his keyboard jammed, he was on the phone to her. He was buggerising his computer so much, once Julie came over and said, 'If I didn't know better, I'd think you were doing it on purpose.'

'How do you know better?' Mick said. And I swear, as he said it, he was blushing. Something had got through his thick hide: it must've been the habit of taking orders from her, and seeing her long-fingered freckled brown hands tango across the keyboard fixing up all his errors.

She kept telling him, 'Mick, nothing goes wrong with a computer that you haven't caused to go wrong. The computer remembers everything you've done to it, every time you've banged the return key in frustration, every time you've planted your finger on the F1 key . . . and it holds all of this against you.'

'But,' he croaked, obviously turned on by her supreme competence, 'you can take it all back.'

'I can take back whatever I can find out about,' she cautioned him. 'I can't take back everything.'

It must've really hooked him: the idea that a woman could see right through him, even if via a computer. He had no secrets from Julie. And she could undo his mistakes. What a catch.

This should've been the time when Mick finally got put in his place. He'd met his match—she had the intellect and the self-respect to rein him in. But it didn't work out that way. Julie fell pregnant the first time they had sex, or so Mick said. I'd believe him. One-Shot Mickey, Julie called him, just to make your blood boil a little more.

That pregnancy turned out to be Ranger, and Ranger turned seventeen in 2007, so the year must've been 1990. There you go. It was touching, I guess, to see Mick devote himself to one woman. Shotgun marriage and all. Phil was best man. I was a groomsman, alongside a couple of other blokes from Mick's real-estate world. Don't get me started.

If she'd given herself a few more years to tame him, I reckon Julie might've really changed that leopard's spots. But motherhood seemed to soften her and weaken her power. At first Mick'd seen her as a real challenge, but once she had Ranger, he started to see her as a mother—even as *his* mother. So while he still respected her and looked up to her, he began to treat her as someone he needed to outsmart. Phil didn't help matters. Phil teased Mick for being pussy-whipped. Mick, I reckon, idealised Julie as this all-powerful, all-knowing mother figure, which, with his temperament, was the green light to go behind her back.

But the big prize Julie brought wasn't children and family, which really are the first prize in life's lottery. No no no, the big prize was her knowledge of the internet.

As the mid-nineties came onto us, the very earliest days of the internet, Julie showed Mick how if he rigged up his computer to a phone line he could look at all this garbage pouring in from around the world. It seemed like a very slow form of television to me, but Julie was hooked. The internet made her feel less isolated. She tutored Mick through the whole thing and got him addicted too.

Using a search engine, Mick would type in something like 'donkey punch' and find himself at an internet site showing women performing obscene sexual acts with equine partners. The lowest of the low on the internet, and it took Mick Lamington all of five minutes to get there. He was in his element. Phil got himself an

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email address and Mick spent every free moment sending Phil the most horrific pictures he could find, usually featuring women with animals. The fact that there are women in the world who would do that, and men who would take their photos doing that, and other men who would go to the trouble of sticking these pictures onto the internet, and other men who sit at their keyboards searching for them . . . all of it defies my belief. I can't imagine what's going through their heads. It's easier to put myself in the mind of the poor sheep or donkey than it is to put myself in the mind of one of the humans involved. And it makes me want to murder someone.

But that's just me. Mick and Phil, and their mates in the secret society of wildlife-hunters, lapped it up.

Unfortunately—or a blessing in disguise as it turned out—one of Mick's pictures was open on his computer one day when Julie came to fix up some problem. It was called 'Swamp-Ass', excuse my French, and was a set of video stills shot from underneath an exercise bike. There's a woman riding the bike. That's as much as I'm saying.

Julie exploded. She went absolutely berserk. She did her nana. I heard her screaming at him from three buildings away. I didn't know for sure what had set her off, but I could guess. Mick had been trying to amuse me with these disgusting pictures for the best part of three months. I went and watched her screaming at him. They didn't know I was there behind the door. It revived my faith in humanity to hear Julie go troppo like this. At least someone had standards around the Deadly!. At least someone was going to put Mick in his place.

But my faith in humanity was always a fragile thing, and it didn't take. Julie screamed her lungs out at him, and Mick just stood there taking it all. He must've felt pretty bad that she'd

caught him out—but you never know what goes on inside a love affair, and the way he stood there copping it, both of them exchanging that look of mixed hostility and sexual desire that makes you envy some couples, because it shows they’ve got it right somewhere inside, despite everything they’ve got wrong, you could see he had the upper hand. He was ready for her. At the end of her tirade, just like in a pathetic 1950s American movie, Mick smiled, cool as you like, and said, ‘Babe, if I have to stand here for one more second without getting my hands on you, then it’s a crime against nature.’

He looped his arm around her neck, putting her in a headlock. Julie kneed him in the balls. Mick doubled over. Once he’d got his breath back, she pinched his ear between her fingers and *she* dragged *him* off, upstairs.

See what I mean? Some people are lucky beyond their means. I guess I shouldn’t say that, given the way Mick met his end, but even an early death doesn’t begin to cancel out, in karma, the bad things he’d done and the good luck he’d had. Julie Ransom, this smart and beautiful and moral human being, had fallen in love with him. This was a love so indestructible that seeing him getting his kicks out of Swamp-Ass didn’t even put a dent in it. Leaving aside some of the things that happened later. It’s just not fair.

So in the mid-nineties, Mick was dead serious about exploring the internet. He asked Julie one day in our regular staff meeting, ‘If these dudes can put up pictures of some beagle [he meant a woman] being turkey-slapped by a mule [he meant a mule], what’s stopping me putting up pictures of Mick Lamington applying the Kiss to a deadly man-eating saltwater crocodile?’

Nothing was stopping him, she said. But people were already doing that all the time. It was the equivalent of photocopying your a. and sending it round the office. There were millions of people doing that kind of self-advertisement on the internet. The trouble was that nobody was looking at what some idiot did. Mick could do it—Julie had been on the point of advising that anyway—yet without marketing, nobody would find him.

‘So how is it,’ Mick went on, ‘that when I type “cougar fuck stallion” on my Altavista, I get exactly what I want?’

Julie explained the arithmetic of search engines: Altavista gave you the internet site where the words ‘cougar’ and ‘stallion’ appeared most of all—that was the top result—usually a zoological textbook or a naturalist’s site, but once Mick scrolled down and looked for the ‘Adult’ alert, he might find what he was looking for.

‘So the search engines are just like word search on my WordPerfect,’ he said. ‘They’re looking for words.’

‘That’s right,’ Julie said, giving us all a lesson.

It was weird, Phil and me and a few other staff sitting around watching Mick and Julie bounce off each other. You almost had to look away, it was so sexed up, like a pair of randy Big Reds brought into an enclosure for mating season.

‘Some of the adult sites are clever with it now,’ she said. ‘They can implant the word “sex” or “blow job”,’ she blushed, ‘or any of those disgusting things you look up, in semi-invisible type across the pictures. The search engine will find them and bring that site up as the most popular search result. There’s all sorts of ways they manipulate it. Manipulating search engines is the big business of most people on the internet.’

‘So,’ Mick said, ‘why aren’t we doing it?’

‘We don’t even have a website yet.’

‘That’s your job,’ he said. And it was true: Julie had already started designing the Mick Lamington’s Deadly! website. ‘And the other part of your job,’ he grinned, ‘is to make it the number one popular search result when people type in “sex” and, ah, “anal” and “intercourse”.’

Julie never got us to number one, far from it, but you could see how the pair of them together had a touch of genius. Mick worked out that a great way of augmenting his website would be to copy and post just about every scientific monograph ever written on the reproductive habits of any animal ever thought of. You’d have no idea how often ‘sex’, ‘anal’ and ‘intercourse’, not to mention a whole library of other suggestive words, come up when you put the right scientific material on your site. In those days, the search engines didn’t care whether you were pulling their leg or not. No one dreamt up Google till years later. In the beginning, all that would come up was data. Search engines were just that—machines, engines. And before long, we had the word ‘sex’ appearing fifty thousand times on Mick Lamington’s purely scientific, purely educational, purely kiddie-oriented Deadly! website.

Well, that was the catalyst. Where Phil had failed to get us in the front door in America, Julie and Mick got us in the back door. Julie had entered Mick’s life at just the right moment—and Mick entered American lives at just the right moment. If not for Julie, my guess is that Mick would’ve lost interest in wildlife up in Queensland and moved onto something else. Fed his *hunger* elsewhere. But Julie, being a true tech-head, saw this new frontier yawning open like the mouth of a dragon waking from hibernation. Julie was the one who sprang Mick out of obscurity into worldwide fame. If friends of the ex-President of Brazil are unhappy that the flags were lowered to half-mast for Mick, they can blame Julie.

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She made him a star as surely as God made the stars in the night sky. Julie was smart and, let's face it, she liked the folding stuff. As a kid, she'd set up a business fixing other kids' computers, and had bought her own brand-new VW Golf when she was seventeen. There was a joke about Julie on one of the fan websites that went: 'If Julie had married the garbage man from around the corner instead of Mick, where would she be now? She'd be running a multimillion-dollar business empire starring the garbage man as a wildlife star.' It was an exaggeration, but like all exaggerations, it was bloody well true.

When the internet was new, what the mainstream media noticed was not the content but the newness. All of a sudden magazines were printing front-page articles on what was the most popular website around. Out of nowhere, this Mick Lamington, this character from Far North Queensland, who rings a vague bell with these Yanks but they can't remember where from, is on the cover of *Wired* magazine and the *Weekly Standard* and these massive American nerd mags, and everyone's talking about him as the first internet superstar, which of course he isn't really because (a) the first internet superstars are all porno actresses but nobody at *Time* magazine wants them on their cover, and (b) Mick hasn't actually done anything to make himself a star other than perform a curiosity show in two Queensland wildlife parks, but who cares, stardom is stardom and it has its own gravity and momentum, and so Phil's phone is ringing off the hook and the offers are rolling in and nobody needs to cook up some dodgy search-engine scam any more because within a few weeks Mick is LEGITIMATELY a world-famous internet celebrity, so we're like those squillionaires who make their first packet dealing drugs but afterwards go legit, and every man and his dog Stateside wants the cyber-famous

Mick to get right on the information superhighway and come on over there and put on a show, and over we go again, and this time it's just how Mick dreamed it: red carpet, Brad Pitt, Madonna, I-Q, presidential candidates, talk-show kings, Oprah Winfrey, you name it, we're regulars at the Polo Lounge and Mick is recognised on the boardwalk of Venice Beach and mobbed, and soon we need security and a fake beard, and Mick's giving the world not only his famous *Kiss* shows but has a new Australian zoo to promote wildlife conservation, just outside Brisbane, so now the newly renamed Kangazoo is the biggest tourist attraction in Queensland and two in five of all tourists to Australia visit it, and Mick's giving lectures on how 'we tried to get in the front door but we didn't realise the back was open wide', recounting his 'years of struggle with old media', and even though he's an authentic superstar of the new media he gets his biggest deals with old media—the TV series with Pioneer Network, the movies, the videotapes and DVDs—which are the deals that bring the big money in.

Anyway, the rest is history, you know it all. We were based in America half the year, living it up in Pioneer Network's compound in Malibu, high on the hog, Australia's biggest export since wool. And Mick had started referring to himself in the third person, sitting with me watching himself on TV or on the home-cinema screen and saying, 'Frosty, look what he's about to do . . . Frosty, what's he doing now . . . Frosty, he's good, isn't he? He's good in this one!'

Yes sir, I was with him all the way and I was still a f.ing virgin.

TWENTY

As bad as I felt about Sharpie Phelps, it lifted after a couple of days. The guy'd been slowly committing suicide with his drink and his pills, and all I'd done was help him on his way. You could even say that I'd done him a favour by putting him out of his misery. A quick, merciful death. He was lucky he had me.

I'd have to plan differently for Brock McCabe, who was in the prime of life. Croc Brock was a younger and fitter man than Sharpie, one of the new breed of naturalists whose stardom owed as much to his sex appeal as to anything he knew about animals. He filmed all his shows up in north Queensland and the usual style was for him to be cruising around the Daintree in a flat-bottomed boat until he spotted a saltwater crocodile. Then, like Superman, he'd strip down to his shorts—'This might take a few minutes!'—so we could see his taut rippling abs and pecs, and dive in. All he lacked was the knife between his teeth. A real antipodean Tarzan.

It was a bit of a mystery why Brock hadn't cracked the States.

He was humungously huge in Australia, but for some reason he didn't 'travel'. Pioneer Network had had their eye on him, but for some reason it either didn't work out with their test audiences or he didn't want to leave home. As well as being a bit of a pin-up boy, Brock was famously a family man, the perfect all-round Australian. He and his wife, Leanne, had gorgeous twin blonde girls, and, unusually for a television star, when he said he preferred not to travel very much he wasn't BS'ing. He was doing nice enough here at home. Why would he bother with the Yanks?

But that didn't mean I could take my eye off him. His girls were eight or nine now, an easier age for him or the whole family to go over, and there was every reason he might feel he needed a new challenge. That's how you say it when you're bored s.-less, isn't it?

So if Deano Rudd dropped dead (ha!), I could see Pioneer going for Brock McCabe. He was the naturalist from central casting. If he resisted, they'd make him an offer he couldn't refuse. They always find a way.

Well, so do I. So do I.

Brock should have been the easiest to get out of the way. He filmed in Far North Queensland, the home of pretty much everything deadly in the country and a few that haven't yet been discovered. The whole buzz of his show radiated out from the risks he took. It was a miracle he was still alive. How hard would it have been to get him just a bit too close to a saltie? Or put a stonefish under his foot? Or a Portuguese man-o'-war in his path? Or a hungry mako shark? Not hard at all, you'd think. I'm the world's number one rigger. And ordinarily I'd look forward to the challenge of putting Brock in nature's way, as I'd done with

Steve Heath. Me and the fauna, working together for our own conservation, ridding the wilderness of these camera-loving show-boaters.

Problem was, Brock wasn't filming at the moment. And he lived not in Far North Queensland but thousands of miles further south, in a swish architectural mansion on Rainbow Bay in Coolangatta, on the Gold Coast, with his blonde wife and twin blonde angels. Aside from the odd passing shark or an out-of-control longboarder, the most dangerous thing down there was getting trampled by a herd of Japanese golf tourists.

I couldn't rely on Brock putting himself in some kind of life-threatening situation which I could massage, like Glenn Mellon and Steve Heath. He wasn't going to help himself out the door like Sharpie Phelps. I had to make this one happen myself.

Could I do it, but? It's all very well to slip something into a pill bottle, but a different matter to track down a man and murder him in cold blood. Or hot blood, as mine was. Whatever—could I do it? Could I hide behind a door and step out and throttle a bloke? Could I slash a knife across his throat? Could I put a pillow over his face? I spose there are some things that you don't know whether or not you can do, until you do them.

Anyway, there was no harm planning. There's no point in not having a plan. Otherwise you might as well just stand in line at the Great Abattoir and move forward one at a time until your number's up. Not even the dopiest galah goes out that meekly.

Here was my thinking. It had to be a clean quick kill, and it couldn't require any strength. That ruled out strangling or knifing—if I let Brock engage me in a fight, he'd have me on the floor in two seconds. Poisoning him was too hard, and running him over in the car was too reliant on unknown variables. He'd have to be in the

right place at the right time, and I'd have to get away without any witnesses. No. Only one way to do it, then.

At least I knew *when*. The next weekend was the end of daylight saving in the southern states. I'd have to do it on Saturday night.

For what I needed, I had to go inside Mick's house. Ironical that he should be the only person in the Kangazoo who owned a gun, but Mick, the wildlife warrior himself, absolutely loved hunting. Since we were kids, firing BB pellets at semitrailers, Mick had loved the feel of a gun in his hands. Even a spud gun—his favourite prank in fourth grade had been to ping his neighbours' windows with potato pellets. Hunting animals was a habit he'd picked up in those years when he'd been away, in his twenties, turning himself into a bushie. He and Phil managed to keep it out of the press—it wouldn't have been great for Mick's image—but he liked few things better than to hop in a truck and head out bush to take on pigs, rabbits, dogs, whatever he saw, even kangaroos, with his beloved Ruger M77.

He'd dragged me out with him in good spirits—that was the thing with Mick; if he was up to no good he'd compromise you by roping you in—and I'd gone along. Shooting animals went against everything I believed in, but when Mick threw his arm around my neck and chucked me in the chin and said, 'C'mon, Frost,' in that way he had, I felt like he'd put me smack-bang in the centre of the universe, he'd *blessed* me, and I couldn't say no.

I never could say no. See, if you don't get why I dropped my scruples and gave everything away and went against my principles and said Yes, Yes, Yes to him, you don't know the first thing about true love.

By the time we got out into the paddocks Mick's attention had drifted away from me—he was larking about like a kid at Christmas—and so when my time came to fire the gun I intentionally held it loose and let the recoil bounce the barrel away from the pig's a. I was meant to be aiming at. I couldn't kill a flea and I couldn't hit a barn. Mind you, when he saw how useless I was with the gun Mick was worried I might shoot myself or, worse still, him. He took it away from me, giving me one of those Mick looks, like I was some kind of spastic brother he was lumped with for his whole life. I'd just as soon never have gone out hunting with him. It showed me a side of Mick—bloodthirsty, cruel, taking pleasure from wounding and slaughtering living creatures—that I wished he'd keep under wraps. I wasn't like the ignorant public. I knew it was there in him. I just didn't want to see it. The way he whooped and hollered. Now he was gone, I'd've given anything to hear it again, but.

He stored the gun in a vertical safe in his study. On the Friday morning before the end of daylight saving, I loitered round the Wombatorium where I had a clear view through the casuarinas to the front of the Lamingtons' house. I saw Ranger come out and drive off, out of the zoo, in her dad's Holden Jackaroo. Sneer at Mick all she liked, Ranger never had a problem using the family car or putting her feet up in the family house.

I hadn't seen Julie since the funeral. Sheena had but, and said she was in a pretty bad way, refusing to take other visitors and sitting in her bed watching soap operas, chewing Phil's tranqs like jellybeans. I couldn't blame her. She was devastated, her other half cut clean out of her. Shame of it was, Julie was a bigger person than Mick ever was: raw-boned, fit as a red kangaroo, super smart, her thick long hair blocking out the sun like a chestnut brumby's

mane. She could go on without him, she could run this show, all she needed was to back herself. But that's not really the point, is it? I was a better naturalist than Mick ever was, and I could run this show, yet if Phil had come along with his jar of Rohies I'd have gobbled a handful and begged him to tuck me in.

Bloody Mick. He was a liar and a cheat and a conman and much worse besides, but without him we were lost.

I knew the code for their security gate—WOY, or YOW backwards—and let myself in. The front door was locked, but the laundry on the side was open. I knew Mick's house like the back of my hand. Sprawled out like a crocodile on a riverbank, it was built in that modern-Australian style with lots of jarrah wood and corrugated iron, inspired by shearing sheds and backyard dunnies and roos' balls, slants and curves and the trendy indoor-outdoor thing. Inside, it felt like a mausoleum—the way rich people's homes do if they're not crawling with kids. I walked through the laundry into the kitchen, my footsteps echoing on the polished hardwood floors. No point creeping around. *Mi casa es tu casa*, Mick had always said, a phrase he'd picked up in Los Angeles. It wouldn't give Julie a heart attack if she found me here. But I'd rather she didn't.

The key to Mick's gun safe was hanging on a rack in the kitchen pantry. So much food in there, going to waste. So much wealth in this house, cleverly disguised by its low lines and the native foliage. It was always meant to be a hidden lair, like a James Bond villain's underground city. The myth of Mick was that he lived humbly, in the zoo. (The humble living was reserved for others, but.) The myth of Mick, though, didn't have the same need for domestic consumables as the real Mick did. Talk about creature comforts! This home had fifteen-thousand-dollar Italian leather couches, plasma TVs in most rooms, piped hi-fi, a sauna, pretty much the best of everything.

His study was in its usual pristine state. Mick had a bookshelf that only had books about Mick Lamington. There wasn't room for anything else! He'd done a whole series for kids, and some illustrated coffee-table books for the adult Christmas market, a book of jokes for the Father's Day crowd, even a diet book for the ladies. There were also three biographies done on him by paid lackeys. On the shelves were also hundreds of DVDs and videos and CD-ROMs. The full Lamington oeuvre. When I think of him in year eight, dux of the year, a near-genius in maths as well as English, acting in Shakespeare plays and cutting the opposition to shreds in the debating society, and I see what he left on this earth . . . I have to wonder sometimes. I have to wonder.

His desk, all inlaid woods and leather, was, as usual, spick and span. He wasn't much of a desk man, Mick. He tooled around on his computer but that was about as much desk work as he could take. Over the years he'd pretty much killed off his attention span. The upright gun safe was right next to the desk, tucked in between the fridge and the home-cinema screen. I opened it up. The Ruger M77 was in a soft drab-green vinyl case. Boxes of bullets were on a shelf above it. Bloody Mick—you weren't meant to keep guns and ammo together. But he couldn't give a s. about rules. Should've heard him go on about the 'nanny state'.

I'd taken the gun out and was slipping a small box of twelve bullets into the pocket of my overalls when I heard the door click behind me. My heart threw a triple-somersault. I could do without this. In a few days Julie would hear about Brock McCabe, and then she'd remember she'd seen me, and she'd make the connection. Could I rely on her to look after me? I wasn't sure. I had a better chance of hoping she was so fuddled that she'd forget having seen me. If she was such a basket case as Sheena said, I might be able to convince her I'd never even been there, I'd been an apparition.

Or if that failed, I could just do away with her.

I turned around and it wasn't Julie standing in the study doorway.

'Eh, Hunter, how's it going?'

Mick and Julie's boy, snaggle-toothed and dreamy, was staring at the gun.

'Ar, this?' I said. 'Now your dad's not here, we have to give this back to the police. Nobody's gunna need it any more, right?'

I played it cool, locking up the safe. Hunter was a sweet kid but he was off in his own world. I relaxed. If anyone was going to be my witness, I couldn't have chosen better.

'How're ya doing, anyway?' I said, dusting down the vinyl gun cover in a busy, adult way. Everything I was doing was absolutely normal. I'd become such a devious bugger, and so quickly. Fast learner.

'Good,' Hunter said.

'That's good, mate.' This was about as far as conversation with the kid went. Mick had stopped talking to him years ago. He couldn't hack the frustration.

'Been up to see the rats this morning?'

Hunter nodded, his sweet bug-eyed face a million miles away. Of all the animals to get obsessed with, it was rats. Not mice. Common, garden-variety rats. I'd built him a little cage out in the yard of the house, with waterwheels and slides and feed trays. He could sit there for hours playing with them. It was the thing we had in common. Mick, if he was any kind of father, any kind of naturalist, would have bonded with Hunter over the rats. But it only seemed to be another of his great disappointments in the boy. 'Rats!' he'd said. 'Why can't he get interested in a real boy's animal?' 'Like what?' I'd said. Mick looked at me like I was as stupid as Hunter. 'Well, Frosty,' he said, looking out the window—at the zoo. 'Let me think . . .'

Smooth as oil, I was readying to leave with the gun and the bullets. Taking them back to the police. Hunter might tell his mother, but all he'd recollect was that I was doing some totally normal, grown-up stuff. He might not even recollect that.

I was sliding past him in the doorway when a thought made me stop. Poor kid, he was stooped there in his park ranger's outfit, all khaki and important. Who knew what was going on behind those slate-grey eyes? Mick's colour. Originally, anyway. There must have been something going on in there. I'd seen the kid with the rats. He had a heart, he had a brain.

Kneeling down beside him, I said, 'You missing your dad?'

Hunter looked at me vaguely, like he remembered me from somewhere. Then he shook his head.

'I'm sure you are,' I said. 'We all are. Your mum must be missing him very much. Is she okay?'

He shook his head again. He wasn't missing his dad, and his mum wasn't okay. The kid was compos, all right. He was right on the ball. His problem was, he couldn't tell a lie.

'Listen, mate,' I said. 'Promise me something. Whatever happens, you've got to be nice to your mum. Okay? In your whole life, from now on your mum's the one who's most important. You get me?'

He studied me for a long time, like I was a 3D puzzle. His eyes went out of focus, so they might've seen the hidden pattern.

'Uncle Frosty,' he said at last. 'Are you going out to shoot my dad?'

Ar, the poor kid. He'd got things all out of order.

I formed a fist and rubbed the bottom of his chin. Hunter leapt away like I was going to attack him. I pulled him in and gave him a hug.

BRIAN WESTLAKE

‘You know, mate?’ I whispered. ‘In a funny way, you and I are the same. I don’t really miss him either.’

Then he surprised me. His hand started patting my shoulder, kindly, like he was the grown-up and I was the snivelling kid.

‘It’s all right, Uncle Frosty,’ he said.

Like he knew what a liar I was.

TWENTY-ONE

Okay, so Saturday lunchtime I got in the ute and heavy-pedalled it south down the Highway towards the Gold Coast. I'd hidden the gun in a toolbox in the tray and covered it with a tarpaulin. The ammo I had in my washbag, which was in a canvas carry-all on the passenger seat. I'd had someone at the Kangazoo call Brock McCabe's place with some routine administrative request about DVD supplies and confirmed that he'd be at home. Unfortunately his wife and daughters were there too. I'd trip head-first over that hurdle when I came to it. At the time of day I was planning to hook up with Brock, there shouldn't be any problem with the family.

I've got to admit I drove with a bit of a spring in my step. I wound down the windows and let the sea air pour in, nature's own air conditioning. I had some cash in my wallet, courtesy of Phil Barrows, and I had a good plan. I had no idea whether I'd be able to carry it out but sometimes just having the plan is enough.

Early in the afternoon I drove through Coolangatta across the border into New South Wales, to Tweed Heads. Separated by the Tweed River, which is the state line, the twin towns are more or less conjoined suburbs of the same Gold Coast exurban melanoma. But they hold on proudly to their separate identities, one feature of which is the weird time differences. Queensland, due to the cow-milking and cane-cutting lobby, doesn't have daylight saving. It'd fade their curtains. For nearly half the year, from October through to March, New South Wales time is one hour later than Queensland time. When daylight saving starts in October the sun rises at about 6 am in Queensland, which becomes 5 am in New South Wales. On the last Saturday night of October—or, more precisely, at 2 am on the Sunday—everyone in New South Wales winds their clock forwards, so they lose an hour of sleep, to go onto daylight saving time. And Queensland is unmoved.

On the last Saturday in March it goes the other way. The New South Wales people wind their clocks back so at 3 am it becomes 2 am again. For one night of the year, there are two 2 ams.

The last Saturday of last March I checked into the hotel of the Twin Towns RSL and Casino. I wanted somewhere big, but most importantly it had to have security cameras.

With a few hours to kill, I drove to the beach at Rainbow Bay to stake it out. Most of the joint was high-rise apartment blocks. It was more or less a viewing auditorium for the surf at Snapper Rocks, or the Superbank. Back in 2000 they'd dredged out the Tweed River and started pumping out the sand on the north side of the river mouth, at Snapper, which had been a popular but inconsistent surf break. The tonnes and tonnes of new sand created a declining sandbank off Snapper and Greenmount so that perfect right-handed waves would pour along the beach in almost any

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conditions. They broke along, rather than against, the beach, so that boardriders could paddle out easily and pick a number of different spots to catch their waves. Overnight, one of the world's best surfing beaches was created. And then, this being the twenty-first century, overnight it was spoilt. Every holidaying wombat from America, Germany, Japan, Brazil, France, not to mention from the rest of Australia, had to surf the Superbank. I'd heard Mick whinge about this until he made my ears bleed. He really hated the foreigners. For all his image, Mick was a pretty xenophobic bloke. He said he loved Aussies too much to leave any room for the rest of the world. He didn't mind dagos and chinks if they stayed in their own countries, but he didn't want them staying too long in Australia, and in particular he didn't want them at the Superbank. It wasn't because he surfed. He didn't, or not at Superbank. It was because he reckoned any tourist day spent at the beach was one tourist day lost to the Kangazoo.

Brock McCabe was a real surfer, unlike Mick. The Superbank—sharp in the drop but forgiving, easy, on the shoulders—was the local wave for Brock, and if he'd had his way he'd have gone surfing there every day. But he was too frustrated by the crowds. They'd cut him to pieces. And when those surfer boys recognised him, it only got worse. There's something in the air these days that has turned people against celebrities. They like to hurt them, to assert themselves. It's the idea that celebrities haven't done much to earn the richest spoils our society has to offer. Grommets slicing Brock up in the surf were cutting him down to size. I'd heard him talk about some shocking surf-rage episodes. Once a guy followed him all the way to the car park, pinned him against the ticket machine, and said if he saw him in the water this side of the border again he'd personally send Brock's teeth so far down his throat he'd need to stick his

toothbrush up his a. to clean them. And Brock had been surfing there for twenty years.

I sat on the grassy headland south of the bay at Greenmount, thinking about Brock, about Mick, and about what I still had to do. I felt bad about Sharpie, but not too bad. I felt really bad about Brock. I felt guilty in advance for leaving his daughters fatherless. But what choice did I have? I was running out of time, I was borrowing money from my own son's medical kitty. Brock had to go. Brock was so good, even I'd hire him before I'd hire me. I couldn't believe Pioneer hadn't gone for him already. Why Glenn Mellon? Idiots. If they'd gone for Brock instead, we wouldn't have had the shark cage accident and the whole thing wouldn't have snowballed out of control. We wouldn't have had Ranger cooking up her plan with Deano Rudd. If they'd just gone for Brock I could have stayed on as his sidekick and life would've been just dandy. No real change. Idiots.

I was telling myself I should've been killing Steam and Rout, but then, I reminded myself, there were more idiots where they came from. In America they grew on trees. Smart, clever, educated children who should have been engineers and doctors but instead wanted to s. in their own nest by working as television production executives. This wasn't my world. I hadn't created it. I just had to find my way within it, adapt to the terrain as an animal adapts. Defend my family within it. It wasn't a world of my making. That's for sure.

Having cased out Brock's house—he had the best possie on the Duranbah headland, a three-storey house in sandy Gold Coast cement render with a bunch of reflective windows like two rows of perfect teeth—I walked around the streets. He was a motoring enthusiast, Brock McCabe, and had a six-car garage. I'd been in there before with Mick, when Brock was showing off his Ferrari, his

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Aston Martin, his MG, his Bentley, his Land Rover, and his prize possession, a Holden Racing Team Commodore touring car. 'I love the foreign cars,' he'd said, 'but to me there's something special about Australian.' Yeah, particularly if it can go to three-one-five k's per hour without bits falling off. That's special.

There was no sign of Brock at the house, and I didn't want to bump into him anyway. He was probably out having a surf, getting fin chops from clumsy German backpackers or malicious local grommets.

I drove back to the Twin Towns RSL and killed—cold-bloodedly murdered—a few hours indulging in the national Australian pastime: hitting buttons on poker machines. What do gangsters and drug dealers risk their lives to earn money for? To play pokies. What do dole bludgers and housewives do with their meagre coin? Play pokies. What do lawyers and judges and doctors do when they have to pacify themselves? Play pokies. What does a killer do when he has to keep his mind off what he's going to do that night? Play pokies. It's a true leveller. It's why we're such a great egalitarian nation. Poker machines treat us all the same.

Or some worse than others as it turns out. Overall, poker machines are programmed to return about eighty-five cents in the dollar to the user. But that's only an overall requirement. As an individual you can win big. Someone else can do the losing for you. That's the whole point—the averages must be maintained over the long term, but for each user there is total unpredictability.

Just as well I was only in Tweed for one night. By 2 am, I'd lost six hundred dollars. Six hundred less for my little boy Rod. I was a bad father.

But the time had come for me to be a good father.

* * *

I made sure that at 2 am on the dot I was walking through the lobby of the RSL, under a security camera. I'd have an hour to get back there, which was plenty of time. Brock's place was only five minutes away.

The gun was where I'd left it in the tray of the ute in the car park underneath the hotel-casino. I didn't want to be carting it around with me, attracting unwanted attention. I pulled up at a beachside playground and checked the gun under the weak yellow streetlight. It seemed in order—though what would I know? I put some bullets in where they looked like they were meant to go. I knew what the safety was, and kept it latched. I should have taken some practice shots, but where? Where in urban Australia can you fire a gun?

In Brock McCabe's garage, that's where.

It was 2.19 am when I pulled up four or five doors along from Brock's and around a corner. There weren't many streetlights. I'd checked this out earlier. I parked close enough so I wouldn't have to run a long way with the gun.

All the houses, including Brock's, were more or less dark. I say more or less because although the lights inside were off, there were always garden lights, automatic sensor lights and whatnot. As well, the blocks of units were well lit up.

I slid the gun out of its cover, green vinyl with white piping. In my hands guns always felt lighter than expected, paradoxically because I expected them to be heavier than I'd expect. You know what I mean. It felt like mercury. It might fly away. I pointed it at one of the buildings and looked through the rear sight, which was shaped like a leaf. The creative effort to elaborate on a simple hole: don't let anyone ever tell you that men don't love guns. I was falling for this girl already. I unlatched the safety and fitted my cheek into

the hollow some genius had thoughtfully carved into the wooden stock: perfect, like it had been sitting in Mick's safe all this time waiting for me. The sight ran in a long nubbled ramp up to the circular front sight, so you had two concentric circles like ripples to look through. You just had to pop the pebble into the centre.

It wasn't much of a plan, this. So many potential witnesses. How many people lived on this headland? Two thousand? It would only take one pair of eyes, up in a unit, getting a glass of water, to dozily peer out the window and I'd be done.

I clearly hadn't watched enough television. If I had, I'd've known how stupid my plan was.

Holding the gun tight against my side, concealed like a crutch, I hugged the garden verges until I got to Brock's driveway. It was lined with Chinese lanterns at ankle height that came on as I approached. I couldn't worry about that. In for a penny.

There was no way I'd get in through the garage door, a fiendishly complicated affair that folded and unfolded like a robotic concertina. When Brock had shown off his car collection to Mick and me, he was almost as proud of the Wondadoor as he was of the cars inside. It was 'space-age, and fully Australian', he'd said. He loved his stuff, Brock did.

The sides of the house were blocked off by wooden gates framed into the rendered walls. Taking a punt that there were no outside alarms or cameras, I jumped over the gate to the east side and continued up the garden path.

I did one circuit of the house, just to check nobody was up. It was spectacular in there. Mick had been inspired to buy his home-cinema set-up after a visit to Brock's house. These guys, at this level, what really motivated them was getting better toys than their rivals. Maybe I'd be like that too one day.

There remained the challenge of actually getting inside.

The garage speared out to the flank of the house, inside the gate, and had a narrow vertical window built into the render, to let in some natural light. I went to this window, held my gun by the butt end, and tapped it once, twice, three times, four times, five times, until the cracks widened enough for me to stove it in. I climbed inside, into the cool space.

An alarm came on, but no lights. I backed against the Bentley, quiet as a midgere. It might be a back-to-base alarm, but Brock wasn't a back-to-base sort of bloke. Hearing the alarm, he'd spring out of bed, tell his kittens they were safe, and come down here himself. It would have been a bird smashing the window, he'd say, or some kids. Grommets were often following him home to abuse him about dropping in on them. He was used to minor juvenile harassment. No need to call the police.

I reckon I was more scared than Brock could ever be. I crouched in the darkness between his Bentley and his MG, trying to puff myself up. *I am the angel of death.* I checked the Ruger was ready and flicked the safety off. I heard Brock's footfall coming down the stairs. He wasn't panicking, just taking his own sweet time. He paused just outside the garage to turn the alarm off. Wouldn't want to disturb the neighbours.

I still can't believe how stupid I was to think I could fire a noisy gun like that in such an overpopulated area and get away from the scene without being spotted. For all my other planning—casing the joint, picking the daylight saving changeover night, choosing the casino-hotel, making myself conspicuous there—I'd made a major blunder in thinking I could shoot this guy and get out unseen. It struck me now that to escape to my car, I'd have to climb back through the broken window, get myself over the wooden

gate—which would probably seem ten feet tall in my panic—and run across four lawns before driving my ute straight back past the house. Stupid.

But there was another way out. I was right near the panel of red and green buttons that controlled the massive garage door. Green meant open, I remembered that. I'd shoot Brock, hit the green button, open the doors and run straight out. It'd give me a good forty-five-second start on the phantom me, scrambling out the window and over the gate. As I huddled there in the chilly darkness waiting for him, it seemed like a good idea.

'Yeah, hello?' Brock spoke into the dark garage like he was answering the phone. He wasn't trying to put on the cool, composed act. That was Brock McCabe. He *was* cool.

I didn't say hello back.

'Anybody here?'

He sighed to himself, as if embarrassed at having called out. I knew what he'd do next. He'd come across to the smashed window. He'd inspect it, and conclude that it was a bird. He might cover it up, or he might just leave it and go back to bed.

But he wouldn't go back to bed tonight, because in the moment he was considering the window, the angel of death would spring up behind him.

It all went to plan, choreographically. I stayed crouching behind the Bentley as Brock crossed the garage floor. He hadn't turned the light on, and I saw why. He was starkers. He slept in his buff glory, and hadn't bothered to put on a robe or a T-shirt to come downstairs. Sure, it was a warm night, but did he have to be so unworried?

Behind the Bentley, the loaded Ruger in my arms, I told myself not to move, not even to breathe, until the last moment. I was a

dingo hiding behind a rock. Predacious animals can do this—they can wait. Just as we naturalists can. We wait and wait in a concealed spot until our moment comes. We are predators too, hungry for our shot.

As Brock paused at the broken window, I stood up. I wasn't going to say anything at all—certainly nothing like, 'Brock McCabe, meet your maker.' I was going to shoot a brave man in the back. When you're planning something like this you don't want to make any more of it than you have to.

So I stood, aimed and fired. Brock dropped to the ground. I hit the garage button and fled.

Or no. I stood, aimed, and squeezed the trigger. 'Squeeze it,' Mick had said. 'Don't jerk at it like you're pulling your pud!' I squeezed it—and it jammed. Or it wasn't loaded properly. Or I'd put the bullets in a. over turkey. Or I'd turned the safety on instead of off. There could have been any number of reasons for the gun not going off.

'F. it,' I hissed.

Brock turned around. It was dark, so he didn't recognise me. But he saw the gun. Brock being Brock, he didn't try to scarper back into the house. That's what I would have done. But this man tamed crocodiles. A mere incompetent gunman, probably a useless junkie, wasn't going to faze him. He came towards me and I stepped backwards.

'Come here, you weasel!'

I'd got him mad now. He was chasing me around the cars. I ducked in behind the Aston Martin, but he was upon me. I turned the rifle around and jabbed it at his pelvic region. My first smart move: Brock was nude, so his instinct was to cover up his crown jewels. I jabbed again. If he'd been clothed he might have grabbed the rifle butt.

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I then smashed the butt into the Aston's driver's-side window and mirror, showering glass on the floor. Brock, barefooted, was held up. Snarling and hissing at me rather than shouting, he seemed filled with a sudden hatred.

'Come here, you junkie f.er.'

He circled back the other way, keeping himself between me and the garage door. I guess he thought if he could keep me from escaping, he would eventually outsmart me. He was trapping yet another large but thick-headed reptile. I feel a lump rising in my throat as I recall his courage. Anyone else—anyone like me—would have just rushed back into the house, called the cops, and hoped the intruder would leave of his own accord. Brock McCabe wanted to make a citizen's arrest. And then he'd want to make a DVD.

'We got no drugs or money here, you dumb junkie,' he growled with a personal kind of animosity.

He hadn't recognised me, which was good. I only wanted one thing now: to escape, to live to fight another day—no, not to fight another day, to go home and give up this stupid plan. I hadn't killed Glenn Mellon or Steve Heath, they were accidents, and the thing with Sharpie Phelps was an act of mercy, an assisted suicide. It was euthanasia. So now, if I could only get out of this garage, I'd go back to my life and be a good law-abiding citizen and find some other way to look after Rod and my girls. Hell, I'd join the priesthood if it would get me out of this.

I found myself back where I'd started, near the glass window. No point running through there: Brock knew this property a lot better than I did, and he'd just chase me down and rugby tackle me, whip on a topjaw rope and cage me up. My only hope was to get through the Wondadoor. Blindly, I reached for the control panel and started smacking my open palm into the buttons.

The door creaked into action, like the jaws of some science-fiction spaceship. It was six cars long and built in four articulated horizontal slats. The bottom one swung up first; like a slow-closing fan, it would fold up against the next, rising clumsily but majestically into the ceiling.

But my spasmodic hitting of the buttons confused it. It swung up and down eccentrically. Brock, who was between the Holden Racing Team Commodore and the Wondadoor, started to move towards me. But one of the unexpected swings of the panels caught his hand and jammed it like a bear trap. I hit a button and the door stopped. I stood and stared, aghast. Brock McCabe's right hand was fully trapped in the door's metal jaws. He looked at it, then up at me—and he saw.

'Frosty? Frosty Westlake?'

He left me with no choice. I didn't mean to. I only wanted to escape. I don't even think I meant to shoot him. The malfunctioning of the gun was a Freudian sign from my unconscious, which had not wanted to hurt him. I'd unlatched the safety back at the car, and then forgotten. In the garage, when I thought I was unlatching it, I was putting it back on. The gun was safe in my hands.

Hey, this was Brock McCabe. He was *better* than me. But he was also trapped in his garage door. He stood there, somehow diminished in his nakedness now that he'd recognised me. With his left hand, he made a feeble instinctive move to cover himself up.

'Frosty, if something's wrong, let's sit down . . . Mate, just hit the bottom button, okay? That'll spring me loose.'

I took a closer look at the control panel. I hit the top button. It had a lightning bolt on it, to signify Fast.

It was impossible for me to stay and watch. Whether Brock survived or not hardly mattered to me at that moment. All I knew

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was that it was better for me to press the Up button than the Down. Lightning was the button that would let me escape. Whatever happened with Brock himself could be set to rights later.

He didn't make any noise aside from the grunts of struggle. He must have been in excruciating pain as his tangled naked form was pulled further into the complex of pulleys and winches and metal panels, like he was being sucked into an apple-corer. I saw his feet leave the oil-stained concrete floor. I heard him grunt my name. Yet he didn't scream. He was Brock McCabe. I saw a flash of hair, of muscle, of donger, of knee, and a foot in the darkness. But I wasn't hanging around to make a documentary. As soon as the door rose high enough, I bent beneath its rubber skirt and ran, useless gun swinging from my hand, towards the car. I sped to Tweed and was outside the casino by 2.51 am.

I timed my re-entrance through the lobby. It was 2 am on the dot, once again, as I walked back inside. Unable to sleep, I played the pokies till dawn and won back four hundred of the six hundred dollars I had lost.

TWENTY-TWO

I spose, seeing I never really liked America, still don't and never will, it's ironic that my kids are half-Yankee.

In the year of the third millennium, at the age of two score and three, I was introduced to my first and only lover.

Sheena was a twenty-three-year-old production assistant at Pioneer, and she was charged with keeping me out of trouble during our shoots and while we were touring. It was all the stuff I hated—showbiz, BS, the sheer aggravating pressure of having American eyes on you. But they'd given me a panacea: this down-to-earth, petite, no-nonsense 'girl' courtesy of the good people of Pioneer.

At first I thought Sheena was more like an Aussie than a Septic, she was such a BS-free zone. The minute she took me over, I felt like I was in one of those dreams where you find your soulmate is someone you've known all along. I know it's a cliché, but f. it, clichés are true sometimes. That's why they're clichés. I felt like I'd known her forever. She squired me around and made me so f.ing

comfortable during all the worst of it, and before I started thinking of her as a sister figure or a mother figure, she seduced me.

I was in love! Crusty old Frosty, the weathered and leathered sidekick, the secret magician, the smoke-and-mirrors man, was head over heels with an American poppet. Suddenly I saw everything Mick had seen in that place: the confidence, the eyes on the future, the no-questions-asked certainty. As an American, Sheena assumed she was at the centre of the universe, and she infected me with that self-belief. We were special, us two. Where Mick hadn't been able to sell me on America, Sheena succeeded. I was like a big puppy dog following her around, grateful that this production assistant young enough to be my daughter was giving me the time of day, let alone the key to her charms.

When we got back to Australia I took her on trips to the roughest, scratchiest, most dangerous wilderness, and she not only put up with it but lapped it up. She loved it. If we were catching crocs, she knew how to slip on the topjaw rope that restrains them from biting. She was fearless. Once, camping in the Great Sandy Desert, she went to do her business behind a dune and I heard a scream. I ran and saw Sheena, dunny roll in hand, staring down a perentie lizard: not dangerous, but the biggest lizard on the continent and very rare. I said, 'Stop there, baby, be a statue, I'll come and—' She interrupted me. 'Shut up, Frosty, go back and get the camera. We've got to get this on film!'

Wilderness made her horny, she said, a condition she proved by sometimes dragging me out of the 4WD or the tinnie into the bush for a quick tumble. Never noisy enough to disturb the wildlife, mind you, which she loved with as much curiosity and energy as I did. Just quietly, I was able to rev her up at home too, by letting a boa constrictor called Wayne live in our bedroom with us. Sheena was

taken aback at first, but before long Wayne was curling up around our feet and getting Sheena going. (We had to let Wayne go back into the zoo when we had the nippers, but.) A kid from Baltimore, father a professor of literature, mother a hippie poet, brown as a nut, cute as a button, and in love with me. What the hell did she see in me? I still can't believe it.

Disbelief is an unsound foundation for a marriage. I was in love without any reservations or doubts, in a dream of long-overdue love—I'd waited all this time, but hey, it was worth it—which left me a long way above the ground without a safety net.

If you want to know the truth of it, as soon as I fell in love with Sheena and she admitted she didn't half fancy me, I became terrified of my old buddy Mick. Wasn't this the way it'd go? How could I fight charisma? I was the second banana, and Sheena was too spunky to settle for the innocent taciturn animal-obsessed Frosty when there was a genuine superstar in the next room. It was a contradiction I had to live with: if Sheena was everything I thought she was, then Mick would have to find her irresistible. And she would have to find Mick irresistible. I worshipped that production assistant, put her on a pedestal so far above me that there was only one man I could think of who was worthy of her.

But defying my dread, Mick and Sheena got on well. Real well. Like a paranoid rat, I was constantly on the lookout for secret signs passing between them. You know, that language that experienced people speak. Only for each other's ears. Inner ears. But I never picked it up. Mick was happy with Julie and only slept around when he and Phil went on a blow-out to Vegas or New York, or Madrid or Paris, or Moscow or Prague, or Montreal or Seattle—it was a case of what happens on tour stays on tour. But at home Mick was a loyal family man, married with two nippers, and I was a newlywed.

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The whole Mick-and-Sheena thing was a figment of my imagination. Everything was settled, part of the furniture. Sheena was mine.

And Mick had morals, didn't he? He couldn't afford to get me offside, could he? If he lost me, he'd lose the lot. I had a lock on him. He couldn't be Mick Lamington, he couldn't Kiss the beasties, unless he had his rigger making it all look real. He needed me more than I needed him.

But I speak with the wisdom of hindsight. At the time, it was an exercise in trust. I could trust him with her. I could trust her with him. Couldn't I?

Well, yeah, I guess so, up to a point. No, that's unfair. It was never a breach of trust.

I have never been unfaithful to Sheena. Sure, there are degrees of unfaithfulness, and I won't pretend I have maintained a kind of absolute zero. My mind has a mind of its own. But my body—my hands, my mouth, my nose, even my knees and toes—has always been pure as the driven snow. I was faithful to her before I met her. Even when Mick spent so many years trying to break me down, bit by bit, I stayed as true as a nun. Even when he gave me the strongest of motives and the most tempting of opportunities, I resisted.

Mick thought I was gutless. My strength, he said, was actually a weakness. And for more than a decade I let him entrench this idea between us: his lusty appetite for life was superior to my puritanical withdrawal from it. He was saying Yes to life. I was saying No.

It's only now that I can put into words why I never touched another woman. It's the same reason I cannot kill a man with my bare hands. It is because your own body will not go away, will not

leave you in peace. I could not even let myself weigh a voluptuous woman's breasts in my hands—not even for a second, not even a paid woman, *no strings attached* (Mick's words, tempting and taunting), not for an instant. Why? I've learnt why. The woman might disappear, but my hands won't. The same hands that have fondled a strange woman's body would remain attached to my arms. Every time I touched Sheena, it would be with those same hands. They could not be washed clean.

Brock McCabe taught me the truth about hands. The hands with which I picked up my children would, for the rest of my days, be the same hands that had taken a good man's life. The Bible tells you to cut them off. It might be preferable.

But I learnt another thing from Brock. It's not only the hands. It can be the *eyes* that are polluted too. The eyes through which I looked at my children would be the same eyes that had seen Brock chewed up by his six-car Wondadoor. Why should the eyes be privileged? Why would the sense of sight be subject to different rules from the sense of touch? Or the other senses? The ears with which I'd heard Brock's last disbelieving grunts, the nose through which I'd smelt the beginnings of the s. squirting out of his uncovered a.hole. (You know, when it comes out in that death panic, it doesn't plop in nice fully formed chunks. It turns instantly to liquid, like the hair can turn instantly to grey. Your bowels literally turn to water. It happens to animals too.)

My mouth and hands, my senses of taste and touch, hadn't been implicated. I'd tried to quarantine my hands by killing him at a distance. But the senses are all equal, and three out of five had registered that man's death. Three out of five senses I'd be lumped with for the rest of my life. Polluting my marriage, my family.

* * *

Brock's death hit me in a delayed reaction. The light of the morning after brought out all my warts and pimples, so to speak. I was cleaning up in my bathroom at the Twin Towns RSL hotel with the radio on in the background. On the morning news they announced it: Brock McCabe, famous crocodile guy, had been found dead last night at his home. His wife had found him in their garage. The actual cause of death was not being revealed as yet, but the police were treating it as accidental. Foul play had been ruled out.

As I was listening, I caught a glimpse of my raddled face in the mirror and I fell apart. That face—it wasn't mine. It was somebody else, listening to the radio news, getting off the hook. Was it me? No. Or yes. This was me. I was an unfriendly man, malevolent and hateful. Face it: that was why I hadn't been very successful in life. I'd lived in the shadows, grim and grizzled, wishing nothing but the worst for others. A misanthrope. That was why I hadn't risen to get my own show. Others recognised it. Phil saw it, the Pioneer Americans saw it, even Ranger Lamington saw it. It was obvious to every single person except me. I was a nasty grey shadowy piece of work. I was unable to *sell*. I couldn't sell myself, I couldn't sell a show, I couldn't sell a bottle of water to a dying man in the desert. With a product in my hands, I wasn't *credible*. This world is built for salesmen and saleswomen. If you have that skill, to convince others that they want what you have, then the sky's the limit. Who was a better example of that than Mick himself? He could sell anything. He just happened to sell wildlife, and himself. But me, I could never do it. I didn't like people. How could you sell a product if you didn't like people? I only liked animals—and my wife and kids. But that was all, that was the limit of my humanity. I ought to get out of this racket, get myself a new job. Just move on from it all. I was no salesman. Face it. There was still time for me

to go back to my training and get some quiet job in a zoo or a lab or a wildlife park, just quietly take care of the animals and study them and pass on my knowledge. That was what I was, what I am: a student and a teacher. Not a salesman. What was I doing trying to fit into a salesman's world?

I was so exhausted I could hardly move. I slumped to the floor and had a good cry. Croc Brock McCabe! How could I have done this? All right, I didn't actually shoot him or kill him with my own hands, but the radio was wrong, the police were wrong: foul play, it was. How? Who was this devil in my skin? Brock and I should have been allies, shoulder to shoulder in the protection of our wilderness and wildlife. We *were*. It was us against the Americans—Brock had rejected them by staying in Australia. He wasn't part of the problem, any more than Sharpie Phelps was. So what was I doing killing them? What sort of unnatural monster had I become?

Everything around me was swimming in my tears. I felt as heavy as if lead weights were hanging off my wrists, my ankles, around my neck. My nose was thick and full. I gulped air in convulsions through my mouth. Brock's death kept replaying itself in my mind. I saw his eyes like candles in hollows of wax, staring out at me from his first intimations. *Frosty? Frosty Westlake?* But it was his attention to detail that got me, his confidence that he would fix this problem and then he'd be fine. He wasn't screaming for his life; he was attempting to solve a problem. He died doing what he loved.

I crawled into the shower-bath, took the hot jets sitting in the tub. Eventually I stopped weeping, got out, dried myself off and lay on the bed. There was Keno on the television set, as impersonal as a test pattern. I watched it through glazed eyes. Something about the inevitable procession of random numbers calmed me—mathematics was like the universe, like nature. Every number was a life

extinguished. Your number came up today, or tomorrow, but it eventually had to come up. Same if you were a human or an animal. It's all about killing and death. We call it beautiful. It's one great bloodbath out there, the strong killing the weak, the weak outsmarting the strong, acts of God sweeping out whole civilisations as we speak. And we call it beautiful. It is beautiful.

Still glued to the pastel colours of the Keno screen, I felt a cool wave of relief rise up from my toes, through my legs and body until it brushed over my face, like a shroud, like a snake's skin coming off. I poured myself an OJ and thought of the oranges in the groves down south, the bugs and aphids in the orange groves, going on as serenely with their business as ever. Did they care about me? Did they care about Brock McCabe? As little as we cared about them. In nature's indifferent pebbly eyes, Brock, me, each little fruit fly—we were all equal.

I got dressed. My energy had returned, and with it the crispness of the day. I could see lucidly what I had to do. So much no longer mattered; it was as if a divine hand, a benevolent providence, had reached down and chiselled away what was unnecessary for me to do or even to worry about. Everything was simple: one step at a time. I would pack my bag, one thing after another, then go to reception and pay, then walk to the car and put my bag on the passenger seat, check the gun where I'd left it last night, turn the engine on, drive back to the Kangazoo, return the gun to Mick's study, talk to Sheena, visit Rod, and so on, each day following the other, and then book a flight to Perth and kill Don Simpson.

It didn't matter how I felt about it. This succession of events just *was*. It was as if I was remembering it all, before it had happened. Maybe it had already happened! Maybe I was doing something I'd done before. Nature is like that: it lives and relives, it goes in cycles.

As I drove home up the Gold Coast Highway (there was more detail on the radio now—Brock McCabe had died in a gruesome accident, asphyxiated after his hand became caught in the Wondadoor of his ‘palatial home’, still no foul play suspected), I felt renewed. I was past halfway now! If you counted Glenn Mellon and Steve Heath, I was two-thirds of my way to being the only remaining option for Pioneer, the Last Man Standing. Four down, two to go. Even if you didn’t count Glenn and Steve, and just gave me Sharpie and Brock, I had two behind me and two to go. As terrible as I’d felt in my room that morning, I didn’t have the choice to stop here, did I? If I stopped here, it would all have been for nothing. This road I was on, as dreadful as it was, only had *meaning* if I followed it to the very end and eliminated them all. It had to have *meaning*. Otherwise those men, brave warriors all, would have died in vain. I had to prevent that happening. I was over the hump now, I had to finish the job. And I had to finish it quickly. If I got it done in a couple of weeks, Pioneer would sign me up and I could get an advance from Phil to take care of Rod, the expenses to go to America, fill up the bottomless pit of medical bills. I also had to be quick because you never knew these days when some fresh talent would emerge. The latest craze meant everything in television. Who knew? Maybe at this very minute, some new wildlife star was emerging on YouTube. The pipeline between unknown and star was so short and quick now: you could film yourself catching a snake today and be signed up by an American network tomorrow. It happened literally that fast. I couldn’t rest until Pioneer had signed me up—my own series, my own show. Until that happened, I was at risk, not only from Deano Rudd and Don Simpson, but from the army of would-be celebrities out there, the million-faced army of hopefuls who wanted *my* job.

TWENTY-THREE

If things were fraying around the edges, my mood veering between ecstatic relief, crisp resolution and heavy tearful shame and despair, I discovered when I arrived home that things for my family were going much better. There were clear markers of happiness and normality. Sheena was sober and straight and brisk and purposeful, Rosie was her usual happy self, and Rod was improving so fast that his rashes had all but disappeared and he was breathing without medication or other assistance. When I saw him at the rehab place, he was running around the playground like a normal little boy, getting into everything. I slumped, almost fainted, with love for him. He was getting better.

Maybe we wouldn't have to go to America? Maybe we didn't need the money? Again my mood swung: seeking any excuse I could find to stop the killings, I braced myself to raise the question with Sheena.

She was in the playground, watching Rod climb a complex and demanding chain bridge on which he had to coordinate his hands and feet to stop himself falling. Then he slid down a slippery-dip, squealing and landing in a sandpit, before picking himself up to recommence the circuit. While she watched him, Sheena pushed Rosie on a swing. I stood beside her silently, hands shoved in my stubbie pockets.

‘How well do you think he’s going?’ I said.

Sheena pushed Rosie thoughtfully. She wasn’t considering how to give me a straight answer.

‘How do *you* think he’s going?’

I sighed. ‘What have I done now?’

Sheena pushed doggedly, as if working on a production line, pushing Rosie all the way out of infancy.

‘If you’d been around a little more, you wouldn’t need to ask how he is.’

I nodded, watching my toes kick figure-eights in the sand.

‘Sorry, love.’

I could have reared up. The tables certainly were turned. For as long as we’d had children, it was always me who was the responsible parent, while Sheena flaked off on her various enthusiasms. Now that she’d straightened out she was over-playing it. All I’d done was go to Tweed Heads for one night. I’d told her I was in Brisbane again—there seemed no point complicating the lie. She knew where I was. ‘Brisbane’ had become an understood code for me going to do what I had to do. Sheena showed her acquiescence by not asking me another word. I’d assumed she was by my side in this. The last thing I needed was for her to waver, or go against me. Was this what she was doing by ticking me off?

‘You’re sorry,’ she repeated harshly. ‘Well, why don’t you tell that to the detective who came over.’

‘What?’ I grabbed her arm. She shrugged me off, so she could keep pushing Rosie. ‘What did you say?’ I felt a hot flush race backwards and forwards over my head and face. My knees turned to waves, heartbeats on a monitor.

‘A detective came over this morning, while you were in the zoo.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘I’m telling you now.’

‘Sheen!’

‘You haven’t been around. So now I’m telling you. A detective came, guy called Marsh, and left his card. I said you’d call him later today.’

‘I can’t believe you didn’t tell me before.’

‘I wanted you to come here and spend some time with your son. If I’d told you before, you would have flown into one of your panics. Which happen more and more now, in case you hadn’t noticed.’

Though this conversation was uncomfortable for me, it was also a relief because it brought things into the open, if in a shaded kind of way. Our tone was not innocent, on either side. Having met this detective, Sheena wasn’t worried that I might have done something—she *knew* I’d done something. She might not have known how, but she knew. She’d been there right from the beginning. So I didn’t have to play a part, to protect her naivety. I didn’t have to say, ‘Gosh, I wonder what a detective would want to speak to me for?’ Sheena and I were, if at odds, conversing as conspirators.

‘What did he say?’ I asked stealthily, looking around to see if anyone might overhear us. Aside from us and an Aboriginal boy with his grandma, there was nobody.

‘Nothing,’ Sheena said, still pushing the swing like she was moving the clock forward. Taking relief from the rhythm. ‘He just said he wanted to talk to you. And could you give him a call.’

‘What was he . . . like?’ I didn’t want to probe any deeper than that, but I needed something.

Sheena sighed again, impatiently, then softened a little. ‘He seemed all right.’

‘All right?’

‘I don’t know, Frosty, I haven’t had a lot to do with detectives, okay?’ she said, irritable again. ‘Seemed friendly enough. But I spose they would act friendly when they’re trying to put you at ease. He just wanted you to call him back.’

I scratched my chin, trying to calm down. My heart felt like a grasshopper leaping about against the insides of my ribcage.

‘What do you think I should do?’

Sheena just shook her head. I couldn’t tell if it was a simple expression of sadness and regret at the incidents of the past few weeks, and at her part in them; or if it was sadness and regret about her whole life, about having ever got involved with me. And Mick. There was a whole-catastrophe slump to her shoulders.

‘I’d better go,’ I said.

Sheena didn’t reply.

I stopped Rosie’s swinging to give her a kiss. She complained about being halted. I went across to the slippery-dip and waited for Rod to come down. I caught him and wrapped him in a hug. He said, ‘Dad, I can’t breathe.’

‘Are you okay? Are you okay?’ I held him out in front of me, sweating in a rush of guilty worry.

‘I’m okay,’ he said. ‘I can’t breathe when you squeeze me like that.’

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I chucked him under his chin. 'Be a good boy, okay? And Dad'll make sure you never have to come to hospital again.'

'Dad, can you stay and play with me?'

I averted my face so he couldn't see the tears welling.

'Soon, mate. Soon I'll play with you all you want. But now I have to go.'

Over the phone, Detective Sergeant Marsh seemed affable enough. The fact that he was in no especial hurry to meet me I took as a positive. The worst result of our conversation would have been if he asked me to come to the station immediately for questioning. But he said he'd visit me, 'just for a chat', later that week.

'Can you come any earlier?' I said. Three or four days of waiting were going to kill me.

'Oh?' he said. 'Why's that?'

'Ar. I'm just gunna be busy, and Brock's funeral is later in the week, and—'

He interrupted me to say yes, he could come later today. He showed no further curiosity about why I'd want to hurry things along. Maybe that was a good sign. Maybe a bad one.

I tried to gauge the nature of his interest, dropping a bait. 'I assume this is about the big "Who's killing the great nature presenters?" hoo-ha,' I said, with as much levity as I could muster.

Detective Sergeant Marsh just said a flat, 'Yes, it is.' He gave nothing else away and I wished I'd kept my trap shut.

While waiting for him to come, I had to return the gun to the Lamingtons' house. Of course there had been no gun involved in the killings, but I couldn't take any risks. I didn't want to have to explain to a policeman why I had an unlicensed firearm. Talking

to a policeman might have unexpected effects on my nerves. I didn't want guns anywhere near me.

And I wasn't going to keep it for the Don Simpson or Deano Rudd jobs. It had failed me once, had led to the opposite of the clean kill I'd wanted—something gory and grisly that I could never swipe from my conscience. I couldn't trust myself with the gun. Trusting it only led to no good.

But I didn't want to run into Ranger with it, or even little Hunter again. Could I trust him to keep my secret? What if he said to his sister that he'd seen Uncle Frosty take his daddy's gun out the day before Brock McCabe was found dead? Ranger had no interest in protecting me. What if she spoke to the police? What if she already had? She might well want me out of the way. She ought to, if she knew what was good for her. Maybe she was responsible for this Detective Marsh investigating me—maybe she'd set me up, and I was being watched now, under surveillance so I wasn't even safe in the zoo.

I couldn't risk it. I went to the ute in the garage and, looking around suspiciously, took the gun out. I carried it into our house and hid it among the tools behind the fridge. Sheena never looked there. It was where I usually hid her Christmas and birthday presents. I shoved it in tight, and made myself a sandwich and a cup of tea to pass the time until Detective Marsh's arrival. All of a sudden I was starving.

Detective Marsh was a slab of Australian T-bone with a moustache that was either a handlebar that wanted to be a toothbrush or a toothbrush that wanted to be a handlebar. It only made it two-thirds of the way across his top lip before drooping at both ends over,

or into, his mouth. Did he like the taste of it, was that the thing? He reminded me of a fish—not a catfish, whose moustache is more Fu Manchu, but one of those deep-sea oddities, an angler fish, who hangs its false bait in front of its mouth to tempt and catch its prey. Well, this Marsh and his hairy crumb-catcher weren't tempting me.

About my age, he looked like a retired sportsman. His mo curved up all friendly when I let him in through the screen door. I ushered him to the couch and offered him a drink. Loosening his tie, he said he'd like some cold water.

'This humidity really gets me,' he said.

'You're not from Queensland?' I said from the kitchen, thinking—would it be better or worse if he's not from Queensland? My hands were shaking so much I held them under the tap after I'd poured his water. I wished he'd asked for a hot drink so I could stay in the kitchen, count to one thousand and make him, and my shakes, disappear.

'Nah, I'm a Mexican,' he said when I came back. I'd filled his glass only halfway—worried my shakes would spill it—and he took it all in one gulp.

'An escapee.'

'From New South Wales,' he said. 'But I can never understand this daylight saving thing. Why do you Queenslanders have to always be so different? So bloody-minded? I can never work it out.'

I collapsed into my armchair, trying not to give away my tumult. How stupid I had been to think my ruse with the security cameras would protect me. Security cameras would be on a twenty-four-hour clock; they wouldn't change over like we changed our clocks. The Twin Towns RSL hotel cameras would have shown me leaving the place at two o'clock and returning at three—putting me outside, unaccounted for, in the exact period when Brock McCabe had died.

In trying to give myself an alibi I'd outsmarted myself and done the opposite: provided clear evidence that I was the killer. I was almost ready to thrust out my wrists and beg Detective Marsh to cuff me.

He loosened his collar and tried not to notice the dismal wood-panelled interior of our demountable. I was raising my family in little better than a caravan. The air stank of kangaroo s. No wonder my son was sick. From politeness, Marsh avoided saying something like, 'Nice house.'

'Anything else I can get you?' I said hopefully. 'Bikkie?'

Marsh ignored me and took a notebook out of his coat pocket. He studied it for a long minute.

'Must be a difficult time for you,' he said at last.

I shrugged, ever-helpful. 'It's difficult for all of us, but it's difficult for the fans, you know? Most of our fans in this business are kids. I wonder what they're thinking.'

'Sure, sure,' Marsh said without any interest.

'Do you have kids?' I said.

'Two boys. Eleven and nine.'

'Hey, then I'll get them a poster. I can sign one for them.'

He shot me a wretched glance. I interpreted it.

'Oh, okay, well, I still have some signed originals by Mick himself stashed away somewhere. Quite the collector's item now . . .' I let loose a silly girly giggle.

'Mr Westlake,' Marsh cut me short. 'My boys—they're not really into nature. City kids. It's all Gameboys and PlayStation. No offence.'

'Oh.' I sat down, as if corrected. 'Oh. I'm sorry to hear that. They don't know what they're missing out on.'

'Well,' he said, 'they're missing out on taking a personal interest in these terrible events.'

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‘Oh!’ I giggled again. Jeez I hated myself. The fact was, I didn’t trust myself. I was in such a nervous tizz that I wasn’t sure I wouldn’t blurt it all out, confess to everything, throw myself at Marsh’s shoes. It was so tempting—like vertigo, when you want to throw yourself off a cliff. The abyss is so alluring: free, free at last.

‘You’ve known the five deceased pretty well over the years, haven’t you?’

The five deceased. That’s all they were to this cop. Victims. Bodies. A problem that must have a solution.

‘Mick was my best mate,’ I said. Then, so I didn’t look like I was name-dropping, ‘We’re a tight-knit community, the nature community. I knew the others—and I was there when Glenn, you know, had his accident. I’d known Sharpie and Brock for a long time, but not well. Steve Heath I’d call a mate. We all know each other, but it’s not like we get together for dinner parties or whatnot. Maybe a beer if we’re in the same town. But that’s about it.’

Shut up. I was talking too much, like a guilty man. Why didn’t he just slap the cuffs on me now?

‘It must be trying for you,’ he said. Why did he have to keep bringing it back to me? ‘Thinking there’s some kind of a curse out there.’

‘Hey,’ I screeched. ‘At least they haven’t been murdered!’

All right. Give up, Frost. Confess. You might as well have.

Marsh studied me forever. The salt-and-pepper centipede on his upper lip seemed to bristle like a sense organ, a field of antennae.

‘I’m here,’ he said, ‘because these deaths have attracted a lot of media attention and the Commissioner wants every possibility examined.’

Here we go, I thought. Here we go.

‘So I have to investigate the possibility that these are not accidents.’

When you try to feign shock, I’ve found, it always looks like you’re a bad actor. Ned Clegg himself, Academy Award nominee, can never do shock. Nobody can do shock. I didn’t try. I looked at my dusty, s.-cracked boots on the linoleum floor of this s.hole we lived in. Into which I’d brought a family.

‘What we do is risky,’ I said quietly. ‘Accidents happen.’

Marsh gave a cough, as if dismissing my statement as something we told children. For the cameras. As if all the risks we took were just showbiz.

‘Life is risky,’ he said, as if he knew. ‘Putting up your garage door can be risky.’

I shook my head. I didn’t find it funny, and wanted him to know that.

‘You’re not treating that as a murder, are you?’ I kept my eyes on the floor. Who cared if I looked shifty? Who cared about anything now?

‘As I said, I’m just keeping all doors open. So to speak. Now, Mr Westlake. How many nature presenters are there in Australia?’

‘Dozens, I guess, if you count all the zoos, the wildlife parks, government departments—’

‘I mean on television.’

‘Oh. On television.’

‘I’ll tell you, Mr Westlake.’ I hated how he kept repeating my name. ‘There are only three left of any note. Don Simpson, Deano Rudd . . . and yourself.’

‘I’m flattered, but I don’t deserve to be placed in that company.’

‘I didn’t compile the list,’ he said. ‘The Commissioner is a nature-documentary fan. He compiled it himself. Not for me to question, eh?’

‘Not when a higher power speaks.’

‘Would you say . . . would you say it’s a competitive environment?’

Aha. The sting in the scorpion’s tail.

‘It’s like any profession,’ I said carefully. ‘People from the outside may not understand it. But at the top of any field, there are competitive pressures. At the same time, it’s the nature, the wildlife, that is at the top of our priorities. We are competitive for ratings or whatnot, but that’s a secondary matter. We’re all together in competing against the modern world, if you like, on behalf of nature. Is that competitive? I don’t know if I’ve answered your question. I prefer to think of us all as determined—determined to conserve species.’

Marsh shifted in his seat, clearly bored with my pious speech. I could hear his bum cheeks unstick from each other with a private ‘click’. I’d done the right thing. I’d surprised myself with how well I’d responded.

‘Sure, sure, of course,’ he said. ‘So, anyway. I’m here to tell you . . .’

He stopped, waiting until I looked up at him. Finally I did, but his brown eyes burnt. It was like staring at the sun. My mood swung back to the bleakest pessimism. I was finished now. I had nothing left. The terrible weight that had sunk on me in the hotel after I’d come back from Brock’s house returned. Life would have no savour for me, no feeling, no meaning. I had no hope. I wanted it over. I felt pressed down, as if the air itself was a heavy suffocating blanket. Even my eyes fought to stay open. I was a goner. I should have told him the truth. *Yes, we’re competitive, all right. It’s a jungle out there. It’s kill or be killed. This is the television industry.*

‘I’m here to tell you to be careful, and to ask if you want any, ah, protection.’

‘Protection?’

‘From the Queensland police. The Commissioner asked me to offer you the full range of our support services.’

Now I could gawk at him. Now I could do shock. I couldn’t believe it. Was this it? Was he here to interview me not as a suspect but as a potential victim?

‘Don’t look so surprised.’ He smiled. ‘I know, you can’t really get protection against a garage door. But I noticed . . . don’t take this the wrong way, but you don’t have one of those fancy bear traps to deal with here. Sometimes people can be too well-off for their own safety.’

He was talking about Brock. I could only hear him through a noise, a white crackle, like a badly tuned radio station. He was a long way away.

I didn’t directly refuse his offer. I don’t recall much of what followed, but a few minutes later I’d got the policeman out of the demountable and I’d collapsed on the couch. He was offering me protection from a possible murderer. What could I do? If I accepted, I would be under surveillance. If I refused, it might look like I was avoiding being put under surveillance and thereby making myself a suspect. Which was worse? Should I pretend to be more scared? A murderer! A murderer on the loose!

I had told Marsh I would think about his offer. Yes, kids, I would think about it all right.

TWENTY-FOUR

Now that I'd fended off the detective, Sheena treated me as if I was Merlin the f.ing magician. I didn't tell her the essential detail in my conversation with Marsh: that I wasn't a suspect. I enjoyed my moment, my wife looking at me with a new kind of awe. First time for everything, I spose. After how badly things had turned for us two, how pear-shaped the last five years had been, it was nice to feel myself making a comeback.

Two days later, Brock McCabe's funeral. You'd have thought the world was getting sick of wildlife presenters falling off their perches (or down their burrows; or into their garages; or, in Mick's case, up his own a.), but no, the world wasn't getting sick of us; au contraire, we were suddenly the soupe du jour. *60 Minutes*, *A Current Affair* and *Today Tonight* were onto us like a tonne of turds. All these people who hadn't taken any notice of us over the years, who thought we were some kind of quaint hangover from the bush-billy days without any conceivable appeal except to retarded

Americans and Japanese shutterbugs, all these people who'd scoffed at us and mocked us and sniggered at us and been *embarrassed* by us, were now taking an extreme interest. That's the scarcity value of economics in action. Now that we were an endangered species, we were interesting, we'd *crossed over* into the mainstream, we'd *broken out*.

So of course I refused to give any interviews. Make them grovel. What was I going to say, anyway? Make some kind of philosophical comment about the law of the jungle? Reminisce about the old days with Mick? Bugger that. Bugger them.

Anyway, there weren't many interview requests, or if there were, Phil didn't pass them on to me. At our end, Phil did all the interviews himself. Becoming quite a star, old Phil. I could see his mind ticking over: he was quite happy with the way things were going. It was setting everything up very nicely for his great unveiling of Ranger 'n' Rudd, now just two weeks away. In fact, this sudden epidemic of death was working so nicely for Phil, I wondered if Detective Marsh had spoken to him. Speaking of interviews. I mean, the question with any murder is: who gains? Who gains? Phil gained. Or he looked like he was.

The unexpected megastar of the interview circuit, however, was Don Simpson. Don was old school, a good old snake man from the deserts and desert burbs of WA. He'd been around the traps, and was easy on the eyes with his jarrah-brown gnarliness, almost like he had a natural camouflage in the dry land. For the mainstream audience, Don Simpson was comfort food. His shows were predictable and straight, we'd seen it all before, but he knew his snakes and he respected them. He wasn't your Glenn Mellon bimbo, your Steve Heath flim-flam man, your Sharpie Phelps feral junkie, or your Brock McCabe pin-up boy. Don was just a good

straight honest man, as true as the day is long. He reminded me a lot of me.

I was sitting watching Don on *A Current Affair* the night before Brock's send-off. He was crying. Maybe it was exhaustion, but he was saying how all the presenters were mates, and he'd miss those who were gone like members of his family. It's true that none of them was closer to Mick than Don. They all hated Mick, really, except for Don, who put aside his reservations and played a kind of godfather role to Mick. It tore me up to see him break down on one of those cheap and nasty shows. They showed him crying, cut to a commercial break, then came back replaying him crying. Later that night, the news had the clip of him crying too. Television loves tears like a platypus loves scummy algae.

An American crew was coming over to interview Don for *Today*. Which got me a bit edgy. Don had never had any kind of profile in the States—even here, he was well past it—but you could never anticipate changes in taste. For all I knew, they could have some kind of retro-nature thing happening. One day he'd be on *Today*, the next he'd be on *Oprah*, he'd be the New Improved Real Crocodile Dundee, and I'd be sunk. Only room for one of us over there, and a bloke who was so much like me—obviously they thought I was the poor man's Don Simpson, they never asked me for an interview—he'd squeeze me right out. I had to get down to business.

It was convenient that Don was coming over to the east coast for Brock's funeral. That would at least save me an airfare. (Just joking.) But I was too busy to clear my head and sit down and do the necessary planning.

Brock's funeral was preoccupying everyone. The American crew weren't coming over here just to interview Don. They were coming to film the funeral and do a big special on this Bizarre Sequence

of deaths. Five is a bizarre sequence. Hey, I got Australia into the international news again, onto CNN. Ned Clegg'd be proud.

The funeral wasn't some salad of imagery and brand names tossed together like the service for Mick (which had only been two months ago—I couldn't believe it—it felt like years). Brock, on top of all his other Peter Perfections, was a practising Roman Catholic. A good faithful husband and father. And he was to be given a big slap-up funeral, all traditional, in the main Catholic cathedral in Brisbane, St Mary's.

Sheena couldn't come. Or wouldn't. She'd been treating me with so much respect it scared me. Because I'd scared her. She was cooking me nice dinners, ironing my shorts, cleaning the demountable, getting Rosie dressed and fed and bathed all by herself, turning into a mail-order bride. My Sheena, what had come over her? Fear. Plain fear. Amazing what it'll do. She said she couldn't come to Brock's funeral because she had to be near Roddy for her daytime visit and she couldn't get a babysitter for Rosie anyway. When you hear that 'anyway', like a back-up reason in case the first doesn't sound real enough, you know they're both BS. Sheena didn't want to come, because she'd have to walk up the aisle holding my hand. She feared me at home, but she was revolted by me in public. I couldn't blame her.

As it turned out, I wasn't going to go dateless. Phil Barrows sent me a message on the morning of the funeral, asking me to toddle over to Mick's house. When I got there, Phil was in the kitchen, right at home. Looking very much like a prime suspect. He was gaining, he was gaining. And he was having a very convivial beer with Deano Rudd, who looked like a ridiculous unwashed Mormon

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in a black suit, white shirt, black tie and black stubble, and Ranger, who'd retro-fitted some of her old Goth gear to make herself look like Madonna. The singer, not the mother of God.

When I came in, they all stopped laughing, as if they'd been laughing at me.

'Frost, how's it hanging?' Phil said, wiping a tear out of his eye.

'You're all very cheery for people on their way to a funeral,' I said. Phil and Ranger seemed very tight, all of a sudden. Like partners in crime. It's a marvel, what common cause can do.

'Who invited him?' Ranger asked Phil, meaning me.

Deano glommed along in the background, picking his nose. If there was anyone in all this I was actually going to *enjoy* killing, it was Deano Rudd. He was heavy metal, this guy, all fake tan and tattoos, and so phony he should have been in that one industry for people too phony for television. He should have been in the music industry.

Phil cleared his throat with great dignity. He had to switch to grown-up for a moment. He got up from his kitchen stool and led me by the elbow out of the room into the main foyer.

'Frost, glad you could make it.'

'Stop acting like the f.ing MC, Phil. It's not your day, it's Brock's. And the Catholic church's.'

Phil chose, as he so often did, to overlook my gift for clarity.

'Come with me,' he said in an important whisper.

I followed him along the corridor where the bedrooms were. The sound of Ranger and Rudd sniggering like a pair of nasty kids echoed off the hardwood floors. We got to the master suite and Phil paused at the door.

'It's her first public appearance, you know, since Mick's service.'

I shrugged. 'The story's kind of moved on from Mick, wouldn't you say?'

Phil gave me a strange look. 'If I made Julie available for an interview today, we'd have everyone from Oprah to Parky lined up outside my door for three nights with their sleeping-bags, my friend. Never underestimate the power of the widow in this kind of story.'

'Brock's got a widow.'

'Brock's not Mick. Wasn't,' he corrected himself. 'Nobody can take Mick's place.'

'Except Ranger.'

A glimmer of a smile gave his game away.

'If we play our cards right,' he said.

'So. What's my role in this pantomime?'

'Julie's asked if you can be her escort today. She's really nervous about it, Frost, and she needs someone she can rely on. She asked personally for you.'

I'd known Julie for the best part of twenty years and she'd never asked for me personally before. Phil was making it feel like a summons from the Queen.

'Sure,' I said, biting my tongue and nodding. 'Is she ready?'

Phil, the major domo, poked his head through the door. He turned back and nodded me through.

Inside, Julie was sitting on the end of the bed watching morning television. Home shopping. She was wearing a black dress that I knew was Prada. I'd been sitting outside in the illegally parked car when she bought it on Rodeo Drive. Every woman needs one little black dress.

Beside her was Hunter, a right gentleman in his black suit. He looked better than Deano Rudd did in his. We were barking up the wrong tree, all of us.

‘Uncle Frosty!’ He bounded across to me like a labrador and hugged me around the waist. ‘Did you bring the gun back?’

I coughed out a warm avuncular laugh, quick on my feet, and mussed his hair. ‘Funny one, Hunter.’

Luckily, neither Phil nor Julie were paying attention to what Hunter was saying. They never did. Nobody did, except me, and I only did when I thought he’d get me in trouble.

‘Jules.’ As Phil left us alone, I plonked myself on the bed next to her. She responded by changing the channel. I’d been so busy in the past two months, what with one thing and another, I’d pushed Mick forcibly into the past. He’d slid down a crack in time, which I’d cemented over with my actions. But for Julie, Mick’s death was still as fresh as a daisy. Eighteen years they’d been together, and she’d hoisted him up the ladder from dodgy sales ‘entrepreneur’ to world-famous star, funeral on CNN and all . . . and now he was gone. Like that. A snap of the fingers, a dart of the sea taipan’s tail, and that was it for her soulmate, the father of her children. She hadn’t counted on being without him so early. Whatever my feelings about Mick, I felt a sudden wretchedness for Julie. She’d lost her other half, she was now a single parent, and she couldn’t quite believe it yet.

He didn’t deserve her, that’s for sure. But we both knew that. And he’d gone to his watery grave knowing it, which was the important thing. He didn’t deserve her. He didn’t even deserve me. So here we both were, undeserved but still alive.

‘You sure you can face this?’ I said, wanting to draw her out of the TV set.

Jules kept changing channels as if she was looking for something. Mick? No—she might have switched it onto Pioneer and caught yet another day of *Kiss* marathons and had Mick wall to wall. Phil had told me she’d been doing a bit of that. But she wasn’t now. It was

like she was trying to find something else, some other non-Mick life forms out there. I could have told her they existed, but to find them she'd have to switch off the box and come back out to the real world, come back to Australia.

It was impossible to communicate with her in words. She was a zombie. She smelt of heavy perfume and beneath that a radiation of chemical sweat. That Queensland humidity brings out the worst in all of us. I put my arm around her shoulders—bony and stooped, as if she hadn't eaten since she'd lost him.

'Come here,' I said, and pulled her closer. She didn't yield or tremble. Her soul had taken flight. I was comforting a husk.

The TV started changing channels by itself. I looked across the top of Julie's bowed head. By her side, Hunter had grabbed the remote and was flicking until he came to Pioneer. Mick wasn't on, thank goodness. That would have been too gruesome. But little Hunter didn't care. There were re-runs of *Nature of Australia*, antique-looking now. It was part of a tribute Pioneer was running to Australian nature shows, as if to prime its audience for the big revelation: the successor to Mick Lamington. Hunter and I watched a funnel-web spider tenderly wrapping its web around a paralysed skink, as if it was doing up a Christmas present. The spider made me think of Deano Rudd.

'Gotta skedaddle, kids.' Phil poked his head through the door. Seeing Julie slumped against me, he shot me a sympathetic nod. He looked like he was going to give me a hand, but was interrupted by Ranger surging past him. Deano lingered in the hallway behind Phil.

'Another day, another funeral,' Ranger said. She was putting on a 1930s Hollywood funny-woman act: cinders and sparks and totally out of line.

I helped Julie to her feet. She came up like a golliwog, all give and no bones.

‘Like your date, Mum,’ Ranger said, tossing her chin at me. ‘You two go well together. Misery loves company.’

I looked daggers at her, but with Ranger my glares came out as rubber daggers.

‘You’ll look after her?’ Phil stepped forward, to defuse the situation. I got it now. I’d been summoned to be Julie’s partner for the day, her rock. In the public show of Brock’s funeral, it fell to me to be the Faithful Family Retainer and the Widow’s Walker.

I nodded solemnly.

‘Better watch your step,’ Ranger sneered at me. ‘You’re a dying breed, you know? All that crap about risking your lives, and playing with deadly animals, and scaring the kids by fooling about with the venomous creatures of the outback,’ she put on a mock-formal TV announcer’s voice, ‘and none of you seemed to realise that it’s *for real*. “Deadly!” means deadly. It’s not just a stunt for your audiences. Until now, eh? Until now.’

Spindly and brittle as spun glass she may have been, but Julie Lamington had enough ferocity in her to break out of my grip, take two steps across the bedroom and lay an open-handed slap square across Ranger’s freckled left cheek.

The kid froze in horror—that moment when children have hurt themselves, can’t quite fathom what’s happened, are completely lost in the universe. Just before the crying starts.

‘Mum-meee!’

Oh J f.ing C, here we go. Letting loose her big stew of shock, grief and disbelief, so raw and intimate and loaded up with what had happened in the past few weeks, the past few years. I could only bow my head to the floor to stop myself from puking.

BRIAN WESTLAKE

So I didn't see what happened next. There was a long pause, some heavy breathing, and then I heard Ranger leave the bedroom and storm off down the hall. Cuban-heeled footsteps—Deano—followed her. Hunter burbled something at the funnel-web, which was still doing its thing on *Nature of Australia*. Those old series really came to life again on a new plasma flatscreen.

‘Okay, Frost.’

Julie's hand, her slapping one, put a clamp around my bicep and squeezed hard.

‘Ready to go?’ I said.

‘Ready to go.’

TWENTY-FIVE

As I think back over my actions in the weeks following Mick's death—and I do, they re-run in my head like a cable-TV marathon—it always feels like I was overlooking the one thing that was so tight up under my nose it was too obvious to see.

Was I up to it? If everything went to plan, and I got the show to myself, was I really up to it?

I knew I had good ideas, and I knew I had an esteem for my knowledge that said, yes, I was up to it. I knew the animals better than Mick, I knew where to find them better than Sharpie ever did, I could listen to them better than Glenn Mellon, I could explain the real magic of nature to audiences better than Steve Heath, I had more street smarts than Brock McCabe, I was younger and more vital (just) than Don Simpson, and I had more courage than Deano Rudd. Out of all of them, I was the one who had the Force. But did that really mean I was up to it? Was I up to carrying the burden that comes with being the frontman? Was I up to being famous? Could

I support the weight that came from all those staring eyes? Could I take the pressure of being presented to the public, to the Pioneer top brass, to the sponsors, to the advertisers, as the Main Man? Could I cope with all the BS? What about when it started eating away at my face? It's not all about the animals, as Mick well knew. It's all about something else—believing that you are a Star. And whether or not you have it is something like a physical sexual attraction between two people—you either do or you don't, and either way it's blindingly obvious to everyone on earth. It's like different species. No matter how glorious the plumage on a male jabiru, it makes no impression on a female cormorant or tern or ibis. Species are only attracted to their own kind, and anything crossing species is unnatural. That's the way it is in television: the viewers need a presenter they love and recognise as a member of the TV Star species. And you—meaning I—can never know for sure if you belong. Because you can't ever really know yourself in the way that an audience knows you. If you did, you'd be a genius. It's only those brilliant performers, like Ned Clegg (most of the time) or Mick Lamington (all the time), who can see themselves through the outside world's eyes. Who can talk about themselves and think about themselves in the third person. Not many people can do this. I guess it's why, outside those rare creatures like Mick, people who make their life from appearing on television are so terrified and insecure. It's something they just have, and if it's that mysteriously acquired, it can be just as mysteriously lost.

At Brock McCabe's funeral I overcame my self-doubts. I realised that I did have it. I could act. I could sell. I marched down the aisle of St Mary's with the Widow on my arm, I marched with erect back

and proud bearing, I inhabited the role I was given, and I was the star of the show. So what if I'd been the one responsible for this death? For these deaths? That was my secret. That placed me above everyone. I was the star, the heir, and this, on Julie's arm, was my grand entrance.

The organ played funeral music, and we took our place at the front of the cathedral. Across the aisle was Brock's family. I nodded to them in a distinguished way. Brock's wife nodded back, her eyes red and warm. She looked up to me, as Julie did, as the real Last Man Standing, the one who would never be defeated. I felt my sails belly in the incense-perfumed air.

There were readings and prayers and the whole Catholic box and dice. My only disappointment was how the hymns had been adapted to Christian-pop style. Not being a churchgoer, whenever I am in a church I want to have the most old-fashioned Latin papal mass. I don't hold with all this modern stuff. The Catholic church had become the kind of church that welcomed young people. The hymns, which should have sounded like the soundtrack to Dante's *Inferno*, sounded like *Godspell*.

The service over, the tears still flowing, I carried Julie out again. I felt the cameras on me. Tonight's news, beamed around the world. The vanishing great men of the Australian outback, but here was Brian 'Frosty' Westlake, tall as a redgum, dry and indomitable as the desert itself. Saviour of women, prince among weaklings, first among equals. Later that night, I would watch the footage over and over. I was the future of the animal kingdom.

Behind Julie and me, Hunter held my free hand. His boneless little fingers felt like rubber, but he was trying his best, the warrior, and I loved him for it. In the shadows to his flank were Ranger and Deano. I didn't look at Ranger once during the service. I glanced at

Deano a couple of times, only to savour in advance the taste of his extinction. On the television, Ranger's cheek looked flushed with emotion, but I knew it was the imprint of her mother's swinging right-hander. Julie and I, taking charge. Who'd have believed it?

And further back in the procession of dignitaries, the hard-bitten face of Don Simpson. Ah, Don. There was another reason for jubilation: Don Simpson.

He came up to me at the wake, which was held in the Brisbane town hall.

'Frosty, how's it hanging?'

Full of pomp and hot air, I said, 'Ah, if it isn't the face of Australian nature presenting.'

Don twitched, embarrassed. 'I know, mate. It's like they've got this big dial-a-quote Rolodex and under "Nature" they've got my name.'

He took a slug from his glass of beer. Then another, and it was finished. I could tell from his ballooning eyes that it wasn't the first. He looked around for a waiter.

'But you've played ball,' I said. 'Reluctant hero: you've come good. Even on the American shows, I saw.'

It had been reported on the Australian news that Don Simpson had been on the American news. The Australian news always reported when one of us got on the American news.

He grimaced as if in pain, eased only when he found another beer. 'Makes me sick, but once you say yes once, it's not easy to say no. You have to give them a reason why you're singling them out, and they all go soft and whimpery like the one girl who's not asked to dance.'

‘Sure,’ I said. To be honest, I didn’t want to talk to Don, given that I was going to kill him.

‘And the Americans, they’re not really interested in me,’ he went on. ‘Or Brock for that matter. It’s still all Mick, Mick, Mick. These other . . . mishaps,’ I could see Don struggling with his choice of words, ‘they’re only interesting to the Americans because it lets them keep on talking about Mick. If he was big over there before, he’s only bigger now.’

‘Oh yeah,’ I said. ‘Death’s always a great career move.’ *You ought to try it*, I nearly said, feeling too frisky for my own good. But still, I really, really didn’t want to talk to Don. Only the sickest assassins like to get friendly with their victims, and in my case I already liked Don, almost liked him too much to go through with what I had to do. Almost.

I surveyed the room like a man ready to go around and work it. I felt like I’d grown into such a man. I could work a town hall now. It was all part of the role, one of the many obligations that came with superstardom.

Don was going on about the Americans, the hardship of satisfying their interview requests . . . but I didn’t want to hear him. Now he was irritating me. Yes, Don, the Americans are a pain in the a. *If they’re wanting to interview you all the time.*

‘Oi, Phil,’ I called.

Phil Barrows was gliding past like a gloomy dreamfish. Some of the puff had gone out of him. Maybe it was the burden of having to keep the secret about the Ranger ’n’ Rudd show. Well, he only had a week and a half left for the big reveal, his great enterprise back on track, Pioneer Network happy, moving on from Mick. But there seemed to be more to his slump than that. I’d catch Phil glaring morosely at Ranger and Deano canoodling in the corner,

looking at them with what, if I was not mistaken, was real hatred. Maybe he was just realising what a f.ing catastrophe it was going to be. They'd give him a bumpy ride, that's for sure. That cheeriness I'd seen back at the house, between Phil and them—it was just more faking, that's all it was. They were true showbiz types now.

'Phil, you know Don, don't you?'

'Don.'

'Phil.'

They shook hands. Of course they knew each other. But I was beginning to enjoy that sense of being the Important Man, who can introduce two crashing bores to each other magnanimously and then p. off and leave them to it. Phil and Don looked as if they had as much to talk about as a pair of Trappist monks, but what did I care? I was looking for an excuse to drop Don like a stone, and Phil deserved no better.

I swanned about, greeting and meeting. Julie took my arm for a while, gravitating to me like a satellite to a big brassy planet, a gas giant. Hunter held my hand as I brought him and Julie to the Federal Minister for the Environment. Then I reintroduced Julie to the State Premier, who shook my hand as if I was already the big star. These types recognised fame like dogs recognise a familiar a.hole. It didn't matter what I was famous for; I was *famous* and that was enough.

Leaving Julie in the Premier's safe hands, I wandered outside to a balcony. Below was a token piece of Aussie bush for the tourists, a transplanted grove of gum trees and sandstone boulders. They would have put a piccaninny garden gnome down there, if it wasn't so un-PC. When did Queenslanders start having to be so careful? Probably when we became part of the international community. Yeah, that's when. We had to watch our p's and q's when the outside world started to look at us.

The ENDANGERED LIST

A way along the balcony, three or four smokers were gathered in their fug like mutants, condemned to their disease. Soon they parted, leaving one behind. It was Brock McCabe's widow, Leanne, choofing away on her durry. I'd never known she was a smoker. Some people you never know even the tip of the iceberg. It seemed to me that her being a smoker was telling me an awful and significant lot. That maybe life with Brock wasn't all it seemed. That maybe they weren't as picture perfect as the funeral and all the tributes had made out. She sucked on her cigarette and her cheeks hollowed. I could see what she'd look like at fifty: another faded blonde pining for her best years, no Plan B for life after youth had fled. She'd bring up her kids on her own and become a tough single mum, spokes around her lips, reeking of stale tar, still wondering what had happened, why she'd been cursed with the Wondadoor whose many hinges had kicked her from life's penthouse down to its s.house.

I was seized momentarily by the old heaviness, the depression. Power, for the funeral and the wake, had filled me up like a tank of petrol. *I have brought all this into being.* But now, seeing what I'd brought into being in the lines on Leanne's face and the roundness in her shoulders, instantly fast-forwarding this innocent soul from the prime of life into premature old age, that same blanket of misery fell over me, damp and prickly, weighed with lead. I couldn't take this any more; I was going to burst into tears again. I had a flash of the Twin Towns RSL, the hotel room, my collapse into my own nest which I'd filled with my own s. It was coming back. I had to get out of here.

Turning to make a dash for it, I was blocked by a presence whose own misery, wrapped around his face like a beard, mirrored mine.

'Don, I gotta go.'

‘It’s like I was saying, they won’t leave you alone . . .’

‘Serious, mate, I’m feeling off-colour . . . and I just remembered, Sheena and the kids are expecting me to come visit them at Rod’s rehab, so . . .’

‘. . . and it struck me the other night, right between the eyes like a silver bullet . . .’

Don was lost in his own brown study, barely aware of me yet also needing to speak to me. Well, I didn’t need to speak to him. I was going to puke, and Don speaking of silver bullets hitting him between the eyes was only going to make things worse, for him and for me, so I needed to get out of there before I did something stupid.

‘. . . and what it was, is—you’re like me, Frost, you’re the only one who’ll understand this, but something’s changed . . .’

‘Yeah, right, Don, I really gotta go . . .’

‘Something’s changed in the world. When we were in our heyday, it’s not that times were more innocent, I don’t buy that, the world lost its innocence when the Yanks came and saved us from the Japs, y’know, we were part of America from then on, and grateful for it. God, do you remember the sixties?’

Not really. Don and I had a lot in common, but I was a bit riled that he was putting me in the exact same generational group as him. He had a good fifteen years on me.

‘But what’s different now,’ he went on, ‘is that there’s no middle.’

‘No middle?’ I was being drawn in. And I couldn’t just desert the guy in the middle of the wake. Might make a scene. Could do without that. What were people going to say, if one day I had a tiff with Don Simpson and the next he was found in a pool of blood? I had to be careful here. Don was the one person in the whole shebang I couldn’t afford to put offside.

‘No middle,’ he went on, shaking his grizzled head. ‘You’re either up there . . .’ He raised his hand above his head. ‘Or you’re down there.’ He pointed to the ground, down over the balcony rail to the rocks. ‘You look at the business now, and it’s either the global brands or the nobodies. In our day, you could be a big star, or a small star, or have a kids program on weekday afternoons, or you could just go round touring wildlife parks, you could do birthday parties, whatever. There was a place for everyone, depending on his talent.’

‘It wasn’t perfect, Don.’

‘Course it wasn’t perfect. Impostors got on prime time and good people were pushed down to the birthday circuit. But that’s never going to change. What’s changed is there’s no middle left. There’s no such thing as a small star. The business has no room for them. They’ll show re-runs of Mick Lamington forever, instead of cultivating a middle-of-the-line presenter like me or you. They’ll just bet the house on finding another international superstar out of nowhere. No such thing as steady talent development. The rest of us can go hang ourselves doing matinees in zoos. It’s bugged, Frost. There’s people out there who’d like to watch, you know, their local identity on their local TV station. But instead all they’re gonna get is Mick Lamington repeats and whatever Pioneer does next. All the decisions for, y’know, Dubbo and Broken Hill and Mount Gambier are made in L f.ing A.’

‘Global marketplace,’ I said, just to say something. I wasn’t comfortable listening to Don’s rant. Already on the point of throwing up from vertigo and depression, I couldn’t take this kind of truth from this particular man. Sure he was right. Didn’t I know that? Wasn’t I the prime example of what he was talking about? Why did he need to rub it in?

‘So, no space for the good honest solid naturalist who wants to show their audience a little slice of this great country,’ he carried on. ‘No matter how good we are, Frost, our cards are already marked. We’re known quantities. We don’t reel in the big audiences. They know that, so we’re in the dustbin. They’d rather pluck some kid from the internet than give one of us a go. And the kid will flame out in six weeks, and they’ll have to start again. It’s f.ed. But that’s the economics of this business, with worldwide satellite networks. They’ve got to try to pick longshot winners, or they’ve got to stick with the name brands. Mick’s a name brand. At least you’ll go on, even if it’s as repeats until the end of time.’

Mick’s stardom would carry me on into eternity, as Don said. I was going to be immortalised in syndication as the bloke whose name you can’t quite remember, the earnest sunburnt bushie who does the job but has no screen presence so he’s kept to these token three-minute segments. One of nature’s sidekicks, forever and ever. It was too much for me. It was too true. I looked around desperately. This f.ing old doomsayer—would anybody notice if I put my hands around his throat now and throttled him? I could throw him over the balcony before he could say Jack Robinson. There were six floors down to the rocks below. Don would be smeared on the sandstone, I’d let out a shout of alarm and say I hadn’t seen him fall. He must have slipped . . . or thrown himself. We all knew how miserable he was . . . He couldn’t handle the reality of life without Brock, Mick, Sharpie and the rest . . .

Don interrupted my next funeral oration. ‘Do you think I’m doing the right thing, Frost?’

‘Eh?’ I snapped back to the present.

‘Doing the right thing?’ he repeated. ‘I haven’t told anyone yet. I figured, if anyone knows what I’m going through it’s Frosty

Westlake. I wanted your take on it. You reckon I'm pulling the right rein?'

'By . . .?'

'Jeez, mate, I know it's hard to handle after all these years. But I'm not going to miss it.'

'Miss what?'

'The business.'

'Hey, but the Americans, the interviews . . . You were on NBC today, weren't you? You're all set up for the big comeback . . .'

He was giving me an odd look, as if after all these years he'd finally figured out that I wasn't quite the full quid.

'I'm not going to miss it.' He shook his head. 'I spose I don't need you to help me. When I told you just now, when I heard myself saying it, I knew it was the right thing. Sometimes you need to do it before you know if you want to do it.'

'Do what?'

'Retire.'

'Retire?'

Don grimaced and sucked back on his beer. 'What I told you five minutes ago. Spose you're in shock, eh? Brock's death, Sharpie, Steve . . . Mick . . . All gone. You're in shock. It won't sink in for a while, I spose. But you know what? You know what I can't tell anyone?'

Now I *was* in shock. My mouth had gone dry and I could feel the blood rushing out of my head, out of my body through the ends of my fingers, which were tingling with the flight of my blood, goodbye, goodbye.

Don leaned closer and whispered, 'I'm *scared*. It's what we, in our profession, can never admit, isn't it? But ever since Steve Heath, I've been getting more and more scared. You wanna know a secret?'

He was real drunk now. The relief of letting it all out. He steadied himself against me, putting a hand on my neck.

‘Since Steve, I haven’t put my hand down a snake hole, haven’t had the sand to go anywhere near a snake. So what’s a snake man who’s scared of snakes? He’s finished. That’s what he is. Kaput. I keep thinking I’m next. Next time I stick my hand into one of those glass cases, or next time I go out on a shoot, my number’s gunna be up. It’s the odds, isn’t it? We’re a dying breed. We’re gone. Someone upstairs has decided we have to go, all of us. Maybe you should consider giving it up too, Frost. I mean . . . you’ve got young kids. They don’t need to grow up like Brock’s littlies, without a dad and that. My kids are adults now, they’re okay without me. But all of a sudden I don’t want to lose them. I mean, I don’t want them to lose me. I don’t want to miss the best part of life. I’m talking like a bloke heading into retirement, eh? Y’know? So I am. Why not admit it? That’s what I am. An old bloke heading out to pasture.’

‘As of . . .’ My throat seized up in its own frothing dryness, like a car with sugar in the petrol tank. ‘As of when?’

‘As of this very minute.’ Don stabbed my chest with a drunken finger. ‘I’m done. I’ve lost my sand, lost my desire. I’m finished.’

‘You’re retiring.’

‘How many times do I have to tell you?’

He was angry with me now. He was angry with himself. Angry with the world. But he was doing the right thing. Lord, Don Simpson, how little you knew you were doing the right thing.

Catching him by complete surprise, I rolled him up like a swag in the biggest bear hug he’d got in thirty years. He had family, wife, kids, grandkids, but I can promise you that no one ever hugged him like I did. Tears burst from my eyes. I hid my face in his wrinkled,

salt-whiffy neck. Don was having a bit of a sob too. Anyone watching us would have seen a pair of middle-aged drunks having a cry at a mate's funeral. But Don was crying because his life was over. I was crying because it wasn't.

Defeated by relief, I pulled away from him and wiped my face on my jacket sleeve.

'Gotta pull ourselves together . . .' he muttered.

'Sure, sure . . .'

'Frost, you've been under a lot of stress, right?'

I shook my head, blowing my nose into my hankie. 'No more than usual.'

'Maybe you ought to consider giving it up too.'

I tried not to say anything. All I wanted was to blurt it all out, tell Don what I'd done, how I couldn't quit, not now I couldn't, not when I was so close to the end. I had only one way of validating these terrible things I'd done, and that was by finishing the job. I was doing it for my son, and I was doing it for the greater good of Australian nature and the audiences out there who needed to be dragged out of their safe man-made PlayStation existences and reminded that there was a whole world out there that knew nothing about us, that'd been here before us and would go on being here after we're gone, a whole world to whom mankind is just a momentary wrinkle, an introduced pest. I had to do it. It was my mission. I was the true wildlife warrior. Only problem was, it took getting my hands dirty. But I didn't want to be a force of extinction. I didn't want to have to kill Don. And he was saving me, saving himself. By retiring, he was getting out of my way. I was so grateful to him, I wanted to give him something in return. I wanted to blurt out the truth.

'I gotta go,' Don said. 'My flight back to Perth's in two hours.'

‘Whe-when are you announcing it?’ I said.

‘Before I get a chance to reconsider.’

With that resolution, Don turned away from me and marched back into the wake. A minute later, I heard spoons being tinked against glasses. Someone was going to make a speech. It was Don, standing on a table with beer in hand.

‘Everybody, hush up,’ his gravelly voice called out. ‘I’ve got an announcement to make.’

The crowd went silent for the man who had just saved his own life. I wanted to rush in and kiss him. But out of the corner of my eye I saw Deano Rudd and Ranger Lamington in a corner of the function centre, in a corridor on the way to the toilet, where nobody inside could see them. Completely oblivious to Don Simpson’s momentous announcement—the end of an era—Ranger and Deano were having a good old snog like a pair of teenagers. Which, I guess, she at least was. She was seventeen. Deano was thirty-two. I wondered: is that a boyfriend or a paedophile? Anyway, as Don saved his life and saved me a lot of trouble, I watched Deano Rudd and Ranger Lamington having their way with each other, showing the true nature of their regard for all this around them, all this history coming to an end. My hand tightened on the balcony rail and I felt the old tide rising again.

TWENTY-SIX

In the end I fled from Brock's wake like my hair was on fire. It was too risky to stay and talk: I'd give it all away. I felt like celebrating, raising three cheers for that grand man Don Simpson; I felt like stepping straight up to Deano Rudd and hurling him off the sixth floor so we could be done with it and get on with the rest of our lives; I felt like dancing with Julie Lamington, and sharing a smoke and a good old cry with Leanne McCabe; I felt like any number of inappropriate acts.

What I needed was a few minutes alone.

Back at the Kangazoo, I changed out of my monkey suit into a zoo uniform. I stopped by the Koalaseum, my favourite quiet spot. Benji, the little one, was sleeping on mum Liza's chest. Why had we called them Benji and Liza? Weren't they American names, with American baggage? There had to be some changes around here: name changes. When we got a new pair of koalas, they'd be called Bruce and Sheila. Their kids would be Gav and Shirl.

I got in the ute and drove to Rod's rehab place. I reflected again on what a lucky man Don had made me. By stepping aside, he'd got me within sight of the finishing post. More importantly, he'd saved me from doing away with the one bloke among the Big Five I really liked and respected from the bottom of my heart. I was abjectly thankful that I hadn't had to do anything to him.

But now that I was levelling out again, I reminded myself to be careful about any loose wires. Hell, I'd nearly blurted the whole thing out to Don. He might not have believed me, but that wasn't the point. If I let myself go, I'd become a security risk. To myself, and to Sheena and the kids. For the rest of my life, another thirty or forty or fifty years if I was lucky, I was going to have to watch my step. Not a word. Not one word. To anyone. No slackening. Not a single word, or it would have been all for nothing. Even though my marathon felt like it was coming to an end, really it was just beginning.

Don's retirement, as well-timed as it was, got me to thinking how much I was at the mercy of circumstances. This path I'd set off down, I was no more in charge than Little Red Riding Hood or Hansel and Gretel. Circumstances and luck were going to decide my fate. I had nothing to do with it.

But I did, didn't I? I had *everything* to do with it. Yeah! If I'd just sat back and let fate take its course, I'd be finished. Pioneer would have their Ranger 'n' Rudd show, there'd be Brock McCabe as back-up, and maybe all the renewed interest in Australian wildlife presenters would see a boom—kids on YouTube would be playing with lizards and auditioning, and all the Big Five would enjoy prosperous futures. Except for me. I'd be sitting back grizzling about what might have been, what used to be, while I went on my daily round doing matinees for the Kangazoo—maybe not even that—while my son died of his allergies.

The **ENDANGERED LIST**

There wasn't much of a choice, was there? It was like Don said: we live in a world where the middle has dropped out, where there are only haves and have-nots. I had to be a have. For everyone's sake.

And maybe I could claim some credit for Don's decision. He'd quit because he'd grown scared, he'd lost the gravel in his guts—and who had made him scared? Why did he start to feel that he was next in line, that our whole profession had a hex on it? Who had caused that to be?

Me.

And maybe there was something else . . . Maybe, by merely standing near me at the funeral and the wake, where I was so dominant, Don felt subconsciously this force of nature that was going to roll over him. He was a listener, Don, just like me. He could understand things that hadn't risen up in words. He could sense, deep down, that there was a tsunami rolling in and he had to get out of the way. A cyclone. Hurricane Frosty. Gale force. Get out of the way.

When I got to the rehab joint, my day was up-ended again. Nurses were running about and an ambulance was sitting in the entrance, its light flashing but not blaring. Someone was being loaded in on a gurney. Amid all the mayhem I found Sheena, slumped on a chair in the waiting area. Rosie was at her feet, the angel, doing a wooden puzzle. The face in the puzzle was Mick's. All Rosie's and Rod's toys were free merchandise we got from the Kangazoo.

'Baby, what is it?'

Sheena couldn't speak. She cried into my chest. Doctor Proctor came over and told me the bad news. Rod had suffered a relapse, an acute allergic reaction.

‘How? To what?’

‘Impossible to say,’ said Dr Proctor. Impossible because, I figured, it was his fault. They’d taken Rod off his medication to see how he’d cope without it. Seeing he’d been getting so much better, they were hoping for a change of plans. Maybe the trial in America wouldn’t be necessary. Maybe he was getting better by himself. Maybe life could resume as normal, and Rod could come back and live in the zoo. We wouldn’t be in the demountable forever, maybe we could even live in the suburb outside the zoo. Life! It was good! Ever since Rod had been getting better, I’d been the one pushing for them to stop his medication. I was the one who wanted to pretend there was nothing wrong.

The stupid doctors had followed my wishes. It was their fault for listening to me. And now the poor little guy was being taken back to the Royal, to intensive care.

‘It’s a bit of a setback,’ Dr Proctor said. ‘But we had to find out how well he was really getting. We didn’t know if it was the environment, the medication or a natural recovery. So we eliminated one of the variables. And it seems that’s the important variable.’

‘The medication,’ I said.

Proctor nodded. ‘Simple scientific method. Change one of the variables, keep the others constant and—’

I don’t know what came over me. My hand shot out like a retractable gaffer and gripped the doctor around the neck. I kept coming, not stopping till I had him pinned to the wall. His eyes bulged. I could kill a man with my bare hands. I could. I had experience. I believe he saw this in my face.

‘Frosty, let him go!’ Sheena was clawing at my ears. Behind her, Rosie had started bawling in terror at my sudden move.

I let Proctor down the wall. He straightened his tie and tried to absorb it in a low-key medical way, as if this kind of thing happened to him on a daily basis. Disappointed parents, always the worst.

‘It’s all right, Mr Westlake, I understand.’

He said it, but he didn’t look like he meant it. As soon as he could, he scarpered. The ambulance left with Rod inside. We got in the ute and followed them to the hospital.

‘Frosty,’ Sheena said quietly.

I sighed. Got myself all small and tidy for another dressing-down. Or, at best, another calm reminder that it helped no one for me to lose my bottle, it didn’t help Rod if I terrorised doctors. We just had to go to America and pay our dues and try our best, get Rod into the trial . . . Maybe his place in the trial would be jeopardised now that I’d attacked Dr Proctor. I’d f.ed it up—again. I’d lost my temper. I was a terrorist. And like terrorists everywhere, I was screwing things up for everyone, not least my own side . . . And blah blah f.ing blah.

Sheena looked at me across the seat. ‘Dunno why I pulled you off him,’ she said.

‘Eh?’

‘I should’ve let you go him.’

‘Ah. Probably best that I let him off with a warning.’

She shook her head. ‘Do you think you could have . . . killed him?’

There was an excitement in her voice that I loathed. Sheena was getting off on all this death. Her inside knowledge excited her, enthralled her. Already knocked off balance by what was happening with Rod, she was going completely crackers. She loved me *more* for what I was doing. She loved being with a killer. She’d seen me on TV at Brock’s funeral, playing the part, selling the show.

‘We’ve got to get Rod into this trial,’ was all I’d say. I wasn’t going to gratify my wife’s bloodlust. We’d been down that road before.

Rod was in a terrible state, all blown up like a bag of red onions. They had him on a drip and were feeding oxygen into his nose. His sparrow’s chest was rising and falling under the hospital blanket. I sent Sheena home with Rosie and sat by Rod’s bedside for the rest of that day. To say something, I crapped on about the funeral and how impressive I was. I put on the television and there I was, Rod’s dad, living up to the role at long last. But in Rod’s dull eyes there was no recognition and no pride. I saw something deep and durable in him, something unimpressed by this little ant’s game I was playing. But he should have been impressed, shouldn’t he? This was a father pulling out all stops to save his life. Can’t I tell Rod that, one day? That I did it all for him?

The horrors cornered me again. My mood was veering every few minutes. Like contractions. Like a bad acid trip. I couldn’t take the swings. I could take being depressed, up to a point, and I could sure take the highs. But I couldn’t take the swings. It was like I didn’t know where I stood with myself.

Late at night, I left Rod at the hospital and went home. I watched TV with Sheena and couldn’t sleep. I hadn’t really slept for weeks now, not properly, since this whole nightmare had started. An eel cruelled my sleep. I couldn’t deal with this much sleep deprivation, and was scared that it might drive me to some indiscretion. Only today I’d been a whisker from throwing poor Don off a balcony; then a hair’s breadth from blurting it all out to him, confessing my crimes. Sleep deprivation and mood swings can do that to you.

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But when this is over, I told myself, when I've finished with Deano and got my series up and running with Pioneer, everything will come good. No more insomnia, no more depression, no more darkness. No more allergies for my boy. No more sadness.

No worries.

The truth was, I could only ever fall asleep when I unspooled the past.

So here's what happened, here's what you've been waiting for. Okay? Why Julie Lamington and I were so undeserved. Shove it.

Sheena got pregnant with our first baby, a cashew-sized Rodney Kenneth Westlake. And as she changed, so did Mick. This was 2002, when his fame hit its peak. It's little known about Mick that most of our receipts have been flat lining since 2002. There was a high-water mark, and we didn't know that we'd passed through it. Nobody ever knows.

Except for Mick. He had an instinct for the audience like no other. He could be BSing and gladhanding and all the rest of it, but it was an act. Just like I had ears for the wildlife, Mick had ears for the audience, and he sensed the din starting to die down. He was still big, and seemed to be getting bigger because now all the celebs and the politicians and the other Johnny-come-latelys were hopping on the bandwagon, but that was a diversion. The real hard numbers were wheel-spinning. Massive population movements. Hollywood—and Mick was Hollywood by now—is willing to get on its knees and give a BJ to the entire population, if only it could be sure of a result. And Mick could feel the slippage before anyone else.

We'd sit at the computer and go through his fan websites, most of them unofficial, and Mick would pose as an anonymous punter

trying to chat up some girl who'd been raving on about how she wanted to boink him and loved him in his short shorts and all that palaver. And if you saw him, you'd think here was a man at the peak of his powers. But if you knew the truth, it was a man who was scrambling to stay on top of a moving heap, and the heap was moving on, moving on, ever so slowly, but that's fame, that's population, it's like the animal world, in a constant state of migration, death and renewal; even if you can't see it happening with individuals, it's happening with the population.

Why shouldn't Mick have been content with what he'd achieved? In barely five years he'd gone from a sideshow attraction in Townsville to Australia's most famous man; his net worth had gone from two or three million to, according to *Fortune* magazine, one hundred and twenty million (if you took into account the Kangazoo Trust). He really did have everything he craved, right down to the beautiful wife and the adoring nippers. Ranger was thirteen at this stage, Hunter four or five, and Dad was a deadset legend.

But by 2002 Mick had got hooked on it all, and what he sensed was not his size but his momentum. He was huge, yes, but he wasn't growing any more. Phil had hatched a plan to have him do thrice-weekly shows in Las Vegas, of all places. One of the gaming owners was planning a big new casino with a jungle theme, and Mick was going to be there as the in-house Siegfried and Roy, pretending to wrestle with tigers and giant snakes. But you can only stretch the elastic so far. Mick was all for it, and so was Julie, but the Pioneer people put their foot down: his image was all to do with kids, attracting kids, and there was a serious image clash between kids and gambling houses. At least in American heads. So Pioneer talked the deal off, and it's the only time I saw Mick almost blow up against Americans, or the American way of doing things. He was furious,

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losing it, letting the old Mick, the pre-Kangazoo guy, show through, ranting on about ‘political correctness’ and so on. Never mind that the Vegas thing would have been a disaster, probably ending up with Mick back on the drugs and caught whoring around with topless dancers, or locked in his hotel until he paid up his blackjack debts. It was a setback, and Mick was starting to take setbacks hard. Unhealthily hard, even a bad review in a newspaper. He was getting brittle. With the famous, you’ve got to be aware of this. It doesn’t matter how big they are. If they’re not growing, they’re in an unstable state, ready to do their worst.

And so he did. We were on holidays, way up at Port Douglas, in winter 2002. If Mick was everything you thought he was, he’d be spending his days catching and kissing saltwater crocs or diving with sharks on the outer reef or exploring the habitats of stonefish and moonfish or climbing trees to investigate an eastern hornbill’s nest or making plans to set up a cassowary sanctuary.

I was doing some of that stuff. Mick was playing golf and getting smashed by the pool.

Ah hell, it’s all got to go this way. Unless you have something you love—I mean some obsession that you love just for itself and you never tire of it—it’s always going to come to this. You’re going to get bored. Mick’s only obsessive interest had been himself and his drive to be world-famous. While he was on the up and up, his obsession satisfied him. But now he was on the ebb, he was disgusted with himself. I can only put his actions down to self-disgust. Forgive me.

We’d been in Port Douglas for ten days, and we had four to go. I’d been up near Cooktown checking out some crocodile habitats and investigating what I truly believe is the most beautiful animal in creation, the sacoglossan sea slug. Imagine a butterfly with a

hundred wings, grazing on the luminous weeds of the Barrier Reef, its beauty underlined by the lethal poison its gold-black leaflets release when touched by a predator. That was my interest. I, my friends, am the real thing. Mick, Julie and Sheena were by the pool each day or on the golf course or going to some nice restaurant. Sometimes I didn't make it back in time for tea. I didn't care. They were my closest friends and I had all that rainforest and reef to keep me happy. I hated hotels, especially the five-star ones, so the longer I was out and about the better.

But in my absence, boredom and curiosity and alcohol and drugs had got the better of them. I'd been ecstatic with happiness that Phil Barrows wasn't there with us. Phil was at home, at the Kangazoo, babysitting Ranger and Hunter. But he'd left his mark on our holiday: he'd given Mick a huge stash of coke and ecstasy and porno DVDs. Mick was in his little adolescent heaven: golf, pool, food, grog, coke, Es, and hot bunnies on tap.

He had this curiosity about pregnant women, the tight inflated bubble of their bellies.

Got stung by a bluebottle last night, Phil.

Bluebottles, gotta love 'em.

I'll lay out the facts. There was no breach of trust. On night ten of the holidays, I was late getting back from the Daintree and while they were waiting, Mick, Julie and my five-months-pregnant Sheena dined on lobster at the Captain's Table in Port Douglas, took a twilight cruise towards the reef, had a swim and then some coke, drank a whole lot more champagne, came back to the hotel and hit the coke and champers again in our private poolside condo. I can't imagine Julie and Sheena doing more than a line or two, particularly given Sheena's condition, but they had to join in to keep Mick happy. He couldn't do it alone.

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When I got back I was invited to get with the program and, God help me, I did. I had three glasses of champagne and one line of coke. What choice did I have? Mick was shoving it in my face. I was on holidays. I didn't want to be the outsider. We were ten years old again, back in the golden age.

Towards midnight, Mick got up and stretched his long brown form—he was wearing nothing but boardshorts—and gave an ostentatious yawn. Then Sheena, in her bikini, her taut stomach glinting in the moonlight, got up and did the same kind of yawn. As blissed out as I was on the pearly night, my heart started thudding. I think it's always like this, isn't it? Maybe it was like this for Mick when he put that eel to his mouth. The big things in life, when they happen, your last thought is that you knew it was going to happen, you always knew it was going to be like this.

Sheena came over to where I lay on a banana lounge and went into a crouch. Her eyes glittered with all the champagne and the coke, all the ten days of tropical softening up, all the boredom she saw lying in wait for her down the parallel train tracks of a lifetime with me.

I couldn't speak. I just shook my head.

There were tears in her eyes, but she was smiling at me as if I was her kid on my first day at school. As if she was the one suffering at having to let me go, into the big wide world. As if I was the boy, our Roddy, sleeping inside her, no past, a future ready to open like the two-edged petals of a wondrous sea slug.

I couldn't speak. My dry mouth flapped.

'Frost,' she said. 'Julie's here.'

Sheena, my Sheena love, took my loose fish-flappy hand in hers. Behind her I sensed Mick doing some stupid callisthenic-like stretches, to fill in time. The negotiations between him and Julie,

Julie and Sheena, Sheena and him, had all been carried out, signed and sealed, everything agreed. They'd had plenty of time together while I was up with those sacoglossans.

'You've always . . . admired Julie,' Sheena started to say, as if she had to sell me on Julie. As if there was a fair trade happening here. As if being a fair trade was all that was needed to justify it.

I raised a feeble hand to stop her. But I couldn't look at her. My mouth opened and shut. I felt like I was underwater, screaming, with nothing coming out. In reality I was lying on a banana lounge at midnight by a pool in a thousand-buck-a-night condo in Port Douglas. (All on the Kangazoo Trust, care of Kenneth and Beverley Dibbs, thanks very much.) Screaming, with nothing coming out.

'Go t . . .' I managed to croak. I couldn't get the rest out.

Sheena pushed herself up, her knees cracking. She was bursting like a plum in that bikini. I'd never loved her more. Nor had Mick, I suppose.

I didn't watch them go. I lay there beside Julie for a long time. She tried to make conversation, but was getting nowhere. I'd never had much to say to Julie anyway. She was too far out of my league. In the end, she lost patience and said, 'Well, come on, Frost, we'll look a bit silly if we just sit here talking. Come on.'

She stood up and reached out a cold hand. I was dimly aware of her need for revenge. She'd tossed it up and made her choice. Fling Mick's best friend was the least worst option.

My mouth flapped again. The coke and the booze had turned bad on me, like milk going off in my gullet.

I managed to get the words out though, this time. I managed to say to Julie what I'd been trying to say to Sheena.

'Go to hell.'

You know what? She did. And she met Sheena down there.

TWENTY-SEVEN

While waiting for the big announcement, Deano Rudd had been cottonballed. Pioneer and Phil had arranged for him to be put up in an apartment hotel in Noosa. Deano's management had wrapped up his other commitments and all the kid had to do was watch TV in his apartment, enjoy the ocean views, and root the eyeballs out of a teenager. Which would pretty much set the tone for his next few years as the star of the show. Nice work if you can get it.

I picked up his room card from his man-bag while he was in a meeting with Phil, Ranger and the Pioneer people, Tim and Mandy, who'd flown out after Brock's funeral. They had no time to meet with me this visit. That suited me. Deano's crocodile-skin bag was on a table outside Phil's office and I just swept in and picked out the room card. He wouldn't miss it. He'd just think he'd lost it, and get himself another when he arrived back at the apartment hotel a few hours later.

On the way to Noosa, I nearly got wiped out by a semitrailer. I'd been looking the wrong way while entering the highway from a side road. Thinking the cars drove on the right-hand side of the road. When I'd been in America, I was always nearly getting wiped out for the same reason, only I was looking to the left. Funny that this same affliction should come over me now, in reverse, on my home patch.

Nobody in the hotel lobby took any notice of me when I sailed in. With apartment hotels, if you're cocky in your bearing, they think you're a guest. It's easy-peasy.

I was light on my feet in the afterglow of Brock's funeral. Now wasn't going to be the time I'd finish off Deano Rudd. I was just here for a recce. To know what to do when showtime came, the next night. I had it all mapped out. This was the last one, and the first one I'd be doing for pleasure.

His suite was furnished in typical forgettable hotel style: a few soothing prints on the walls and some nice contemporary brown and white furniture. These places all look the same. Why is it that an American TV drama set, a Queensland apartment hotel and a project home in the western suburbs of Brisbane all have *identical* furniture? It must be another side to what Don Simpson said: if there's no middle any more, there's just a herd rushing for the same thing. The sellers of these brown tables and white couches must be richer than Croesus.

The apartment was laid out simply: living room with balcony, kitchen against a wall, bathroom/laundry, and bedroom. Deano Rudd, being the child that he was, had scattered his stuff around the joint as if he'd stood with his open suitcase and spun it

around him like a propeller. In the bedroom, pairs of leather pants, fake-crocodile waistcoats (nice one), Akubras, more belts than strictly necessary (starting to feel sorry for Ranger); in the laundry, dirty socks but a noticeable absence of underpants; in the living room, unwashed glasses, empty wine and beer bottles, magazines (cars, Hollywood and stick mags—no nature or science, and definitely no books), receipts, email print-outs, the strewn-about packaging for a brand-new Xbox, which was sitting, joystick at attention, on the coffee table in front of the television set. On second thoughts, this bloke was a good match for Ranger. He'd have been lonely without another teenager to waste his time with.

Brock McCabe and Don Simpson had been family men, with wives and children—I felt worst about Brock and most relieved about Don. Anticipating doing away with Deano Rudd I felt the opposite, the antivenom to my regret and pain. Not only would Deano leave no grieving unfulfilled love, no widows or orphans, but I was doing him a service by saving him from all of that. This was the type of lecher who would wake up one day and decide he had to be married. He would rope in some poor deluded girl, impregnate her, break her into servitude, and then wake up another day deciding he had to be a bachelor again. Or, at best, he would love his wife and children, and then find himself out of a job, because it happens to all of us (except Mick), we all reach our use-by date, and some of us are better prepared than others. Deano Rudd would never be prepared for redundancy. You could tell. His life would turn to hell one day. I was saving him from so much agony. He should have thanked me for it.

I was casing the joint with a specific plan in mind, but my thoughts about Deano's future hit me like a sedative. The sadness and heaviness returned, knocking me down. I subsided onto the

king-sized bed that I imagined was still warm from Deano and my best friend's daughter. That poor kid. Once it starts, it never stops. The pattern was set for her a long time ago, and all she had left was to repeat it infinitely. Maybe I'd be saving her from something too. Becoming one or the other of her parents.

My plan wasn't complicated. My plans never were. It was the actuality that got complicated. What a mess, old Brock naked in his mangler Wondadoor. What a mess, Glenn Mellon, only a few pieces of him fished out from the cage. What a mess, Sharpie Phelps, drowned in his own vomit, not quietly dropped off to sleep. What a mess, Steve Heath, frothing at the mouth in the desert. What a mess, Mick himself, turning blue while his crew stood around laughing at the king of the practical jokers. What a mess. How had I got into this? What had turned me into a cold-blooded serial killer? I guess I'd just been lucky. None of them ever really felt like they were my doing. Until Brock. Brock was the one that went bad. Brock was meant to be the clinical assassination, but it had turned into a horror show. My eyes offended me. I ought to cut them out. If Brock had happened at the beginning, if something had gone that gruesomely wrong at the start, I'd have quit, I swear. I'd never have progressed past that one. But I'd had a run of beginner's luck. I'd even got two kills without trying, leaving it in the lap of the gods. And the gods had smiled on me. They'd given me their green light. They still were. They'd granted me my fantasy killing, the non-killing of Don Simpson. That was the best of all, to have the power to let a man live. Don was lucky. He got out of my way. But not everyone would be so obliging. Deano Rudd wasn't going anywhere, he was stumbling blindly into the path of a steamroller and he didn't have the wit to sniff danger. If I didn't do it, some spider would.

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I had my standards. Probably, if I had a favourite, if I could choose one killing to repeat, it'd be Steve Heath. Nature and myself in alliance. I leave it to the animal to decide if it wants him or not. It doesn't do my bidding. It takes its own course. If it kills, it has helped me, but if not, there's nothing I can do about it.

Mick's death was like that. Nature had her opportunity to help me, to defend herself against her enemy, and she took it. She took it.

This was the plan with Deano. Nature would decide whether or not he would die tomorrow night. My role would be to give nature her opportunity. She had her own motive. The web of life needed to be saved from the Deano Rudds of this world.

I spotted the place in the bedroom, hauled myself to my feet like a big slag heap of heavy metals, and made my sluggish way home.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Some kind of mayhem was brewing at the Lamington house when I got back to the Kangazoo. Generally I tried to turn a blind eye to their domestics, but this night I couldn't resist. I needed information, to round out the picture, because I was about to move into a new phase where knowledge would be power. Frosty Westlake, the main man, the angel of death, understood how crucial a little knowledge would be.

Ranger's screech—Julie's retort. Bangs and smashes—doors slamming, glasses breaking. Some male voices—Deano's nasal bleat and Phil Barrows' low, reasonable, sleazy murmur. They were going at it hell for leather. I thought we had it bad in the demountable, sometimes, family-wise, but the perfect Lamingtons had it over us in this as in everything else. When they blew up, they went atomic. The only voice I didn't hear was Hunter's. Kid was probably curled up in a corner playing with a Christmas beetle.

Eventually the male voices took over. Ranger and Julie had gone quiet, or maybe Julie had run off to bed. I couldn't tell. I was

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standing behind a row of rubbish bins in air that stank of fruit bats. Creatures that sleep upside down and s. all over themselves. Frosty amongst his own.

I left them to it. I had work to do.

I went around the vet surgery into the Arachnodome, the home of all our spiders. Here was the plan. I was going to collect a starburst spider, Australia's deadliest, and plant it in Deano's bed at the apartment hotel. The starburst would decide to kill him. Deano might go for an antivenene, but most of the local stocks of the stuff were here in the Arachnodome's storeroom. When they came to get it, as they would, they would find that it had all mysteriously disappeared. They would look for it in an increasing panic, and only when it was too late would they think of making a dash for the Royal Hospital. If you got bitten by a starburst, you only had a couple of hours to get the antivenene. Otherwise you'd die. I learnt that on a Deano Rudd show. Yeah, right.

I stole through the Arachnodome, a cat in the night. I shone a torch into each of the glass-fronted tanks, busy with predation at this time of night.

Can you believe the beauty of spiders? I could see what turned Deano Rudd, and so many viewers, on. Their world a many-eyed kaleidoscope, taking on each day eight steps at a time, the architecture of home and trap spun from the gossamer of their a.holes. Incy-wincy.

What's a spider? Just an eight-legged wingless predatory arachnid whose home is its trap. But what have we made of them? Humans, I mean. Look in the dictionary. A spider is a device for holding down electric cables at a central point. A spider is an octopus. A legged trivet for holding up a pot on a fire. A wagon, a light-framed trotting gig. A lying, deceiving, wily, evil person:

a rock spider. A pulverising instrument used with a cultivator. A type of bullock harness with radiating straps. A clawed instrument to hold a candle in the depths of a mine. A fizzy drink with ice-cream added. A grevillea flower, a lily, an orchid, a wort weed, a monkey, a steeplejack, a cartoon character, an old person's handwriting, a lawn bowling contest where everyone rolls their bowl at once aiming for the jack . . .

You see? You see what we've done to them?

I got so lost in the spiders that I forgot what I was doing. The grace of the female starburst's house pride seeped into me like a poisonous conscience. What was I doing here? I had never actually tortured any of my victims: I'd aimed at clean deaths for all of them. It wasn't my fault that Glenn Mellon was mashed or that Brock McCabe went out in a blaze of agony. Those were unfortunate side effects, neither planned nor desired by me. If I'd had my way, they'd all have gone as peacefully as Sharpie Phelps. I was doing a job that had to be done. I was not—*not*—taking a second's pleasure in it, and was not a torturer. Nothing gratuitous. I was an angel of death, not a devil. So what was I planning here? Staging for Deano Rudd the most horrible death, a plunge into nausea, the desperate plummet from confidence to panic, a lingering and painful passage of the past before his eyes, a vomiting horror to see him out. How could I do that? I hated the chump, but I had my morals. I was no torturer. I had to find another way.

And besides, I was terrified of spiders.

Laugh if you must, but every human has a weakness and nature presenters are no exceptions. We're all afraid of one thing. Don Simpson, would you believe, used to freak out when he was circled by moths as he sat on the dunny. Brock McCabe never went near a jellyfish. Sharpie Phelps had a severe allergy to bee-stings. Well,

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my well-hidden Achilles heel was spiders. I couldn't see myself gathering a starburst out of a tank into a glass, taking it to Deano's apartment and secreting it in his bed. Who was I kidding? I just couldn't do it.

I had to back off a little, plan more carefully. I still had a week up my sleeve. I had to do it properly. Spiders brought me bad luck. For sure, if I took a starburst spider, I'd find some way to botch the job.

TWENTY-NINE

Sick with nerves, I went back to the demountable. I noticed along the way that the ruckus at the Lamington house had died down, and most of the lights were off. I let myself in through our screen door. Sheena and Rosie were asleep. I thought this would be a good time to get the Ruger back to the Lamingtons'. I mightn't have many chances left to be up and about while everyone was asleep, so I couldn't let this one go to waste. I'd considered keeping the gun as an option for Deano, but I wasn't silly enough to tempt fate. I'd been a failure with the gun the first time around, and had no certainty of doing any better this time. I'd work out another way.

I got the gun out from behind the fridge and was creeping through the kitchen, trying not to make the linoleum floor creak, the Ruger wrapped up in its vinyl case in my arms, when the screen door swung open into my face.

'JFC, Frosty, get me a drink, will ya?'

His pot-scrubber hair flaming in the moonlight, Phil Barrows surged inside and flung himself onto the lounge. The demountable rocked on its piled-brick foundations.

‘All I’ve got is a couple of light beers,’ I said from the fridge, pretending to fuss around, act normal, while wondering what the hell was going on. When Phil had burst in, catching me off-guard, I’d laid the gun in a very conspicuous place, on the kitchen table. I needed to hide it but I’d draw more attention to it if I scurried off and put it somewhere else. Act normal, I told myself.

‘That’ll do, that’ll do,’ he said impatiently, flicking his fingers at me like a master to his servant.

The hiss of two cans gave a familiar punctuation to the moment. Phil took a long swig.

‘Jeez, I’ve got my hands full now,’ he said, more to himself than to me.

‘You mean with Ranger and Deano?’

I parked myself on the couch next to him. We were facing the TV side of the lounge room, the Lamington house screened by the casuarinas behind us.

‘I know it’s the only way forward for the show, and the Yanks have already got some good focus group response, and you know, it’s the best way to honour Mick. But jeez, talk about high maintenance. That girl . . .’

He couldn’t go on, swamped in some very recent memory. What had they been screaming about? I was dying to ask him.

‘And Deano’s not everyone’s cup of tea,’ I said sympathetically. In normal circumstances, I’d have been so worried about my own future that I’d have taken the opportunity—it was pretty rare for me to get Phil in this candid, uncoiled mood, alone—to ask what they planned to do with me. But these weren’t normal

circumstances. I knew what Phil didn't know, which was that my future was assured.

'Why did he have to die, eh?' Phil sounded drained, totally spent. 'He's really left us in the lurch.'

There had been no time to sit down, quietly, and think about Mick. He'd been invading my head like a virus—the rogue interference of memory—but I hadn't just sat down and enjoyed a good reflection on what that man had meant to us.

'He was like my brother,' Phil said. He choked back a sob, and wiped his eyes so hard that they turned red and teary in irritation.

I got the s.s. There's something about strong sentimentality that cancels me out. It's like a display that I can't match. I resent it. Americans do it all the time, and I'm sure Phil wasn't the weeping kind before he learnt it from our trips there.

'Must be hard for Julie,' I said blandly, thinking of something non-controversial, but from Phil's silent heavy shrug—as if he owned all the feelings towards Julie—I got even madder. He'd been hanging around Julie like a bad smell. You could see his plan from a mile off. He was moving in. This bastard—what was I doing thinking we could spend a quiet moment together reflecting on the great Mick? Phil was a blow-in, a parasite, an ambitious bloody ex-journo who cared for nothing on this earth except the main chance. Mick dying had left *Phil* in the lurch? Oh, selfish bloody Mick, he shouldn't've done that.

'You got another beer, Frost?'

I got up and moped towards the fridge, hoping he'd just go home. I opened the fridge door, wondering how to get him out quicker. I peered inside and to my relief there were no beers left, and I was turning around to tell him when . . .

Ping!

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On the outside aluminium wall of the demountable, behind us. Phil jumped. 'What was that?'

'Dunno. Something falling out of a tree? Um, I hate to tell you this but I'm outta cold ones . . .'

Phil wasn't listening. He stood up and pulled the curtain beside the TV set to look outside.

'Nothing there,' I said. 'Just another quiet night at the Kang—Oi!'

Another *ping*, like a hailstone. It hit the exterior wall behind us again, the noise amplified by the demountable's thin metal cladding. Phil sprang across the room and peered out the screen door.

Still cool, I brought him a glass of cold water. 'Here you go,' I said.

'Ta.'

As he took a swig, there was a volley of two, three, four, five of the same *pings* against the wall. Phil looked at me, his pale blue eyes wide.

'What the f. *is* that?'

Now I was wondering too. I opened the screen door and stuck my head out. There was only the rustling of the trees, the smell of the cages, the ordinary sounds of the zoo at night. There was no moon, and the only light came from the porch yellows of the Lamington house through the casuarinas to my left.

As I closed the screen door there was another volley. It was like hailstones were hitting the demountable. From the side? On a cloudless night?

'Jesus, Frosty, what *is* this?' Phil was getting very panicky very fast. I was a bit slow-witted, as usual.

'Sure it's just . . .'

 I tailed off.

'What's going on?'

Sheena had appeared at the bedroom door, with Rosie in her arms. Rosie rubbed her eyes. Sheena squinted out into the lounge-room light.

‘G’day, Phil,’ she said. ‘What’s that noise?’

Just then came a volley of *pings* against the house. A window cracked. It didn’t smash or shatter. It just cracked. I leapt towards Sheena and Rosie, grabbed them in my arms, and rode them down onto the floor.

‘What is it, Frosty?’

I didn’t say anything. Like a surf lifesaver I hustle-crawled them across the lino towards the couch. The noise escalated, a heavy hard rain.

Phil was at the door, shouting, ‘F. off! F. off, will yers!’

So he knew something. There was somebody out there. We were under attack? But from who? With what? I didn’t get it at all. It was only about three minutes from the first *ping* to the last, but it felt like a lot longer as I went through confusion, disorientation, suspicion, the paternal bloody-mindedness to grab and protect Sheena and Rosie, and back to more confusion.

Phil was now screaming at our unknown assailants—or unknown to me. In the background, birds were squawking bloody murder and animals were coming to life left, right and centre.

‘What’s going on, Phil? What is it?’ Sheena was screaming too. Rosie was bawling.

Then Phil—I’ve gone through this ad infinitum in my head—Phil seemed to spring into action. As if he was the father and we—me, Sheena and Rosie—were his children. I heard him grunt resolutely. Something like, ‘Right, if that’s how it’s gunna be.’ I saw his feet, in his alligator shoes, march across the floor. The rain of *pings* was slowing to silence, then starting up again. The demountable must have been hit by forty or fifty shots.

Phil's feet stopped at the kitchen table. He grunted again.

'Frost, is this Mick's?'

'Um,' I said weakly from behind the couch. 'Yeah?'

'Beautiful,' he said. 'I'm good with this one.'

He slipped the Ruger out of its case and I heard the clicks and slidings of preparation.

'What are you doing, Phil?' Sheena squeaked.

He went on with his preparations, swearing. 'Who's been buggerising around with this gun? It's all jammed up, some kid's been playing with it.'

'What are you doing?' Sheena insisted, clutching Rosie. For a moment I saw terror in her eyes. As if Phil might be about to unload on us.

'Eradicating a pest,' he said at last.

Sheena and I didn't see what happened—whether he was aiming at anyone or anything, or whether he was just firing off a warning shot into the bush. A Ruger M77 is a big gun. Surely its sound would scare off whatever was *pinging* us. But I was too confused, and it all happened too quickly. I'm imposing a story on it now, in hindsight. But then, at the time, I didn't know what the f. was going on.

'Right, gotcha,' Phil said, but he hadn't fired yet. I didn't understand.

The Ruger shot, when it went off, was a full stop. Finalising everything. It finalised the *pinging* like a joker trumping a string of junk cards. In the distance I heard a high female squawk—human—then a sustained wail. Phil put the gun down, slammed the screen door behind him, and stormed off into the casuarinas. The zoo animals were going absolutely berserk.

THIRTY

You know what? I've been taking you for a ride. The real story, the story at the centre of things, wasn't ever mine. The real story, the one you *People* magazine and *Entertainment Weekly* readers want to know about, was to do with Ranger and Phil. That's right. Ranger Lamington and Phil Barrows. The thorn in her side, the burr in her saddle, the bee in her bonnet, wasn't me. It was pure egotism for me to imagine that I was the reason Ranger hated me so much. She hated all men, particularly the weak ones who let bad things happen. She hated her dad for failing to know, failing to protect her.

The whole thing, the big action, had been happening somewhere off centre-stage. Off *my* centre-stage. Ranger Lamington was the tragic heroine of this story. Phil Barrows had wormed his way in as a means to his own aggrandisement, sure, but also as a pathway to the girl. Remember how he didn't come up to Port Douglas with us? He'd volunteered to look after Mick and Julie's kids. For two weeks. Just him and them. That's when it started.

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Phil Barrows had a crush on Ranger the size of Ulu-bloody-ru. I should've guessed, with all that bizarre wildlife female-chasing stuff, that Phil had some kind of sickness. But nobody suspected a thing. The bugger was in love with her. Later, Julie found a corkboard of secret photos Phil'd snapped of Ranger over the years. In the pool, around the house, bent over her schoolwork. He had a kind of a shrine to her. He worshipped her, in that pathetic furtive way of his.

Did he act on it? Apparently not. But back in '02, when we were losing the plot up at Port Douglas, Ranger had started to notice Phil looking at her, hanging around her. 'Weirding her out,' she said. It just built from there. Some major drama going on between the pair of them, and nobody ever knew.

I was amazed to find that money wasn't Phil's driving force. Money was just the disguise, making his obsessive involvement with the Lamington family seem like a natural thing, while behind closed doors, late at night, on camping trips, in his own car, in the caravans and utilities of the Kangazoo circus, he dreamt about the unnatural thing. Poor Ranger. Isn't it so bloody human how the person wearing the most pain, the one who most needs comfort and love, is the one who makes herself the most unloveable, the prickliest, the one most resistant to comforting? Another unnatural thing about us. Not even the lowest grub on the forest floor would be so screwed up.

She hated men enough to take up with a scuzzball like Deano Rudd at the age of seventeen. He was a means to an end, her way of getting back at Phil. Some things we can only do when our parents are dead. When Mick died, something stirred in Ranger and she was able to take up arms against her oppressor. She'd always felt that Phil was protected by Mick. Mick would believe Phil ahead of

her. Maybe she was right; I hope not. But once Mick was gone, she got involved with Deano as a way of driving Phil insane. It had been getting worse with each hour, and the fight I overheard in the Lamington house was the last straw breaking between Ranger and Phil. Deano was just the meat in the sandwich, caught in the middle, wrong man in the wrong place at the wrong time.

All this came out in the statements made to police after Phil shot Deano. It never went to trial: the publicity would have killed the whole zoo, and landed Phil with a longer sentence than he got. He was counting his lucky stars, anyway, that he hadn't managed to kill Deano. He'd shattered the bloke's jaw, broken it in seven places, but the bullet passed through without damaging any vital organs. I mean, it did take a bite out of Deano's brain, but no vital organs. Anyway, it made him a sob-story for fifteen seconds, and then he drifted off into the obscurity of matinee performances at wildlife parks and an interactive website hit by about a thousand lost souls a week. His face has never quite healed. Ranger, having used him up, dropped him like a stone.

Phil Barrows pleaded guilty to malicious wounding and a bagful of assault and firearms charges in return for the prosecution dropping attempted murder charges. He's been put away for eight years. If it had gone to trial, he'd have got closer to fifteen and there'd have been nothing left for the rest of us. I'd have had to get up in the witness box and give an account of why I had Mick's gun in the demountable. On the Bible, I'd have had to swear that Phil shot Deano with the intent to kill him. I guess I would have. I'd have said that the central actor in the whole story, Phil Barrows, brought the gun with him and picked off Deano like a sniper.

But Phil never let it go to court. He pleaded guilty. What was in it for him to contest the charges and plead not guilty, to go in front

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of a judge and jury? He didn't have anything against Julie, or me, or the Kangazoo. He just hated Ranger with all of his spurned, broken heart. He didn't want to drag us through the mud, so he made a sacrifice. He took a bullet for everyone. Looked at a certain way, you can even feel sorry for Phil. The love of his life, and the minute she was free she turned on him.

But I never knew about any of that—the real Shakespearean tragedy. If Ranger had told this story, Frosty Westlake would only be a shadowy figure on the fringes: the annoying, laconic, too-serious old bushie mate of her scumbag father. I was completely peripheral to the real action. What was I? I was the type of nervy, uptight, short-fused old neighbour Mick and I used to love goading when we were kids. In the golden age. We'd pelt his car with eggs. We'd fire off a barrage of cumquats on his caravan. We'd take up our BB guns and give him a midnight scare by firing at his house. It was only to give him the s.s. As a kid, you loved giving cranky old men the s.s.

Ranger, she was always her father's daughter.

Or if you like, the real story could have been Julie's—her recovery from losing her soulmate. Or it could have been Hunter's. It certainly could have been little Rod's story. My main man, he fought back like a wounded brown snake. We were able to get him to America for the clinical trial, because in the wake of the shooting I became a well-paid family man. We stayed in a lovely town just outside of New York City while Rod was tested in the hospital. Every day was an epic for the kid, his own Odyssey. He got through it, and earned himself a whole lot of ticks beside various boxes. He's a success story. He's played his part in a valuable new medication

making its slow way into the pharmacies of the world. And he's lived to tell the tale. He has to take drugs for the rest of his life, most likely, every single day. But do Sheena and I care? Not on your nelly. We're a family again. Sheena, me, Rod and Rosie. We've got a nice little place near the beach at Caloundra, on the Sunshine Coast, where Roddy doesn't have to be too close to too many animals. The nearest he gets to his irritants are the shirts and pants I bring home in a plastic bag after my shoots. But even my shirts don't get too close to the animals now.

Roddy wants to be a doctor when he grows up. His big hero in life? Dr Proctor.

So you see, this story was never really mine. It's just as well I'm not a jealous or territorial creature. If I was, I'd be an angry man right now. But all I am is relieved.

Some of us aren't cut out for the leading roles. The trick in life is to be able to see yourself from the outside, to know who you are and what you're cut out for. Main characters are people who *want* all the time. They don't have to want anything in particular. It's the strength of their wanting that marks them out as a character. The *wanting* is the force of a pencil bearing down on the paper, sketching their outline. That's their Force.

His constant wanting was what made Mick a star, a main character. It's all about how hungry you are, as he said, and Mick had a bottomless appetite. He wasn't always clear on what he needed, but he knew for sure that he needed something. I honestly believe that if you could have seen into Mick's head in that moment when he swallowed the sea taipan off Tasmania, you'd have seen relief. Relief that the wanting could end now. He was being set free at last.

But I wouldn't be relieved to die, and I'm not one of those people who's always hungry. I'm just not the main character. I'm the sidekick, or, as I'm now called, the manager.

In a deed of arrangement that had existed since 1998 between Phil Barrows and the Lamington Family Trust, Phil's shareholding had to be sacrificed if he got any criminal convictions. That was at the Americans' insistence. The whole enterprise, for Pioneer Network, depended on an image so clean it squeaked. Any hint of bad stuff and you were out of the picture. So when Phil took his guilty plea he was stripped of his shares, which reverted to Julie.

The shooting was like an alarm bell to Julie. It woke her up. Her grieving period ended at the moment that bullet smashed up Deano's jaw. She shrugged off her mourning like a black widow spider and got to work with Tim Steam and Mandy Rout on rebuilding the brand. Julie, as the sole shareholder, had total responsibility. And she did the natural thing, for a mother. She passed on Mick's legacy to the person who deserved it most.

I don't think it crossed Julie's mind for one millisecond that I might be the right star for the new *Kiss* show. Nor did it cross Tim's or Mandy's. The joke, in the end, was on me. There was no stardom for me at the end of the rainbow. I could keep doing away with my competitors until the end of time and there would still be no stardom for Frosty Westlake. I was one of nature's second fiddles: always the bridesmaid. That was my part in the web of life. My species. A deputy, a back-up. I'm making a good manager. Julie just needed someone she could trust. She does most of the actual nitty-gritty of management—the finances, the deals, the computers and whatnot—while I'm sort of the family butler, keeping a lid on things. She's given me a percentage in the Trust and a pretty burly

salary to set us up. In exchange, I need only know what's going on under every stone in this place, and tell her the absolute truth, nothing but the truth. It's a good deal.

The joke was on me. The only ones who succumbed to the delusion of my potential stardom were me and Sheena. I'll be forever grateful to her for that. Does that sound strange? That I'd be grateful to my wife for so rousing my competitive juices that for a few weeks I'd turn into a worthy star, a real hero, a man full of hunger and desire, who would kill his rivals to get to the top of the heap? It probably is, because that wasn't me, that was some demon that took me over. But I'm thankful to Sheena for her faith. That's why I married her. She believes I can do things which are plainly impossible. Just ask anyone.

And I've forgiven her. It's taken me five years. But I've forgiven her.

Am I a murderer? I still think about that a lot, at night. Five men died, including Mick, one got his face busted up, and one went to jail for eight years. Did I wish for anything else to happen to any of them?

I did wish Mick was dead. Truly. I can admit that. My best friend, sure. I wished him dead. And my wish was granted. And you know, in a way, after the cleansing, I reckon we're all better off without him. I just wish I'd had the sand to do it myself.

Without a live Mick to take it out on, I had to refocus my energies.

I wished Glenn Mellon was dead, or out of the way, and I was glad when the double act of shark and cage got him.

I wished Steve Heath was dead, and a snake came to my aid.

I wished Sharpie Phelps was out of the way. I put the weapon in his hand. He used it. That's the one that makes me a murderer,

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I think. That's the one I actually did, even though they'll never be able to pin it on me.

I wished Brock McCabe would get out of my way, and although I still cringe in horror at the memory of what happened, and can tell myself a story about how I didn't actually shoot him and didn't lay a finger on him, I can't run away from my responsibility. He'd never have been anywhere near the deadly jaws of that Wondadoor in the dark, getting his dingle-dangle caught in the works, if it wasn't for me.

I wished Don Simpson and Deano Rudd would get out of my way, and with the help of providence, they did.

I'm one lucky boy. I got all my wishes. My wife loves me, my daughter is growing into a real charmer, and my son's on the constant improve. We're at peace, that's for sure. Can life get any better?

THIRTY-ONE

Today we got a visitor. Sheena showed him in. He came with the familiar stocky ex-sportsman's stride, the bonsai handlebar, the barrel chest and, beneath the grey suit, the dainty legs.

'Detective Peat?' I said as I shook his hand, trying to remember, knowing I had it a little wrong.

'I get that all the time.' He smiled as if he meant it. As if I'd meant it. 'Along with Bog.'

'Marsh!' I tapped my forehead. 'Just a senior's moment. Cuppa?'

'No, thanks,' he said. I ushered him to a pure vinyl couch in the living room. 'Nice view.' Our place overlooks the Pacific Ocean.

'I'm getting used to the sea breezes,' I said. 'Never been much of a coastal type before now, the inland's more my thing, but we're told it's good for my son's breathing.' I made sure I looked sheepish about the turn in my fortunes.

Marsh small-talked about the show for a while.

'You still doing segments on air, Mr Westlake?'

‘Frosty, I keep telling ya,’ I corrected him. ‘Yeah, no, the odd one. I like to keep my hand in. But it’s the kid’s show, not mine. I’m just the manager.’

‘Hm.’ He nodded, as if he hadn’t heard this already. The droopy ends of his moustache curled into his mouth like an anemone’s tendrils. ‘You got Phil Barrows’ old job.’

‘I’m Mick’s oldest friend. I can’t say I have great management experience, but the prime quality is trust. Julie needed someone she could trust with her life. So when Phil had his problems, she turned to me.’

‘You’re on a contract?’

‘Nice contract, and points in the back end,’ I said, wanting to be as agreeable as possible while burning up inside. What did he want? Why was he here?

‘Well, the show’s going gangbusters, isn’t it,’ he said. ‘America, Europe, Japan—I read that it’s already showing in more countries than it was when Mick was doing it.’

‘The kid’s got genuine star power,’ I said. ‘And it’s always carrying the message, you know? This isn’t showbiz. This is a serious educational program to raise awareness among kids, adults, whoever, that wildlife and their habitats have to be conserved, not destroyed. No child is ever going to read a paper in an academic science journal. No kid’s going to learn from some professor that the next time he finds a snake in the bush the right response isn’t just to whack-whack-kill it, but instead it’s to get help for that creature. And no kid’s gunna get the right idea from watching a bloody Spielberg film where some big rubber crocodile’s trying to eat everyone up. Yeah? They’re gunna get the real message, the truth, from us. Mick’s the . . . sorry, Hunter’s the one who’s carrying that message out into the public. Awareness.’

I was well drilled. I was real good.

Marsh nodded. 'My kids—I think they learn a lot about life from watching a show hosted by someone their own age. And with his . . . unique way about him.'

Everyone had underestimated Hunter. Mick had scorned the kid as some kind of simpleton, and that picture kind of got itself lodged in their heads. Mick, with his charisma, had that power. Families make caricatures of all their members, and Mick turned his own son into a simple little gibberer. But the fact is, Hunter just loves animals, always has, and he knows more about them than any man or woman yet born. He listens to them, and he hears what they're saying. He's a right Doctor Dolittle, that boy. He's got the Force. And the show is about kids, really. Nature television always has been. It's just taken us adults a while to realise it. When you see Hunter doing a shoot, or going live in a matinee at the Kangazoo, it's all so clear, so obvious, so right, like the answer that was sitting under our noses all along. He's a star. He's a performer.

'He's a natural,' I said.

'He's a natural,' Marsh repeated.

Something was bothering me, at the back of my head, but we'd hit that pause that comes when a policeman visits your home out of the blue. Chitchat is over. Now the business. We both took a deep breath, me because I was fighting an attack of butterflies, Marsh because he probably didn't want to have to say what he was about to say.

'Mr Westlake . . .' He opened his notebook, a moleskin, same type as the last time. Not regular police issue. As if this might be a personal case, something he was following up on his own time.

'Frosty.'

‘Mr Westlake,’ he repeated, but not pointedly. It was more like he hadn’t heard me. ‘Can you remember where you were on March 3 last year?’

‘Golly,’ I said. ‘Can you?’

He didn’t smile. ‘I’ll help you. It was the night Stephen Heath was bitten by that snake.’

‘Oh.’ I let loose a shrill laugh. ‘It’s a long time ago, more than a year, isn’t it? Honest, it’s a tough question. Can you give me any clues?’

He wasn’t watching me. If he had been, he’d have seen a crimson hibiscus unfolding across my face.

‘Okay, I won’t play games with you,’ Marsh said. ‘We’ve interviewed Ian Angell, Mr Heath’s manager. He’s saying you were up at Silvercap the night Mr Heath died.’

He still wouldn’t look at me, even though I was blushing and sweating and stammering fit to give myself up. Here it was, D-Day. My number was up. It had to happen eventually. How long did I think I could keep getting away with it?

‘D-did Bluey A-Angell tell you why I was there?’ I said, playing my last and only card.

Marsh nodded. Now he looked at me. His eyes were brown and bland as a kangaroo’s. Nothing there but hunger.

‘He said you were the rigger. A term meaning, in his words,’ Marsh consulted his notebook, ‘a hidden hand behind the scenes, employed to create illusions, to make the tricks look real.’ He looked up at me. ‘Makes it all sound like a magic show, doesn’t it?’

I shrugged, quivery. ‘For some it is.’

He raised his eyebrows, asking me to elaborate.

‘Some presenters need a helping hand. They can’t quite bring it off themselves. So they need a rigger. Steve Heath called me in to

do a job for him because his regular rigger had a problem. If you're wondering why I didn't tell you the last time we met,' I ventured onto the front foot, anticipating his next question, 'it's embarrassing. It's something Steve would have liked to be kept secret.'

'I understand.' Marsh nodded. 'My kids would be very disappointed.'

'That's why it's kept under wraps.'

'But why would he call you in?' Marsh puckered his brow. 'Why would Frosty Westlake be known as a rigger? Where did you get your reputation from? I mean, you were working with the biggest star of the lot, the real deal, the most famous bushman in the world. Surely you'd never done any "rigging" for him?'

I relaxed. I could see the trace of a smile fighting with itself on Marsh's lips. But then I pulled myself up. This was what he wanted: for me to relax.

Sternly, I shook my head. 'I've been around for a long time, Mr Marsh. But I never had to rig anything for Mick. He was, as you say, the real deal.'

'Sure.' Marsh smiled.

I steadied my hand. I figured I'd got through. But I had to stay confident.

'So why is Bluey Angell talking to you about this now?' I said breezily. 'I thought you weren't treating Steve's death . . .' I nearly said 'Brock's', or 'Sharpie's', or any of them, ' . . . as an accident.'

'Oh yeah, yeah,' Marsh said, snapping his notebook shut. 'That's right. A string of deadly accidents. I mean,' he snorted, 'there's no way anyone could contrive to talk an eel into diving down Mick Lamington's throat on the day he couldn't breathe through his nose. You couldn't dream that up, could you? I mean, it's beyond belief.'

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‘Nature,’ I said. ‘It can’t be predicted. We work in a very dangerous profession.’

But not that dangerous. For a flash, I saw the future unfolding in Marsh’s brown eyes. He had me pinned for Steve Heath. He had me pinned for Glenn Mellon. One day, sometime, he’d get his hands on that security camera footage from the Twin Towns RSL hotel and he’d have me located in the vicinity of Brock McCabe’s place the night he went into the mangler, me leaving the RSL at precisely the right time. Or wrong. And then he’d work out that I had no explanation for where I was the night of Sharpie Phelps’s death. He’d devote a decade to it, Marsh would, the ultimate cold case. He figured he had me. He couldn’t quite work out Mick yet (good luck!), and he couldn’t put the pieces together on why Phil had confessed to shooting Deano Rudd from my house, but he’d keep working at it, this Detective Peat Bog, he’d keep working at it until it killed him. *Who gains?* There were only two people who’d gained from all that death. Me and Hunter. Manager and star. And Hunter was only a kid.

‘Right.’ He nodded, as if we were two nature-TV professionals, insiders, discussing the finer points. ‘I guess . . . I guess Hunter doesn’t need a rigger. That’d be too much.’

I gave a laconic Aussie one-shoulder twitch. ‘You don’t want to fool kids. What kind of person would do that?’

‘Right, right.’ He pushed himself to his feet, sucking thoughtfully on those moustache ends. ‘Well. Thanks, Mr Westlake. I don’t suppose you remember where you were when Mick Lamington died? We all have our stories. I was out fishing. I came back in and my younger son was in tears. We’d had a trip planned to the Kangazoo the next school holidays. It was a tough day.’

‘You know,’ I said, ‘the terrible thing is, I was out at Gonjako Wash at the time, and our radio was down, and I didn’t hear about

it for days. I had about seventy-two hours where I was the only person in the world who didn't know about Mick. And he was my best mate. I'm still devastated about it. It feels like I let him down.'

'Nah,' Marsh said. 'It would have been worse for you if you'd been there, down in Tassie with him.'

He was right on that count. We knew where we stood with each other, Marsh and I.

Then it came: what had been nagging me.

'One thing,' I said.

'What's that, Mr Westlake?'

'I thought your kids weren't into nature TV? I remember you saying they were into PlayStation and whatnot, and didn't have the—'

'I lied.' His moustache smiled pleasantly.

'Eh?'

'I lied. It suited my purposes at the time.'

'Ah. Right. Okay . . .'

We shook hands at the door.

'Thanks for helping me out, and sorry for bothering you,' he said.

'No worries, mate.'

He flinched a little at that. *Mate*.

'And thanks for telling me something I didn't know,' he said. 'About the riggers. I'll always watch these shows differently now.'

'I've spoilt your innocence,' I said.

His moustache smiled again, but not his eyes. 'I'll have to live with that.'

'It doesn't happen on all the shows, but,' I said. 'Just the ones that need a little bit of help. The phonies.'

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‘Well,’ he said. ‘I can say this. I’ll be watching *your* segments a lot more closely now, Mr Westlake. I’ll make sure I watch you every single time you’re on.’

‘I appreciate that,’ I said, like an American. ‘If there were more like you, I might’ve been a star.’

‘Oh, there’s still time, Mr Westlake. You’re never too old for the spotlight.’ He paused and shot me a genial wink. ‘I’ll be watching, okay?’

‘Stay tuned, Detective,’ I said. ‘Stay tuned.’