

Chapter One

He's resisted waking as long as he can but there's pressure in his bladder and it drives him from sleep. He lies still for a while, hearing wind, the crash of surf, the squawking of some nearby birds. He can feel sand over his face where his cheek is pressed onto the beach, feel sand down the back of his neck. His eyes blink open but for a while that's his only movement. Then he lifts his head and looks around.

Heavy wind is gusting from the south-east, beating up waves that are uneven and rough. He watches as opaque sheets of green water build and hang, then tumble and foam up onto the land. He looks further, to lead-coloured sea, the roll of tumbling clouds. He swivels his head to see where big houses have been built at the edge of a cliff, over the view. Under the wind the beach is empty of people.

He's wearing only a t-shirt and shorts and he's cold. He gets onto his knees, pulls the waistband of his shorts beneath his thighs and pisses a frothing pool into the sand before him, then he stands up, rubs at the gritty feeling in his eyes, shudders. It's nearing twilight and he's very hungry.

He turns his back to the ocean and makes his way to the edge of low forest – tea-tree, scribbly gum, tough, short bushes. Up a hill he goes, grunting at the exertion, then down the other side onto clear, mown grass above the highway. It's the evening traffic peak. Some rushing vehicles have their lights turned on. He waits at the kerb for a break in the procession then sprints over the bitumen when he gets the chance. Across the road the parking lot is full of cars with people who have come to enjoy the lake. He waits and checks out possibilities.

Before him Lake Illawarra stretches up to the mass of the escarpment. Clouds hang from the lip of the mountain to halfway down its face. At the western edge of the lake a fine mist of rain is falling and blowing back towards the mountain on the wind. Fishing dinghies are heading for shore and at this distance look to him like little black beetles bumping across the choppy surface of the water.

Houses on the Primbee peninsula have their lights turned on, the windows warm dots in the falling gloom, and he can see the neon signs of the yacht club on the lake's northern edge. He walks north through the parking area, reaches the edge of a little bay, turns west along a footpath. Across the road there are small brick dwellings built years before by the Housing Commission. He crosses the road, further west, and comes to the entrance of Legoland.

Legoland must have another, official name but no one can remember what it is. This is an estate built by a government to house those who can find nowhere better to live. There are narrow streets and winding alleys, here and there an abandoned vehicle, units two storeys high behind old wooden fences. A couple of homes have been damaged by fire and not yet repaired. Legoland perhaps looked like a good idea to someone once, on paper, but the passage of reality has not turned out so well.

He opens the gate into the yard of one of the homes, walks a pathway between garden areas overgrown with weeds. The front door is unlocked and he pushes it open.

Light in the lounge room is dim, though a television set is turned on and flickers away in a corner. There is no sound from the television but its colours fall across the room and light up the remains of food on plates on the floor, wads of paper, empty cartons and cans, animal excrement on bare floorboards.

A woman is seated in the room. Her head lolls down over a shoulder. Her eyes are open though – slitted and glazed. One arm dangles beside her, the other, fist clenched, is thrust into her lap. He picks his way across the floor, stands beside her, watches her for a while. Her body and limbs are long but very thin. He reaches across and uses two fingers of his left hand to check her neck for a pulse as the lady from the Department of Community Services has taught him. He feels a weak beat. He turns to look for a time at the television screen and sees a woman on a dais crying at the fact of her Olympic success, watches as the station cuts away to show restaurants with tiled walls, crowds in a stadium, boats in a harbour. He has learned at school that the Olympics are being held in some city called Barcelona. He wonders how long they will continue – they’ve dominated the television for what seems to him to have been a very long time.

He turns back to the woman. ‘Mum,’ he says, but the woman’s eyes don’t move. ‘Mum, Is there anything to eat?’

But he’s seen her paraphernalia on the floor and knows that she won’t be talking for a while. For a moment he wonders where she got the money and whether there’s any of it left. Then he walks to the kitchen, opens the door of an old refrigerator. Inside is a tomato oozing a thick pus, a margarine container. He takes out a milk carton, sniffs the contents, wrinkles his nose, replaces it.

He closes the door and, without looking at his mother again, he leaves the dwelling.

As he walks outside the garden fence there comes a cry, '*Piggy!*', excited, exultant. When his head jerks around he sees a group of five young men, jeans, joggers, spray-jackets. At once he turns away from them and sprints desperately along the winding alleyway with strength given him by terror. At a break between buildings he heads west, north at another intersection, hearing behind him the swearing and abuse from his pursuers. He enters the mouth of a cul-de-sac then hurls himself at the fence of a burned-out derelict construction site, scampers over the broken ground of its courtyard, reaches an entrance to an area amidst its foundations, pushes back a sheet of fibro, crawls onto the damp earth under the building. He thrusts the fibro back into position and lies in total darkness, his shoulders against the brickwork, his heart leaping in his chest. He gasps from exertion and fear.

He listens. Beyond the slab-dark of his hiding place footsteps pound over bitumen. There's silence. His pursuers have stopped. He hears the fence shudder under the weight of someone jumping against it but he can't know whether he's clambered over or just dragged himself up for a look. He hears, 'He's not in there,' the noise of someone falling back to the roadway, then the beat of feet again, the sound fading as they run away.

He lies in the blackness for what seems to him is a long time. When he thinks there's been enough of a lapse and there's no sound of a return he fumbles a cigarette lighter out of the pocket of his shorts, gropes to find a stub of candle where he's left it, lights the wick. Lit by the meagre flame he crawls between foundation pillars to where he's left two more substantial candles. These he lights, and in their glow he gazes at a picture, which he's glued to the brickwork. Satan smiles back at him, his lips thin, muscles

stretched over his cheekbones, and in the countenance, as always, Piggy finds cruelty and command and power.

He ruffles the foliage, now long dead, which he has placed beneath the illustration, then lowers his head. In a whisper he prays, 'Oh my Master, my Lord, please take your servant into your heart, please place me under your protection.' Then he leans back against a brick pylon, closes his eyes, waits.

In the end, though, he is so hungry and feels so weak that he thinks he might vomit. One by one he snuffs the candles and crawls back to his fibro shield. He inches it to one side and listens. All is silent. He crawls back into the courtyard, peers through a chink in the fence. The cul-de-sac is empty. Over the fence he clammers, trots into a broader estate thoroughfare, heads north.

At the edge of Legoland he runs as hard as he can across an empty paddock, slides into the cover of long grass, climbs on hands and knees up a steep hill and emerges onto the fringe of the sporting fields of Warrawong High School. He trots to the brickwork of a school building, leans against it, catches his breath. The school seems deserted. The last light is almost gone and misty rain falls across him, driven by a stiffening wind.

He crosses the empty carpark built for teachers, climbs over the back fence of one of the Housing Commission houses that neighbour the school. Along a pathway beside it he goes, then out onto a footpath that borders the southern edge of Flagstaff Road.

Piggy stands for a time, looking into the warmth of lighting at the windows of the little row of houses along the roadway. Streetlights have come on and their rays make patterns in wet bitumen. Soft rain glides down, slowly soaking him. He looks east.

A figure comes around the bend from Cowper Street. Piggy smiles for a moment, waiting, watching. The boy is older than Piggy, maybe seventeen. He's tall, over six feet in the old measurement, and broad-shouldered. He carries little weight – he's

not yet as big a man as he will become and he walks with a well-balanced swagger, his hands are thrust into the pockets of his zippered jacket, his head is leaning forward under the rain.

He sees Piggy, approaches, nods, stops. Under the streetlight his high cheek bones, the deep dark of his eyes, the little flop of black hair across his forehead are visible. He has the handsome, even features that many Macedonian men have. A car passes heading east, its tyres hissing up wetness off the road.

In greeting, the older boy says, 'Pig.'

'Jimmy.'

'Watcha doin'?'

'Ah. I just run up here. Emilio and his boys saw me, and chased me.'

'Yeah? Well you're alright now. They won't bother you now.'

'No. Cos you're here.'

'Yeah, maybe me, a little bit. But mainly about Grandfather. They won't want to do nothin' upsets Grandfather.'

In the gloom they each watch the shape made by the other.

Jimmy says, 'You eaten?'

Water sprays from Piggy's head when he shakes it. 'Not for a while.'

'Got any money?'

Piggy shakes his head.

'Any food at home?'

A dollop of rainwater drops from Piggy's nose to burst on his chin. He doesn't reply.

Jimmy makes a noise – part chuckle part sigh – takes a wallet from his jeans and draws out a five-dollar note. 'Get yourself down to Warrawong,' he says, and gives Piggy the money. 'Buy a kebab.'

Piggy takes the money, thrusts his balled fist with the note inside it into the pocket of his jeans. 'And it's a *kebab*,' Jimmy says,

‘not cigarettes.’ Piggy nods again. ‘And if you’re stuck for somewhere to sleep come to my place, knock on my window. You can sleep on the floor.’

‘Nah. It’s cool.’

Jimmy lifts his gaze towards the west. Piggy sees him stiffen, the hands come out of his jacket pockets and ball into fists. Piggy follows the gaze. Someone is walking east, down from Cringila Hill. The boy comes within twenty metres of the pair, stops in a pool of light thrown by a streetlight.

Piggy says, ‘Jim. It’s Abdul.’

The three boys wait in the rain. Piggy blinks, frowns – a vehicle is gliding down Flagstaff Road behind Abdul. It is a pale work van, such as an electrician might drive. Its headlights illuminate shafts of falling rain. Piggy watches it cross to the wrong side of the road, reach where Abdul is standing, stop. A long arm comes out of the open window beside the driver. In the fist is a large pistol. *Pap!* There’s a sharp, high detonation and, later, Piggy believes that he has seen both flame at the pistol’s muzzle and Abdul’s head rocking at the impact of a slug smashing into his skull. Abdul staggers a couple of steps towards Jimmy and Piggy then falls forward, arms outstretched, palms down. They can hear the smack as his head lands on the footpath cement. Piggy watches the arm vanish into the cabin, the vehicle ease forward a couple of feet, the arm comes back out and he hears the explosion of two more shots. He watches Abdul’s head bounce under the blows. He sees a fountain of blood shoot up, weaken, falter and merge into a dark pool on the cement. Piggy looks at the dark glass of the van windows. The arm has been withdrawn. Later, Piggy will remember this as clearly as any of the rest of it. The driver neatly signals a deviation to the left, pulls away from the kerb, returns to the correct side of the road, heads down to Cowper Street, turns right and vanishes.

Neither Piggy nor Jimmy speak. As one they turn and walk briskly in the direction of the van. Neither boy has his hands in his pockets as they've come to believe that hurrying in such a posture suggests guilt. They cross Cowper Street, then, when they enter the mouth of the alley on the other side, they break into a sprint, knees high, arms pumping, legs stretching out to drag back distance. They pound along the bitumen, their passage provoking loud baying from guard dogs tethered in backyards along the alley. They come to an alcove in the back wall of the Catholic primary school, fall into the space, press their backs against the brickwork. They stand there, panting. There are no sounds of traffic.

Jimmy says, 'Shit!'

'Yeah.'

'I mean, shit!'

'Yeah.'

'Something just happened.'

'Yeah. Abdul got shot. Maybe killed.'

'Maybe? Three in the head? No comin' back from that. But more. Somethin' *else* just happened. Somethin' big.'

The dogs settle, going back to shelter from the rain. The boys can hear the quiet *shoosh* of rainwater over iron rooves, the soundtracks of television shows, far off and muted.

'We should ring someone up,' Piggy says.

'What?'

'We should ring someone *up*. Like an ambulance.'

'An ambulance.'

'Yeah.'

'Three in the head and we're gonna send him an ambulance? For what? Collect body parts for handin' around?'

Piggy covers his face with his hands, shudders. 'Well, we should ring someone up, tell them he's there.'

‘Tell someone? Pig, he’s lyin’ there in a pool of blood on the footpath just above the high school. Trust me, eventually someone’s gonna notice. I’ll tell you what we’re gonna do. You walk down into Warrawong ...’

‘What?’

‘I fucken told ya. You’re going down into Warrawong ...’

‘What if he’s there?’

‘He? He who?’

‘The guy, the popper? What if he sees me?’

‘Friend, if he wanted us dead he’d have been shootin’ at us. Believe me, no one’s gonna come up to you, say, “Good evening, I’m the guy just done that to Abdul, up there on the hill.” It’s about what happens next now. So you’re goin’ down into Warrawong and buy a kebab ...’

‘I’m not hungry.’

‘I don’t fucken *care* if you’re hungry. You’re gonna buy a fucken kebab and *eat* it.’

Jimmy blinks and rubs water from his forehead. Piggy lowers his hands from his face, then blinks up at the cloudy sky. ‘Okay.’

‘Now. Go now.’ Jimmy says. ‘I’ll wait here then go up to the highway, walk the long way round to Cringila. Come up home later if you want.’

Piggy nods. ‘Alright.’

They wait awhile before Piggy pushes himself off the wall.

‘And,’ Jimmy says, ‘I didn’ see nothin’. You be clear on that. I didn’ see nothin’.’

Piggy stands, hunches over, then nods and walks along the alleyway.

Jimmy leans back against the brickwork and closes his eyes. He hears the sound of rain and, from different directions, the noise made by several television sets all tuned to the same show. He thinks that he’s about to vomit but breathes deeply and fights

back the impulse. Then he thinks that he's going to cry but fights that away too. He looks back along the alley where rain-drops bounce and burst on the asphalt.

Aloud he says, 'Well, fuck me.'

Chapter Two

There's only dull pain around the spine but the throb in Gordon's right thigh is getting worse. He suspects it will improve if he changes position but fears the sharp stab he'll feel in his back. He checks his watch. There's forty more minutes to pass before he can take another painkiller. He waits, undecided.

He hears the clack of shoe heels on polished floorboards, and then gets the good, warm smell of the woman as she comes up beside him from behind. 'How're you doing,' she asks, the tone intended to sound encouraging.

'If anything,' he says, 'I think it's gotten a bit worse. I'm sorry. Could you get under my right shoulder? I'd like to move.'

She crosses behind the armchair, stoops. He circles her shoulders with an arm.

'There,' he says.

'Better?'

'Yeah, good. Thank you.'

'Cup of tea?'

'That would be wonderful.'

He listens to the rush of rain across the iron roof, the wet whooshing of the foliage of the tall gum trees, the hiss of gas burning in the fireplace. He jumps, startled, at a sharp burst from the telephone. The woman calls, 'I'll get it.'

He watches her lift the handset. 'May Winter,' she says. He sees her frown. Eventually she says, 'Edna, look, truly he can't. He's in really serious pain.'

'Is that Edna?' he asks. May waves a hand to dismiss him. 'I'll speak to her,' he says, and pushes weight down onto the arm of his chair, bites his bottom lip, stands, then shuffles to the telephone. He can see the seriousness of May's displeasure as she hands him the receiver and leaves the room.

'Edna. Gordon here.'

'Gordon. How are you?'

'No good.'

'Ah. I want to ask you to do something.'

'Edna ...'

'Just listen. We've got a corpse in Warrawong, which I'm told is almost certainly a homicide.'

'Warrawong.'

'Just down from Cringila Hill.'

'Ah.'

'We have a preliminary identification that people are confident about.'

'Do we?'

'We think it's Abdul Hijazi.'

Gordon looks out into the darkness beyond the front windows. He says, 'Oh, dear. Oh dear oh dear oh dear oh dear.'

'Exactly.'

'What happened?'

'No idea whatever. All we've got is a corpse with a hole in its head on the footpath in the rain. We've done a bit of a doorknock.'

To this point, no one saw anything, they were making their tea, they were watching television.'

'Yes.'

'So, someone's going to need to prepare some comments for the papers and the talkbacks.'

Gordon thinks he knows what she's going to say next but doesn't know what he hopes to hear. Eventually Edna says, 'I was hoping you'd take a bit of a look at the scene for me.'

'Who's got it at this point?'

'Peter Grace. Now, hold on. Listen. Let's assume this runs on awhile, which it feels like it will. They'll form a team from homicide in Sydney and they'll come down. That would be nothing to do with you. I'd like it if you'd look around. You'd report only to me, officially but independently.' She chuckles. 'This, do you see, would be an innovative detecting technique.'

'Of a type for which you are justly famous.'

'So I'm told.'

'Edna ...'

He can tell that she's talking quickly to get through her points before he can object.

'You are down as being "on leave" so anything you did would be from unallocated resources, which is how this would need to proceed. Any time you could give it ... an hour here, two hours there ... I'd have you regarded as on duty for a day and recredit a day of your sick leave. That's all I can do, but I can do that.'

'Who would be your local liaison?'

'Peter Grace.'

A pause. 'I'm surprised you'd want that.'

'I don't, but it's the way it's worked out. I could maybe have it changed but that might cost me a lot more than it's worth in the overall scheme of things. A homicide team will probably be led by Sean O'Shea, detective sergeant, solid man, but that would be

nothing to do with you. You'd report to me, how it all was going, whether there was something building in Cringila, whether any situations are being manipulated.' She pauses. 'I'd be able to trust what you told me. You wouldn't be putting together any nasty parcel of surprises for me to unwrap. I wouldn't ask this unless it was important. Abdul Hijazi – it might be crucial – how this plays out. I've got David Lawrence here with me. I can send him up to Austinmer to collect you. Now, if you like.'

He waits awhile, until he knows what he's compelled to do. 'Send him. I'll get ready.'

When he turns May is at the doorway to the kitchen. Her arms are folded and she's scowling at him. 'Tell me I didn't hear you say what you just said.'

'May ...'

'Gordon. The weather!' She shakes her head bitterly. 'Tell me,' she says. 'What can you do for me? What is the best gift you can give me? I'll tell you. *Get bloody better. Get better.* So I can just get on with the other issues I have to deal with, which happen to be considerable, as I'd hoped you'd have noticed.'

'May ...'

She gives a sort of snarl and goes back into the kitchen, but then she comes to the doorway again. She says, 'You know why you're doing this.'

'Well ...'

'Edna has said "roll over" and you think you might get your tummy tickled.'

'I doubt she'll be able to do much for me. I think The Boys are going to get her.'

'That doesn't matter to you. It's not the rewards. It's *praise!* It's praise from someone in an important job. It's what you live for.'

He shrugs. He says, 'I'll take it easy. I won't walk very much.'

He makes his way into their bedroom, lowers himself slowly

to sit on the bed, looks forlornly at his lace-up shoes against a wall. There's water in a glass on the bedside table and a sheet of foil with ridges where tablets are held. In a quick movement he removes a lozenge, washes it down with a drink. With eyes closed he waits then for the pain to dull. When he blinks them open May is in the room watching him.

'You've taken a pill,' she says, accusing. 'It isn't time. It isn't *nearly* time.'

'It's really hurting, May.'

'Yes, and it's so unfair, isn't it? You take such good care of yourself!'

She kneels, removes his slippers, places shoes on his feet and laces them, brings a white shirt, tie, jacket, heavy coat from the wardrobe. She dresses him slowly, with difficulty. Gordon is determined not to grunt no matter what pain he experiences. As she adjusts his trouser legs he says to her stooped head, 'I love you, May.'

'Oh, Gordon. Gordon, I know you do. That's not it. That's not the issue.' She rises. 'Tea will be ready.'

After the tea he fetches an umbrella and his walking cane and makes his way onto the verandah. Black bunches of leaves toss under the storm. Raindrops burst and stain dark the floorboards. In time the darkness in the street below him is broken by shafts of light from headlamps. A Commodore turns into their driveway. He calls, 'I'm going,' and makes his way, step by slow step, down the front stairs.

'Chilly.' The driver who greets him is a young man, slender. He wears a well-pressed suit, crisp white shirt, a striped tie.

'Good evening, David.'

They sit a little time in the front of the car. David Lawrence peers up at the dwelling illuminated in headlight beams. He says, 'Nice-looking house. How can you afford a house like this up here?'

Gordon smiles. 'Been in the family a long time. You'd be surprised what you can have if it's been in the family a long time.'

David backs the car into the street, then through beating sheets of rain they drive, with occasional murmurs of information from the police radio. They reach Wollongong's northern distributor, go along it, turn left and ascend to a bridge across the Princes Highway, head through town to the flame and steam of the steelworks in production. At Warrawong they turn right, head up Cowper Street towards Cringila Hill. Along all of that way neither man speaks.

On Flagstaff Road they are waved down by a young policeman in uniform who holds a light cone. Sheltering under his umbrella, gripping tightly to his walking cane, Gordon makes slow progress to the stretched, blue-checked tape that marks out the crime scene. Beyond, there's a huddle of spectators beneath umbrellas and heavy coats. Police have made a gesture of sensitivity by erecting a screen around the corpse. As Gordon pushes past, a little boy stooping on the footpath turns to call to the crowd behind him, 'I can see his hand!'

Gordon enters the barricaded area, past a policeman who says, 'Eh, Chilly.' Gordon does not respond, as is his habit when distant acquaintances use his nickname unbidden. He walks to where white-clad technicians prod and measure. The dead youngster lies chest down, his face pressed to the concrete.

A worker raises his gaze, nods. 'Chilly,' he says. Rain splashes on his hood, rolls across his weatherproofed shoulders.

'Roy,' Gordon replies, and squints his eyes in the cold glare of the floodlights, 'anything so far?'

'Very little more than you can see. It's quite a hole, the exit wound. If it's a single wound it's of tremendously heavy calibre.'

'We haven't got a bullet?'

'Not yet. Probably it will be in that yard, assuming he was

shot from the street, which would appear to be the case. And if it's more than one shot I can tell you this – this is someone who really knew what he was doing.'

Nearby are three men who wear white shirts, ties, heavy raincoats. Gordon joins them. 'Peter,' Gordon says, and a heavy-chested man nods in greeting.

'I was warned you'd be here,' Peter Grace says.

'Warned.' Gordon raises his eyebrows.

'Oh, well. Told. By the Empress.'

The two gaze at each other under the rain, keeping all expression from their faces.

'So,' Gordon says. 'What have we got?'

'So far, a corpse and, in addition to that, just about SFA. When we got here there was a big puddle of blood but most of that's gone in the rain. We're confident it's Abdul Hijazi.' Peter nods at a knot of onlookers. Someone's holding an umbrella above the head of a heavy, dark-clad woman who cups her hands, rocks back and forth, her mouth open and working. 'That's his family,' he says. 'They heard, and came down. *They* say it's him. We'll get the prints and all that and be certain in the morning.'

'Can we talk in a couple of days?'

'I'm told that's the way that things are going to be.'

As Gordon turns to go back to the car a tall man breaks from a group and approaches him. Gordon nods and waits. 'How are you, Ned McKenzie?'

'Cold and wet.'

'Yes. And wasting your time just now, I'd have thought. One look, you know what we've got. There isn't going to be any more.'

'I've been over talking to the family. "Always a good kid. Our lives are over." That'll be my piece tomorrow. The fact he's there and dead, that's already been filed by someone else. What's this with the stick?'

‘I’ve pulled something in my back.’

‘Ah. Why you haven’t been at golf. You should be home, warm and dry.’

‘You’re as bad as May.’

‘Any theories?’

‘What, me? I’d say he’s upset someone.’

‘Abdul Hijazi, upset someone? Fair guess. There’s going to be quite a queue. One thing for you blokes, there’ll be no shortage of suspects.’

Beyond Ned, a young man has approached and stands, blatantly listening. Gordon runs an eye over him – tall, slender, early twenties. He has a small floral-patterned fold-up umbrella and a greasy-looking trenchcoat. He is bald across his crown and has combed his hair from the side of his head over the area.

‘Ned,’ Gordon says, ‘who’s this?’

‘This, it appears, is a colleague of mine who is doing work experience at a local television station.’

‘Work experience?’

‘This is what he’s told me.’

Gordon rolls his eyes. To the young man he says, ‘Who are you?’

‘Ian Battle.’

‘How long have you been doing work experience?’

‘Eight months.’

‘Have they paid you anything yet?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Ah. Great world, the world you’re trying to get into. Now. I’m having a private conversation with a friend of mine. Go away.’

Ian Battle looks at the policeman for a while with no expression on his face, then turns and goes back to the group of onlookers.

‘I’m moving on,’ Gordon says to Ned. ‘My back hurts.’

Back at the car, Gordon asks David Lawrence to take him to Port Kembla command.

After a moment, David Lawrence says, 'Whatever you want, Champion.'

Back at command under fluorescent lighting police tap at computers, read files, talk and listen into telephones. A plump, middle-aged woman with stars across the shoulders of her uniform rises when Gordon and David reach the door of her office. She has sheets of computer print-out on her desk, a large diary open at a middle page. Gordon lowers himself into a chair across from her. David sits by a wall.

'Well, how are they going?' Edna asks.

'They're confident it's him. That's about all there is at this stage. Whatever hit him, if it was one shot it was big – you know, donkey shot out of a shotgun or something, the skull is a terrible mess. If it's more than one it was done by a marksman, because all you can see is the one wound. Nothing I can see on his back, arms, in the neck, nothing like that.'

'How much do you know about Abdul Hijazi?'

'We've all heard the stuff, should they have let him out, would he be going back in, *when* would he be going back in? Everyone's heard all of that. May says, it's his age, so they're not allowed to write his name in the papers but they may as well because everyone down here knows who he is. When *was* this case, I mean the original act? I remember following the trial in the papers but I don't remember when it happened.'

'Nearly three years ago. A girl called Luz Solomona was raped on the grounds of Warrawong High School.'

'Ah.'

'Yes. Ugly. Four of them, most likely. Abdul was the only one ever identified. He was a classmate of Luz, they'd been friends apparently. You were still working at Wollongong and

your daughter, had just gone up to university. You and May had headed off for a holiday in your caravan.'

Edna closes her eyes and pinches between her eyebrows. Her hair is dyed blond and has received careful attention but Gordon can see that, beneath her make-up, the skin below her eyes is sagging and dark.

'She was cutting through Warrawong High School at night, on her way home, I invite you to believe.' Edna spreads her hands, palm up as if to say, how can you protect people who'll do such things? 'She was attacked, probably by four youths – well, one youth, established, and perhaps three others of indeterminate age.'

'Who Abdul would not name.'

'No. There are people who believe that he was deathly afraid of them. Well, them or their families.'

'Local?'

'No one knows. She only got a good look at one, Abdul, who she knew, and he was the one attempted intercourse.'

'Attempted?'

'This is why we're where we are. This was the thing at the trial – what, in fact, did he do? It couldn't be established just by a medical review, for reasons that were examined in court in ways that the poor girl must have found deeply humiliating. This was the basis of the appeal – what should he have been charged with, was there any real evidence he performed the actual act of which he'd been found guilty?'

'Ah. And maybe three others.'

'So Luz thought. Could have been others, off in the dark, but she thought it was three who held her down for Abdul. And four in total was the impression of the neighbours to the school who heard her screaming and, to their credit, climbed the fences and came to help her.'

Rain beats on the office windows. ‘Who worked the first investigation?’ Gordon says.

‘Went through a few people. It started off with Mick Laacey.’

‘Mick *Laacey*?’

‘Mmm. He’d just got back from leave, after his daughter had died.’

‘Yes. Beautiful little Julie.’

‘Mmm. He came back, didn’t last long. But he was the Cringila specialist, apparently, and he started the investigation after that thing happened to Luz Solomona, whatever in fact it was.’

‘Oh, poor Julie. I don’t know how he got through that. It’d have killed me.’

‘Oh. Perhaps. In any case, he never really made it back to work. Just a bit of the Solomona thing, then back on leave, then he was gone.’

‘Ah. And, do you know, I’ve scarcely seen him since. You know how close we were. Or, are, I’d like to be able to say. After Julie died we’d ring him, you know, and say let’s get together, and he’d never say no but it would never quite work out. Then in the end I stopped asking, which is what I thought he wanted. He’d lost his wife earlier, you know.’

‘Yes. I knew that.’

‘Linda. His wife’s name was Linda.’

‘Ah.’

‘I’ll talk to Michael.’

‘Will you? Are you sure that will do any good, out of your scarce resources of time?’

‘Everything I’ve learned from another person about policing that was worth a damn I learned from Mick Laacey. And our families were close. Well, more back in Narrandera than when we came here, but, if nothing else, this would be a chance to catch up.’

'Oh, well. As you think.'

'Yes. And now.'

David Lawrence looks at Gordon expectantly.

'I must go and face my wife.'

'She's cross with you.'

'Yes. At least I hope it's not worse than that.'

'Gordon, this is truly very good of you.'

'Yes,' he says, bitterly. 'I know.'

His most recent painkiller is already diminishing in impact. Gordon grimaces, levers himself out of the chair and leaves with David Lawrence.