

CHAPTER ONE

At first, everyone thought the retrieving trial judge had been killed by a blind man shooting blanks at a dead pigeon. With typical Tasmanian logic and the blinkered focus of hardened gundog trial fanatics, they ignored the fact that the judge had been standing behind the blind man when the gun went off and the blanks in the blind man's shotgun were loaded only with primers, and therefore harmless.

Instead, they focused on the obvious, which was that blind John had the shotgun in his hands and all the motive in the world for shooting the judge, who, the evening before, had callously told John, in front of everyone, that he should give up entering his guide dog Magic in retrieving trials because, "You can't possibly win." Insensitive and unkind words to a highly competitive individual like John, so in the eyes of most observers, the judge deserved shooting!

And then the judge had compounded the offense by growling back when John's guide dog/retrieving trial entrant sensed John's anger and curled her upper lip in the beginnings of a snarl. Foothills Mocha Magic was not known to snarl without good and sufficient reason. The chocolate Labrador bitch took her work as a guide dog seriously, and reading John's moods, not to mention protecting him, was part of her chosen role in life. A short-lived incident, but a memorable one that gained the judge no credit even in death.

When he died, nobody was actually watching the judge anyway. All attentions were focused across an arm of the South Esk River, on the place where the mechanical catapult was set up to fling dead pigeons for the trial dogs to retrieve. The trial site was on Ormley, a grazing property nestled in the Fingal Valley east of Avoca between the looming bulk of Ben Lomond and the lower Fingal Tier to the south.

It was a typical late autumn morning in which everyone had awakened to a river valley swirling in a fog that roosted in the tall blue gums and stringy-barks along the river and shrouded the gorse bushes

and lower scrub. It took quite some time to burn off, but by mid-morning the day was as splendid as anyone could ask for. Except maybe the judge.

Thus, this astonishing chain of events:

- * The judge raised his clipboard in a signal.

- * The bird thrower was released, flinging the pigeon into the air for Magic to see and John to shoot at even though he couldn't see.

- * John, who'd been a shooter before losing his sight in an accident, heard the thrower and fired at the appropriate moment the bird should have been at the zenith of its flight.

- * And both the hapless pigeon and the trial judge ended up face-down and dead on the boggy ground, a hundred yards and a river between them, but equal in death.

Foothills Mocha Magic, splendid dog that she was, kept her attention focused on the pigeon—if the idiot judge wished to do his job lying face down in the dirt, that was none of her concern. John, of course, didn't see the judge fall, so he waited the requisite mental ten-count, then ordered his dog to fetch, whereupon she took off like a rocket, launched herself into the river, swam across, ran straight to the bird, picked it up, and was swimming the river on her way back almost before the judge stopped twitching. She threw him a scurrilous glance, then presented John with her trophy in a perfect, ten-point delivery, and walked back to heel, neither knowing nor caring that her best run ever wasn't going to count.

Hardly anyone even saw the delivery; most of the gallery had, by this time, realized that their trial judge had just fallen down dead.

About seventy-five people and half that many dogs watched it all, but nobody saw anything that Sergeant Charlie Banes, head of the St. Helens police station, out of uniform and trying to enjoy a rare Saturday off, didn't also see from his position in the gallery of onlookers. A gun was fired and a man whom many people actively disliked fell down dead. That simple. It made no sense, at first, to anyone. Nobody'd heard any shot but John's shotgun going off, and it wasn't until they went to look that the bullet hole in the judge's back became suddenly, brutally obvious. So did the pool of his own blood, welling out under him from where the bullet's exit wound had blown apart his chest.

Charlie's first reaction, like that of the other onlookers, was disbelief. His second, as he licked idly at a fang-bloodied knuckle, was that somehow this was more of Bluey's revenge for having been collared and leashed. Bluey was the rough-coated Jack Russell terrier that Charlie was dog-sitting for the day, a singularly independent reprobate beast famed for his irreverent temper and noxious habits, and Charlie's personal nemesis. Technically, Bluey shouldn't have been on the trial site in the first place, not being a registered gundog, but Charlie's status as an officer of the law had been duly noted and the presence of the scruffy little terrier grudgingly accepted.

Charlie's third reaction—and this was the one that would not go away; it scurried around in his mind like a demented, caged hamster for months afterward—was to wonder how he could ever explain to the higher-ups in the Tasmanian police department how he, a senior policeman, could stand and watch as a blind man stood before a crowd of people with a loaded shotgun in his hands, fired the gun, and somebody died.

That terrifying thought was forcibly shoved to the background as he thrust Bluey's lead into the hands of Teague Kendall, who was standing next to him.

"Stay here, and hang onto this bugger, lest he eat somebody," Charlie snapped, then rushed toward the fallen judge, waving his police ID and letting professionalism take control.

"Police! Everybody stay where they are!" he shouted, and was gratified to see the stentorian tones have their effect on the crowd of now totally confused onlookers. Within moments, he had the crowd under a semblance of order, and had thankfully managed to keep everyone at least several feet from the dead judge.

Kendall did exactly as he'd been told. He remained in place, torn between watching his police officer friend take control of the situation and hoping the recalcitrant Jack Russell terrier wouldn't decide to vent his evil disposition on Kendall himself. Beside Kendall, Rex Henderson also remained in place, scanning the scene with quick, observant glances and, Kendall thought, already rewriting the scene in his mind.

Both men were writers. Kendall's best-selling true-crime thriller *The Specialist*, recounting the exploits of a crazy serial killer who'd operated in Tasmania and near Kendall's home on Vancouver Island in Canada—nearly claiming Kendall and his lady friend Kirsten Knelsen as victims—was topping the charts in North America, while Rex's latest crime novel had done so well his publisher had sponsored an Australia/New Zealand book tour for the Houston, Texas, writer. Their being together in a muddy paddock in the Tasmanian backblocks, observing the aftermath of what seemed to be a sniper attack on a retrieving trial judge, was the result of having met quite by chance at LAX on their way to Australia on two different flights.

Rex Henderson was a quiet, unassuming, middle-aged man whose gentle demeanor belied the sometimes harsh violence of his crime novels. Originally from Minnesota, he'd found it necessary to put on a Texas drawl during his Australian visit just to please his audiences. Now he appeared lost in thought, calmly observing the chaos around them as Charlie sheep-dogged the crowd into order. Rex was also rubbing nervously at his left ear lobe, or so Kendall assumed until he noticed the trickle of blood down Rex's fingers, and realized there was more involved than just nerves.

"What've you done to yourself?" he asked, leaning over to peer closely at the injury.

His companion lowered the hand, then stared wide-eyed at his bloodied fingers before turning to look at Kendall. Only then, apparently, did Rex actually feel anything like pain.

"Ouch!" he said. "They sure have vicious bees in this country. Or was it a hornet, do you think?"

Kendall moved in for a closer look, first dragging a handkerchief from his back pocket so he could wipe away the still-oozing blood. Rex flinched at the touch of the hanky, but flinched more visibly when Kendall had finished his assessment.

"A lead hornet," Kendall declared with genuine surprise. "Bloody oath, mate . . . I think the bullet that got the judge must have nicked your ear on the way by."

"A bullet?" Rex stared at Kendall with a calmness the younger, taller man couldn't help but envy. "Surely not. It was an insect of some kind. I heard it."

“So did I, now that you mention it,” Kendall replied. “And it was no insect.” He thought for a brief moment, then handed over Bluey’s lead to Rex. “Here, hold this mongrel while I let Charlie know about this. And don’t move. Where you were standing might turn out to be important when it’s time to see where the shot came from.”

“Should we be standing here at all if somebody’s actually shooting at us?” Rex answered his own question before Kendall could think of a reply. “I guess it hardly matters, now. There’s been enough time to have wiped out half the people here, if that was the plan.”

Both men glanced nervously around them and behind, across boggy riverside paddocks to the nearest real cover, a slight ridge adorned with bracken fern, blackberry scrub, and a few tall stringybarks—Tasmanian oaks. Assuming Kendall was right about the direction involved, this was the logical place for the shot to have originated.

“Helluva shot,” Kendall said. “Must be near-as-damn-it a thousand meters.” He ran his glance in a line between the judge’s corpse and the distant ridge, then returned to his announced course of action. “You stay here while I tell Charlie,” he said, “and don’t, for God’s sake, let that mongrel dog get loose. We’ve got enough chaos already.”

Teague paused for an instant, peering intently at his companion, then added, “Jeez, but you’re lucky. If I was you, I’d go buy a lottery ticket today.” Then he shook his head in a gesture of disgust. “And I’m an idiot,” he said, and reached out to retrieve the Jack Russell’s leash. “You’re the one needing attention. Get yourself to the catering tent—they’re sure to have a first-aid kit. There’s all the time in the world to tell Charlie about how you almost got yourself shot.”

CHAPTER TWO

While the murdered gundog judge was hovering between Heaven and Hell, with most of his critics opting for the latter, Kirsten Knelsen was deep beneath the earth, somewhere between Paradise and Promised Land, staring at the inky depths of an underground river that could have been the Styx.

It was not, in fact, the Styx, which was far to the south, almost at the other end of the state, but if it even had a name, Kirsten didn't know it, hadn't been told it, and—given the Mole Creek caving fraternity's penchant for secrecy—wouldn't be told it, either. Not that it mattered. Without an extremely detailed or very old map of Tasmania, it would be difficult enough to find either Paradise or Promised Land, let alone the subterranean stream at her feet. Neither was more than a wide spot on one of the island state's more obscure back roads, possibly relevant in the dim distant past, but now lost in history.

Kirsten found the names evocative, however, which didn't help her to concentrate on the wondrous cave scenery she'd come so far to see. Her personal life was locked in a purgatory of guilt, and she feared escape as much as she dreaded staying with things as they were.

None of the caving fraternity's secrecy surprised her. Secrecy was part-and-parcel of the caving ethos. Something normal people didn't seem to comprehend was the sheer fragility of cave ecosystems and the need for them always to be treated with respect and protected from invasion by those who couldn't understand their importance. Vandalism and/or unwitting carelessness were always high on the list of threats to cave systems.

And in the case of this particular cave, Kirsten thought, the secrecy was truly justified. Her companions had told her it rivaled anything the finest of Tasmania's many well-known caves could offer, and Kirsten could well believe it.

Just to get here, having left Launceston in pre-dawn blackness, they'd driven for hours, stumbled their way across a rocky, eucalypt-covered ridge, then crawled on hands and knees across what seemed to

her to be an endless stretch of sheep paddock to avoid being spotted by the owner of the property where the cave entrance was located. There was an entrance elsewhere on the property, to a different cave, apparently, and he was notorious for his antagonism toward cavers and anyone else who dared to trespass.

Within moments of the party's descent (a straight, thirty-foot abseil plunge through a narrow slot between two rocks in a scrub-filled depression in the corner of an otherwise level paddock filled with sheep) into the cave system, Kirsten had been treated to some of the finest, most spectacular calcite formations she had ever seen.

"And the best is yet to come," she was assured by Michael Lichon, the leader of the three-person group giving Kirsten an exclusive tour of a cave system she was told had only been discovered a month earlier.

"Only . . ." Michael actually looked sheepish, might even have blushed, although that didn't show in the harshness of the caving lanterns. ". . . you have to take off your clothes if you want to see it."

Kirsten did a double-take, unsure for just a millisecond whether to laugh at him or actually worry. She was, after all, way to hell and gone out in the backblocks of the Tasmanian wilderness, deep underground, with three people she'd only met that morning, didn't really know, and . . .

And one of the three is a woman. Get a grip, Kirsten. What did Teague say about these Australians and their weird sense of humor?

Then she caught that look again, and realized two things: (1) Michael *was* having her on just a bit, but more important was (2) the entire Tasmanian group seemed uncharacteristically hesitant about doing so.

They're intimidated by me!

That realization struck her like a physical blow, because it kicked her mind back to the problems she'd been having with Teague Kendall. And explained those, too, in that single word. *Intimidated.*

"Jeez, Mike, give it a rest." This from the female of the party, a diminutive blonde in her mid-twenties whose name Kirsten had already forgotten, not least because these were the first words the woman had spoken since her silent nod at their introduction back in Launceston.

“Michael’s famous for his sense of humor—not!” continued *Sue . . . that’s it!* as she began unself-consciously stripping off her own mud-smeared caver’s coveralls. “We’ve only to wade a little bit is all. Easier going, and less chance of doing unintentional damage that way.”

Simple as that. All four removed their boots, socks, coveralls and the jeans or—in Michael’s case—sweat pants they wore to combat the slight underground chill, and stepped single-file into the inky waters of the unnamed river. A hundred meters later, numb from the cold water but exhilarated by the beauty of their surroundings, they stepped out onto the opposite bank, hastily dried off, and got dressed again in preparation for further explorations.

Kirsten was as impressed as the others by the sheer volume of decorative, calcite features they encountered in their journey downstream, her voice added to theirs in a chorus of *ooohs* and *aaahs* at the magnificent way in which Nature had embellished the subterranean chambers of the cave system.

She no longer cared that she’d been unable to secure access to Kubla Khan, arguably the best decorated cave in all of Australia. This as yet unnamed cave was quite spectacular enough.

But, now aware that she might be considered intimidating to the Tasmanian cavers, she found herself consciously pre-editing her comments, pausing to think before she said anything at all. And wishing she’d done so during their drive from Launceston, when the Tassie trio had, at first hesitantly and then with enthusiasm, seduced her into a detailed account of her underground escape from clinical psychologist and psychopath Dr. Ralph Stafford, the “Specialist” of Teague Kendall’s now highly successful true-crime book.

At least, she thought, she hadn’t been lured into revealing that she’d actually consulted Stafford professionally, albeit briefly, as her therapist. Wild horses couldn’t have dragged that admission from Kirsten; it was at the seat of her own worst nightmares. Confiding her most intimate thoughts to a madman who intended to eat her was, she thought, good and sufficient cause for nightmares.

Stafford had slain and eaten women, including Kirsten’s sister Emma, both in Tasmania and on Vancouver Island. And had nearly claimed Kirsten and Kendall, too.

In a cave.

Kirsten had led the madman on a merry chase through the caverns and tunnels of a cave system she, herself, had discovered on Vancouver Island, ultimately leaving Stafford trapped and/or lost in the cave system where he'd pursued her. Or eaten by a cougar. Stafford's body had never been found within the cave system, but blood evidence outside one cave exit and Kirsten's own encounter with a cougar near that exit had authorities certain the dastardly doctor was dead, dragged from the cave exit and subsequently killed and eaten. Or still inside, somewhere, and starved to death.

It had been a nightmare for Kirsten, at the time, but more than a year had passed. Kendall had written his book; Kirsten had come to terms with her experience. But it had never crossed her mind that her exploits might be misinterpreted by anyone, let alone these three highly experienced cavers. Every one of them had vastly more underground experience than she did, although none had gained an international reputation by using their cave knowledge to elude a madman who wanted to eat them.

So she worked to dispel their view of her as a heroine, all the while wondering, in her sudden and newfound realization, just how thoroughly intimidated Teague Kendall actually was by her.

He'd rushed to rescue her once he'd realized her danger, overcoming his own dread of caves in what she had always thought a valiant and truly brave gesture. Not his fault that Stafford had tricked him, trapped him in a deadly sinkhole within the cave system now named for Kirsten herself. Not his fault that, in the end, it had been Kirsten rescuing Kendall, having already saved herself from the madman's cannibalistic scheme.

Not her fault, either. But now, reveling in the delights of her unusual but chosen sport, her thoughts couldn't ignore how it must make Kendall feel. The one and only time he'd willingly gone underground was with her, in the face of great trepidation. His second time underground had almost been fatal and there would not, she instinctively knew, ever be a third time. Not by choice.

Kendall had been afraid the first time, his second visit had confirmed and exacerbated those fears. And he couldn't in ten thousand years comprehend why she, too, wasn't now terrified of caves and caving.

And he never will. Well, intellectually maybe. But . . .

And it hurt. She let her gaze wander as the party moved downriver, and because she was half-thinking about Teague, she found herself wanting him there, with her, able to share in the wonders so stupendous she was almost drunk on the visual and tactile experience.

How can you have a real relationship if you can't share the most important things in it?

Around her, in the eerie light of the cavers' torches, weird and grotesque shapes loomed from the shadows, flowing down the limestone walls in curtains and runnels of calcite with unusual forms, equally unusual colors. To Kirsten it was all strangely beautiful and surreal, but when she tried to see it through Teague Kendall's eyes . . . ?

His worst nightmares come true, considering what he endured. I'm not surprised he's confused about my feelings for caves.

Kirsten's nightmares, too, were haunted. Not by caves, but by Stafford's depravity. He'd killed her sister, probably eaten at least some of her, and come within a whisker of including Kirsten on his menu. But her nightmares of the madman didn't extend underground. In a cave she had fought him, eluded him, fled from him, and finally escaped him. The cave was a blessing, indeed a sanctuary.

One sanctuary. And for nearly a year now, she had been hovering at the entry to another one, a sanctuary she deeply desired and one that had systematically, it often seemed, eluded her. Teague Kendall—in her arms and in her bed and in her life. And now she knew what the problem was, or at least some of the problem. Kendall was intimidated by her. She had come out of their shared ordeal stronger. Much stronger. But Kendall . . . ?

Once he'd left the hospital after his near-death by hypothermia, Kirsten had expected Kendall to return to his pursuit of her. She knew he wanted her, had welcomed his advances, not least because he was a kind, considerate, thoughtful man who tried to understand her. Maybe too nice, too kind. Kirsten's emotional baggage included the residue of an earlier marriage, an abusive marriage. There were scars. There were . . . issues. They'd been working out those issues, slowly, cautiously, but successfully, she thought, when their encounter with Stafford had turned their world upside down. And now . . . ?

We're worse off than when we started, simple as that. I'm stronger than I ever was and Kendall isn't. That's his feeling, anyway. Damn all men and their macho complexes!

Around her, the eeriness of the underground intensified as the cavern expanded. In Kirsten's mind, the issue that had been building for a year seemed to flower, illogically blossoming in the stygian gloom around her. She and Kendall had become closer, in many ways, drawn so by their shared experience with Stafford, by the horror of it, by the intensity of it. But there was a weird barrier there, too, an invisible but tangible barrier that Kirsten, for the first time, could put a name to.

Intimidation! She could see it now, clear as day in the pitch-black of the inky world beneath the surface. Intimidation. Of course!

And it reared its ugly head every time their relationship began to tip-toe, however quietly, toward the bedroom door. He wanted her. She knew that; they both did. She wanted him, and was damned certain they both knew that, too.

And yet, every time they came even close to anything like real intimacy, Kendall hid behind the very thing that made him attractive—his niceness. He was invariably polite, considerate, aware of her feelings, always ready—*too ready!*—to back away, to play for time. He, admittedly, had relationship issues of his own. Kendall's first wife, a Tasmanian woman, had lied and cheated and poisoned their relatively brief marriage before finally dumping him like dirty laundry. He had every right to be cautious, Kirsten thought. She'd never met Rose, a woman Kendall had merely dismissed as a psychiatric nurse; thus, automatically, even crazier than her patients, but Kirsten both feared and disliked her.

Sure thing, Kirsten. Hate the woman on hearsay evidence, and prejudiced evidence at that. And you wonder why you have relationship problems. Anyway, enough is enough. When we get back from this, now that you know the problem . . . or think you do, you're going to do . . . what?

She was mentally stepping from the shower into something slinky, sexy, alluring—had the very thing in her luggage, in fact: an emerald-green peignoir she'd bought with Teague Kendall in mind—when the party got back to their starting point, all still high with excitement, but tired and in need of a rest before they faced up to the arduous climb back to the surface.

The abseil rope hung there, just as they'd left it, but as they drew closer, everyone's attention was drawn to something that hadn't been there when they'd started out, something that shone like a serpent's tooth in the glow of their cave lanterns and a tiny, single ray of light from above. A gleaming knife blade that protruded from the coils of rope on the cavern floor.

Everyone stopped, looking at the coils of rope, the now-obvious stock knife snuggled point upward within the coils, then at each other, as if expecting or hoping that someone amongst them would have a simple, obvious explanation. It was an ordinary, folding, lock-blade stockman's knife . . . the sort carried by farmers and graziers throughout Australia. Less than four inches long when closed, far too shiny and clean to have been there for any length of time. And they didn't need to consult to know it hadn't been there when they'd descended into the cave.

Kirsten felt her stomach knot, an icy, dreadful feeling she knew only too well. She had felt something similar when she had found her sister's ring in the cave Kirsten had discovered on Vancouver Island, a cave to which she and her caving party were genuinely believed to be the first visitors ever!

That phenomenon was later explained, at least in theory, when Stafford's lair was discovered high on a ridge above the cave itself. The madman had been using an abandoned mine shaft to dispose of the remains and personal effects of his victims, and although it could never be totally proven, it was logical enough to assume that Emma's distinctive ring had somehow been washed down and into Kirsten's cave system by the heavy rains so common in the region.

Now, staring in shared silence at the stock knife, which also shouldn't have been there, had no business there, but logically had arrived, somehow, from above, where their abseil rope was secured, Kirsten felt a tremor of déjà vu, and with it a shadow of dread.

CHAPTER THREE

Even as he squeezed the trigger, Ian Boyd knew he'd just shot the wrong man. But it was too late to correct the mistake. This was a time for getting the hell out of it, not for risking discovery with a second, better-aimed shot.

The retrieving trial judge hadn't struck the ground before Ian, Finnish Vaime SSR in hand and the spent shell-casing in his pocket, was on the move away from his sniper's hidey-hole in the ridge-top ferns. And away from the jack-jumper's nest his Blundstone boot had disturbed as he readied himself for the shot. The angry bull ants had swarmed quickly to the defense, and the first bite was like a red-hot needle thrust into his bare, bony ankle at the instant of trigger squeeze. Not even the drugs in his emaciated body could counter the sudden thrust of pain, nor the flinch that followed.

Even had anyone been watching, the seasoned poacher's limping passage through the scrub was as elusive as the autumn breeze. By the time Charlie Banes had the crime scene secured, Ian was in his battered old bush utility and on the highway headed east toward Fingal with an open tinny of Fosters nestled between his thighs.

Ian reached the small community just as the first police vehicles, headed west, whooped their way past him in response to the emergency cell-phone call from the trial site. He almost waved at the passing police vehicles, then thought better of it, exhibiting unusual discretion for a man whose contempt for authority was legend.

At Fingal, he turned north into the maze of back roads and forestry tracks that meandered through paddock and scrub and rugged timber country along creeks and over ridges, angling always north and east before he finally turned back northwest to reach his destination, the Pub in the Paddock at Pyengana. It was a route Ian could have driven dead drunk or half asleep, and often had. He knew every back road and track in the northeast of Tasmania, courtesy of a lifetime spent thieving and poaching. The northeastern

quarter of this small island south of Australia proper was Ian's spiritual home, one he'd left only once in his sixty-plus years of rough, hardscrabble existence.

He'd joined the Australian army during the Vietnam years (it was, in the magistrate's words: "Join the army or it's off to gaol, boy!") and found his shooting and bush skills highly enough valued—usually—to compensate for his incorrigible insubordination. He already knew about killing. There was hardly an animal or bird species in Tasmania that Ian Boyd hadn't shot at one time or another. He'd shot possums for their skins while still just a boy, and wallabies and Forester kangaroos for dog tucker, fallow deer for the table and the sheer thrill of poaching them, bandicoots and wombats and even, once, a platypus, just to see how they'd cook up. And he'd killed feral cats and the ubiquitous Tassie Devils and, occasionally, other people's dogs and livestock just for the hell of it.

The army taught him to kill humans. As a sniper. From ambush. Ian took to it well, seeing no real difference in what sort of animal fell to his accurate shooting. The only real difference, he'd decided early on, was that people were a lot more noisy about their dying if the fatal shot wasn't quite perfect.

The army experience in 'Nam also taught him about hashish and cocaine and heroin and a barrage of other abusive substances his body and mind came to crave. His history and heritage provided the means to finance his addictions once the army had used him up and spit him out, sending him back to Tasmania with diagnosed but untreated posttraumatic stress disorder and a taste for anything that would placate the demons in his mind. From the day of his discharge to this, the day of his first unsanctioned murder, he'd seldom drawn a breath untouched by drugs or alcohol.

Ian was the last ("Thank God!" said those few who knew him well) in a long, long line of thieves and poachers and ne'er-do-wells that traced back to those ancestors who'd come off a convict hulk in chains when Tasmania was still Van Diemen's Land, been flung into the living hell that was the Port Arthur penal colony, then eventually released into bonded servitude or groveling poverty and a return to the noxious habits that had seen them transported from Britain in the first place. Now, past sixty and far more interested in abusive substances than sex, he was probably incapable of furthering his branch of the Boyd line, and unlikely to try.

He paused on a quiet, isolated stretch of road and stowed the Finnish rifle with its built-in sound suppressor carefully beneath the truck seat, and tucked away the spent casing for eventual reloading. Then it was on, to the Pub in the Paddock, nearly fifty kilometers as the crow flies away from the murder scene, and nearly as much again by convoluted, twisting, often barely passable bush tracks.

Ian had no idea if the woman who'd ordered the shooting would be at Pyengana, waiting for him, waiting for a full debriefing. Nor did it matter. She would find him, if not at the Pub in the Paddock, then at some other of Ian's regular watering holes, perhaps in St. Helens, on the coast. She'd found Ian there before, after all. She had strode gracefully into a St. Helens pub with unique familiarity, for a stranger, but greeted Ian with the warmth and intimacy of an old mate.

Or so Ian remembered, vaguely, as he sipped on his first of many draught beers at Pyengana. He'd been both drunk and high at the time, and had only flitting recollections of how she had bought them both beers, then sat across from him at a corner table and begun to speak in that strangely familiar velvet voice, a voice both deep and mellow, smooth and seductive as Bailey's Irish Cream. It was the voice that had triggered Ian's reactions, offsetting the unease he first felt at not recognizing the woman immediately, out of uniform as she was, then his confusion when he did recognize her.

The one thing he did recall was that somehow the woman knew him, seemed able to read his mind, to know what Ian was going to say before the words had passed his yellowing, tobacco-stained teeth, knew his very thoughts, and knew also the inner demons that provoked those thoughts, that fueled his reactions.

Certainly she'd known all about his almost paranoid hatred of anything and everything American. Had even asked, Ian vaguely remembered, if he still went about kicking the doors of the Ford F100 pickup trucks that were becoming increasingly common in Tasmania. Or had she asked? He had to think about that, but decided it didn't matter. She might or might not have asked the question, but she'd known the answer, just as she'd known that he had once shot out his own television set at the sight of Australian Prime Minister John Howard snuggling up to American President George W. Bush as the two conspired to

send young men out to die in Iraq, as young men from both countries had died in Vietnam, and for as little reason.

It seemed to Ian that the woman had known everything about him, not that she'd come at any specific issue directly. Instead, she'd punctuated their discussion with gentle swirls of the nurse's-style upside-down pocket watch she dangled from its fob, letting the timepiece spin in a pendulum-like, hypnotic pattern.

At Pyengana, as he sat nursing a beer and watching the tourists en route home from St. Columba Falls, a few kilometers to the south, Ian found himself wondering just how much the damned woman did know. Did she know, for instance, that now, as the alcohol brought him down from a fierce cocaine high, he was certain sure that he'd actually shot the wrong man?

At Pyengana, he learned for the first time that in addition to missing his shot, he'd actually killed someone. It was all over the television news and everyone was talking about it. Everyone but Ian; he was already seriously into the grog, but not so drunk he couldn't break with tradition and keep his mouth shut for a change. He would have to talk about it eventually, but that would come later.

It was the jack-jumper's fault, anyway, but try to explain that to the woman who'd offered such good money for a simple shooting. Selecting his target had been easy enough; even amongst the crowd at the gundog trial, and even at the extreme range, it had been easy to distinguish the features of the man whose photo graced the dust jacket of the book he'd been shown. An American book, an American author. And, according to Ian's new employer, a Republican . . . a distinction that meant nothing to Ian except that it meant the man was a George W. Bush supporter, and therefore deserved shooting, whether for five dollars or five hundred, which was what Ian had been promised along with copious quantities of what he craved even more than the money—enough drugs to keep him going for months.

Easy identification, an easy shot even at that extreme range. So why had he allowed himself to be distracted so much that he'd missed seeing the ant nest? He didn't know the answer, only that he was on the edge of being, in the vernacular, pissed as forty cats, and would have to take to the back roads in order to get home without risking a breathalyzer check. He'd already gone without his driver's license twice in

recent years, and wasn't quite so drunk that he wanted to risk losing it forever. Besides, there was the Vaime SSR under the seat—an illegal, unregistered firearm even before Little Johnny Howard had forced through the most draconian anti-firearms legislation in Australian history and made criminals of the country's honest farmers, shooters, and bushmen just to placate the growing numbers of city people who knew nothing about guns but were insistent on removing them from society.

Bad thoughts for a freedom-loving renegade already drunk. The next thing Ian knew, he was raging about the Iraq war to a couple of tourists he assumed were Americans. They were actually Canadian and would have agreed with his views if he'd been sober enough to make any sense at all. But Ian was in one of his "eyes closed, arms waving" episodes, and wasn't making sense even to himself. Nor to the publican, who eventually got sick of the disturbance and sent Ian packing. The Canadians, who'd seen far worse behavior in watering holes throughout their own frigid north, thought it something of an overreaction, then put the incident into their mental scrapbooks and ordered another beer.

Ian, for his part, managed to drive his battered vehicle a few kilometers back into the scrub, where he found a convenient and secluded side track where he could unroll his swag and try to sleep away the memory of his mistake. He'd had a long day, traveling first to Launceston to find his target, then having to follow the man south and east to the dog trial site. Easy enough work but damned long hours, Ian thought. The sleep part now was easy; he was out cold almost before he reached the horizontal.

Waking up was less easy. Ian struggled out of a nightmare filled with demons that tormented him with the smell of fresh roasted coffee, and he eventually opened his bleary eyes to find that it hadn't all been a dream. The coffee was real, as was the slender figure of the velvet-voiced woman brewing it, a woman who stared at Ian through reflective sunglasses despite the earliness of the hour, then smiled. It was not a nice smile. The last time Ian had seen a smile like that, it was on the grizzled face of old Viv Purcell's dog Bluey, just before the evil little Jack Russell attempted to bite off Ian's balls.

There was also the small matter of the Vaime SSR, lying across the woman's lap with the muzzle casually aimed in Ian's direction, but he managed to ignore that as he struggled upright and lurched his way to the fire and the lure of the fresh coffee.

He'd poured the coffee and even raised the tin cup in a casual sort of toast when he noticed the woman was holding his rifle in hands that wore latex surgical gloves. And the rifle was cocked.

Then Ian really began to worry.