

The electrifying new thriller

# REDEMPTION MINE



# TONY ANGUS

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**Part One Only**

**TONY ANGUS**

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## **PROLOGUE**

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They say I have a gift. I don't know about any gift, but I do know I can't stand the term 'gift'. I attracted the ridiculous epithet a few years back when, as investigator-in-charge, I helped solve two high-profile kidnapping cases. But it seems to me that investigation boils down to three basic elements—gut instinct, hard work, and a lot of luck. And since leaving Victoria Police and landing in an equally low-paid private investigation business, I've discovered that the harder I work and the more I trust my gut, the luckier I get. Of course, now if I don't work, I don't get paid. And if I don't get paid, I can't afford my luxury one-storey, two-bedroom apartment and forty-year-old car.

When I found those kidnapped girls alive, the press got all over it, and I was flavour of the month. I had the paparazzi on my stairwell day and night, taking shots of me in my boxers, brushing my teeth, eating breakfast. I was ducking out to the car under cover of darkness and peering around every corner. But by month's end, a new flavour had emerged and I was left in peace. That wouldn't last long.

## **TUESDAY**

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I woke in my office chair to a typical Melbourne summer day, about thirty degrees Celsius and a mix of cloud and smog overhead. I stretched, blinked a few times and checked the fur on my teeth with my tongue. I decided to clear the cobwebs by having breakfast in a local café, so I could read the paper and watch the female execs walk to work from Flinders Street Railway Station. Summer in the city. A five-minute shuffle took me to the R&R Café, where I ordered a ham-and-cheese croissant and a latte from the snotty waitress. She looked at my crumpled shirt and tie with a combination of contempt and amusement common among waiting staff at places where croissants and lattes are served. I ignored her and went back to my paper. It's been a long time since I had the energy to confront her species with witty banter such as 'What are you lookin' at?' The truth is, it's pointless trying to explain to strangers why you haven't slept for twenty-three months, or why you go to the office at four in

the morning to forget the demons, explaining the lived-in look and five o'clock shadow at 8.30 a.m. It might also go some way to explaining the occasional erratic behaviour.

I was engrossed in a news article on celebrity millionaires when my mobile phone rang, bouncing me back to reality. I checked my watch and answered.

'Cal Thomas.'

A female voice struggled through the din of the café and I covered my other ear.

'Hello. Is this . . . are you from Thomas Investigations?' a small voice said.

'That's right. What can I help you with?'

'We heard you investigate kidnappings . . .' the little voice continued.

I wondered to myself what kind of priceless gem I'd been offered from God's jewellery box.

'Oh yes,' I said, trying to sound awake.

'And we wondered if we could get your advice? You see, our daughter's missing.'

'*Hmm,*' I thought, '*might not be a fruitcake after all. Shit, it could even be paid work.*' I lost my attitude. I took the name, Gallagher, and the address, Alicia Street, Hampton, down in my notebook and arranged to meet at their home at eleven thirty. I washed the rest of the croissant down with the remaining coffee and wandered back to the office.

Located on Flinders Lane, my office is not about to feature in any style magazine. I spent a bit of money on some paint and furnishings and pretend it's shabby chic. A mate of a mate owns a bunch of real estate in the city and gives me a reasonable rate on the lease. In return, I do small jobs for him, like the time I photographed his wife and her boss in various compromising positions in his pool helped him secure a very reasonable divorce settlement. Now he thinks I'm his personal PI.

I made a couple of phone calls, filed some paperwork on some recent matters. Got my digital voice recorder, daybook, and camera ready for the appointment.



At eleven twenty I did a couple of drive-bys of the Gallagher house and rolled the beast to a stop up the road about a hundred feet. It's a good idea to check out the surroundings. The house was a neat, double-storey brick-and-weatherboard. The garden was immaculate:

a small trim hedge, low-maintenance plants, lawn you could play pool on. A late-model sedan and an older four-wheel drive stood side by side in the double carport and I could see a yacht on a trailer in the backyard. The Sandringham Yacht Club was only half a click up the road. I promised myself to ask for the full fee.

There was no activity around the house for the three minutes I watched, so I started my car and cruised to a stop out front. I crunched down the driveway and on to the porch, rang the doorbell. I waited no more than three seconds before a small woman in her mid-fifties opened the frosted glass front door. She was dressed in a long dark blue dress and I wondered if I was too late and the funeral had already been held.

'Mrs Gallagher?' I enquired.

'Mary. Mr Thomas, is it?' I nodded. She smiled politely and invited me inside, staying behind the door as I passed. I squeezed into a carpeted foyer area and came face to face with Jesus on the wall, a four-foot crucifix in full colour. She closed the door and waved me to the left through two sliding glass doors into the living room. I walked on thick beige carpet, past a framed print of Rembrandt's 'The Last Supper' hung on floral wallpaper. On the mantel above the gas fireplace posed statues of Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus. The strong smell of soup reminded me of my parents' home. The dining room—more wallpaper—was through another set of sliding glass doors. A distinguished-looking man sat at the dining table. I put him at about fifty-five. He had an angular, tanned face with a shock of salt-and-pepper hair swept back. Glasses perched on the end of his nose. He looked like he was fresh off the golf course: bright green polo-neck and khaki slacks. When he stood to greet me, I was surprised to find him almost my height, six foot four. He was lanky though, and a little hunched.

'Graham Gallagher,' he said.

'Cal Thomas.'

His handshake was firm and he made a healthy amount of eye contact. You can tell a lot about a person from their handshake and gaze. He was a man used to getting his way, maybe a little arrogant. I wasn't sure if I was going to like him.

'Thanks for coming, Mr Thomas.' He waved for me to join him at the dining table. Mary Gallagher made mutterings about fetching something cool to drink and disappeared into the kitchen. Grief thickened the air.

'Where should we start, Mr Thomas?' Graham said.

'Well, if you wouldn't mind, I'll ask you both some preliminary questions about your daughter and then I'd like to take a look at her bedroom. Is it OK if I record the conversation so I won't miss anything important?'

'That'll be fine,' Graham said.

Mary returned with some juice and I explained my investigation methods and told them the fee. They didn't flinch—happy days. It's important to get the clients' agreement on the administrative things, give them an idea of what an investigation might entail.

I then dug into their personal lives as delicately as I could. Graham was the managing director of a chain of electrical wholesalers. His income was \$175,000 per year, plus bonuses. He was due to retire in three years, and he and Mary planned to travel the world. Mary was a stay-at-home mum who kept the house in order, cooked, and cleaned. Mary looked like she had run out of gas. They told me their daughter, Rachel, was a well-adjusted, popular seventeen-year-old kid with a good private girls' school record and lots of friends. She regularly sailed with her father at the yacht club and played netball at school. She didn't have a steady boyfriend but, apparently, wasn't starved for male attention. Rachel failed to return home after a day with friends at the yacht club nine days ago. Their grief was palpable. I am normally pretty good at placing reason before emotion, but my own history makes it difficult in situations involving daughters.

I've read statistics that indicate a lot of missing children are runaways, looking for their own place in the world. I knew of cases of missing kids that just ran off with boyfriends or girlfriends, alone, or even with strangers. They hitch-hiked to faraway places, wandered aimlessly around foreign countries. They backpacked, walked, bussed, and trained. Eventually they found themselves and came home. But I still treated every case like a missing kid.

I shut off the voice recorder and asked to see the girl's bedroom. Maybe I could convince myself and her parents that she was a frustrated kid who just wanted to try things her way for a while. I also figured I could distance myself from my own emotions once I saw the evidence of a girl who was in no real danger. I entered her room, came face to face with her photograph on the wall and realised just how wrong I could be.

## WEDNESDAY

*The room is dark, moist, foreboding. The floor undulates under me as if it's a waterbed. My body is fatigued, so drained that I am using every ounce of energy just staying on my feet. I lean unsteadily against a crib, panting and staring at the soft blankets that lay crumpled to one side as the room swims around me. All sound is muted, muffled, except for the wheeze of my own laboured breathing and the dripping of my sweat, falling in slow motion onto the tiny mattress below me. To my right, a shaft of light spears from an open doorway, and I turn and stumble towards a small figure that stands there, casting a long, jagged shadow across the floor. As I get closer, my daughter's face peers through the darkness. She is sobbing, black streaks of tears running down both cheeks. She holds up her right arm to me to reveal an intravenous drip inserted into her forearm. Blood is oozing freely from the tube and splashing on the ground. Panicked, I try to bend to scoop the blood in my hands but am uncontrollably disoriented whenever I move, nudged by unseen hands. I stagger, put my hand out to steady myself, trip and crash headlong into a dollhouse on the floor. The room is filled with the sound of crying, echoing from the walls and ceiling. I feel the blood splashing off the floor, into my face, and I can't do a thing but lie powerless, cowering in the corner of the room, a broken man among broken pieces of dollhouse furniture and dolls. Through the slits that are my eyes, I see on the floor beside me the photograph of Rachel Gallagher.*

I woke, covered in sweat and gasping for breath, and calling Stacey's name.

There's nothing that can prepare us for the death of a loved one. It is without doubt one of the most distressing times in a person's life. But you can multiply that by a billion when the death is of your child. No one should ever outlive their kids. When my nine-year-old daughter, Stacey, was hit by a drunk driver almost two years ago, my world collapsed and I was swallowed into a drunken pit that cradled and imprisoned me for the better part of eighteen months. Finally, when I dragged myself from my own banishment, I had lost, along with my precious little girl, my wife, my career, my house, and everything I owned. I was broke and broken.

I sat up and looked at the clock—3.25 a.m. *Christ!* I turned the light on and surveyed the wreckage that was my bed: sheets in a sweaty pile, quilt on the floor, pillow and mattress

drenched. After nine months of counselling, I thought the nightmares had finally ended, but I guess they were just resting for another onslaught. And the photo of a missing girl who could be, but for the age difference, my daughter's twin, was just the catalyst my fragile subconscious needed to wake the demons. I picked up Rachel Gallagher's photo from the bedside table and stared at it. Strawberry blonde hair, a perpetual smile in those bright green eyes, freckles around her nose. If God had intended for there to be a double for everyone on the planet, then I had found Stacey's. Although I was filled with dread, there was not a hope in hell of my turning this case down. In a crazy way, I felt I was being offered a chance to atone. I got up and washed my face in the bathroom, checked out the dark circles under my eyes. I decided to give my therapist a call—and AA. *Shit!*



At 4 a.m., I walked along the St Kilda foreshore, less than a kilometre from my flat, trying to shrug off the urge for a glass of trouble on the rocks. I could smell the Scotch under the sink, so I escaped out of the house.

The night was absolutely still and dark. It was impossible to tell where the sea ended and the sky began. The water lapped at the beach somewhere to my left. It was too early to go to the office and I wanted to get my head right before I began the investigation. The first step was to go back to the family house and apologise for my hasty exit. As far as I could recall, I must've just grabbed Rachel's photo and taken off. I can remember the blood draining from my face. The Gallaghers must've wondered if they'd called a lunatic. I kicked around on the sand for an hour or so and headed into town.

At 5.30 a.m., I called in at the office. I wrote a couple of thoughts into my daybook, grabbed my kit and headed out to the car. Six o'clock was too early to go to the Gallaghers and I wanted to call in on a good mate who was still in the job. I parked my car outside the St Kilda Road Police Complex and wandered through the automatic doors into the foyer. I showed my credentials to the security officer, who called ahead and announced me. I was buzzed through the security doors. I pressed the button marked 'Homicide Squad' and took the lift up to the eleventh floor, leaning on the back wall. Greg Simkovic met me as soon as I

exited. He looked me up and down with his hands on his hips, shaking his head, broke into a wry grin.

'Thommo,' he said in that deep, gravelly tone.

'Simmo,' I replied and slapped a heavy handshake on him.

'What's goin' on, Sherlock?' he asked with a typically crafty look on his face.

'Too busy to scratch myself, flatfoot. And you?'

'Same, mate. Coffee?'

'Skinny soy mocha decaf latte, thanks.' He shook his head at me again and turned towards the mess room. I followed his chunky frame through the muster room, passing detectives at their desks, on the phone, and at case boards. A couple I recognised nodded tired hellos and turned back to their work, the smell of investigations going round in circles.

'You look a bit wired, mate,' Simmo said.

I explained about the Gallaghers, leaving out the stuff about Rachel's similarity to Stacey. He didn't need to know.

'Put the gift to work, mate.'

'Bite me.' I swiped at the back of his head. He leaned away and chuckled. He's one of the only ones who know the truth. He poured me a cup of thick, lukewarm instant sludge.

'Listen . . .' I said. 'I could use some help on this thing.'

'Uh-oh,' he interrupted.

'Just a couple of bites here and there.'

'Mate, you know as well as anyone how much shit I can get into.'

'I wouldn't even ask . . .'

We sat for a moment and then he sighed and stood, closed the door and the blinds.

'It's possible I came across some info on a missing girl and am making some initial enquiries before passing it along,' he said.

He slumped into a chair in front of the computer terminal. I talked. He typed.

I wanted to see if Rachel was listed on the database prior to her disappearance, either as a victim or an offender, and particularly if she had previously been recorded as a missing person. She hadn't. I also wanted Simmo to check the parents, although I knew full well they wouldn't have any priors. Interestingly, Graham Gallagher was recorded as the victim of an assault in the mid-nineties and a burglary about four years later. He refused to press charges

both times. None of them had guns registered in their names, and apart from a couple of traffic infringements, they were cleanskins.

'When Rachel first went missing, there was a short search by local detectives and Missing Persons,' I said. 'I need to find out exactly what they did so I don't do the same things twice. It'll save me some time and effort.' I looked at him expectantly. He had a strange look on his face, like he was studying me. Finally, he turned back to the keyboard.

'What do you want me to find out?' he said.

'If they checked public transport, security cameras, shopping centres, 7-Elevens, hospitals—that sort of thing.'

'No worries. Anything else? Wash your car? Iron your shirts?'

'Geez, would you?' I said. He started writing 'washing' and 'ironing' on a notepad.

'I appreciate this, mate.'

Forty minutes later, I was shaking Simmo's hand when I could feel eyes upon me. I turned my head to see a familiar but not pleasant face. In the window of an office across the muster room frowned the face of Doug Pianto. I worked with Pianto when I was on secondment to the hommies as a young detective years ago. He was a detective senior constable then. He was an arrogant little shit and was known by the nickname Organ, which he thought was because his surname closely resembled 'piano'. It was actually because he was a dick. He thought he knew everything and treated everyone as inferior, except the bosses whose arses he kissed. A few years back, I proved him wrong in a murder investigation. He lost face and hated me for it. I nodded and turned back to Simmo.

'Don't tell me the Organ is the boss here now.'

'2IC,' he replied, dejectedly.

'How could someone so incompetent become second in charge at the homicide squad?' I asked.

'Taking credit for other people's work and sucking up to management. How it's done everywhere, mate. I'm going to cop a shitstorm now that he's seen you here. I hope you're worth it!'

'You know I am.' I smiled and grabbed his arse. He slapped my hand off and ordered me out of the office, shaking his head at me again.

I climbed back into the elevator and headed downstairs, out to my car. I was almost proud of Rachel for having a clean record but realised I was making it personal again. I turned my thoughts to my next port of call and eased the car south into the early morning St Kilda Road traffic.



I was lucky with the lights on the Nepean Highway and arrived at the Gallagher residence twenty minutes early. I continued past their house, did a U-turn at the dead end, and drove back onto Beach Road and down Jetty Road to the yacht club. I wanted to get a feel for the place and have a picture of what they were talking about. I sat in the car park with my window down and my elbow out. The breeze had died down to almost nothing, and the water in Port Philip Bay was like a mirror in front of me, reflecting the clearest of blue skies. Before me, across the vast expanse of smooth water, lay the Heads, between Queenscliff and Portsea, through which all boating traffic enters and exits Port Philip Bay. In the distance to my right, above the forest of sailing boat masts, stood the Eureka Tower, the Rialto, and the other skyscrapers that make up the Melbourne skyline. The beach on both sides was clean and empty, except for a few joggers and dog walkers. The brand-new three-storey clubhouse was larger and more beautiful than I expected, and the club was full of boats moored along one of the largest floating marinas in Australia. There were crafts at anchor that must've been worth over a million bucks and I promised to get myself one of those when the money really started to roll in. I chuckled at my own ridiculousness, spun the car around, and headed back to Alicia Street. Graham and Mary were in the garden when I arrived and they greeted me cordially. I made some polite comment about the garden, and they thanked me and showed me inside. I accepted an offer for a coffee and then offered my apologies for my hasty exit the day before. I explained that I hadn't been feeling very well. They seemed to think that was a reasonable explanation. I received my coffee, explained what I had to do in their daughter's bedroom, and asked them not to be alarmed. Sometimes people become very protective when a relative stranger starts rifling through their family's private things, especially when a man rifles through a daughter's private things. I gave them permission to watch, but they declined, saying only that they trusted me.

I took a deep breath to prepare myself for the task ahead—time to switch on the professional investigator. I stood in the doorway and had a wide-angle look at the room. I wanted to get a better feel for the life of this girl, to get a picture of the things that impressed her, made her happy, scared her. The room was large enough to cater for a double bed, chest of drawers, large bookshelf, and a desk and vanity chest. The drapes were a lemon colour to match the quilt cover and sheets. Posters of movie stars and rock bands adorned a large portion of the wall space. Favourites appeared to be soccer star David Beckham and R & B singer Usher. The bookshelf was absolutely covered with frogs—china frogs, crochet frogs, beanbag frogs, plastic frogs. There was only one shelf dedicated to books and one of those was on frogs. The kid liked frogs. I took some photos of the room and went in. I opened the wardrobe and checked out the clothing, including the pockets and linings. Taking photographs as I went, I took down the items from the shelf above the clothes and searched through them. There were two shoeboxes full of photos, and I looked carefully at the most recent ones to see if there was anyone unusual in them, but I had no real idea what I was looking for. The eyes in Rachel's photograph on her desk followed me everywhere, watching my every move. I went through her chest of drawers, one drawer at a time. I carefully removed the clothing and laid it on the floor, unfolding each item and checking it before folding it again. I was conscious of not making a mess. She could come home at any moment. I couldn't find a diary or other personal notes, which was odd. It is my experience that girls of that age like to note down their thoughts about things. I turned my attention to the desk and moved her photograph to the bedside table, still facing towards me—those perpetually smiling eyes. The desk was a flat-pack job made from a light-coloured pine, with chrome legs and multiple shelves. On the desk sat a desktop computer, a late-model Asus with a twenty-four-inch touch screen and built-in hard drive. A wireless keyboard and mouse completed the ensemble. Squeezed beside these items, in a small space for writing, was a penholder with some pens, pencils, highlighters, and other odds and ends. The computer probably cost a small fortune, especially for a seventeen-year-old. I also noticed that there was a minicam on the top edge of the monitor. I winced. I've investigated child-porn rings and have seen some pretty rank stuff. I didn't particularly want to have to do that again. I glanced again at her photo. There suddenly seemed to be trouble behind those eyes.

I poked a finger at the 'on' button of the PC, still looking at Rachel's picture, and heard it *whir* to life. I then watched as the computer's internal hardware details flashed across the screen. I was left with a field asking for a password. I scratched my head. I looked around for anything that might give me a clue as to what Rachel might use for a password. I tried 'frogs'. The screen thought for a couple of seconds then asked me if I'd forgotten my password. I didn't know nearly enough about this girl yet. Maybe Graham and Mary had been let in on this little secret. I left the PC on and opened the one small desk drawer on the left side. It contained only school stuff: school notices, a couple of wooden rulers, an exercise book, and an algebra textbook. Below the drawers were a couple of shelves which contained more textbooks. I turned each of these upside down and shook them to see if anything fell out but was left with only a handful of bookmarks and sticky notes. Guiltily, I placed them behind the front cover of the books and moved on.

I sorted through the wastepaper basket beside the bed and found only some pencil shavings, tissues, used chewing gum, and scraps of torn paper. One of the pieces of paper was actually half of an entry ticket to somewhere. The design was vaguely familiar to me, being a semicircle with a wavy line though it, but the other half of the ticket had been torn off and I couldn't make it out fully. I searched for the other piece, without success. I photographed the scrap, noted it in my daybook, and stuck it in my pocket. I checked under the mattress and behind the drapes and ran my hand around the edge of the carpet to see if any of it lifted too easily. Nothing. I turned my attention back to the chest of drawers and pushed and poked to see if there was a hidden panel or if anything had fallen behind. If odd socks were clues, I was on a winner.

I stood with my hands on my hips, having found virtually nothing, so I said a quiet goodbye to her photo and headed back downstairs.

Mary and Graham were in a quiet, intimate discussion, the tone of which was oddly combative. I only caught a handful of Graham's words but they were something along the lines of 'keeping mouths shut'. Things weren't all that rosy in Gallagher land. When I entered the room, he patted Mary's back and left her sitting facing the living room window.

'Find anything?' he enquired, stiffly.

'Not really sure. This half ticket was in her bin. Do you recognise the part of the logo showing here?'

'I've never seen it before.' He stared at the ticket as if it could tell him where Rachel was.

'There's no guarantee it's even hers,' I said, 'but I'll check the logo and see what I can come up with. I'd also like to get a list of her friends and their phone numbers and addresses if I can.'

'We've got the details of a couple of her close friends. She also knows a few kids her age at the yacht club and sometimes meets them at the café. I've met them a few times.'

'You didn't happen to know Rachel's password for her computer, do you?'

'It used to be "frogs",' Graham said and I smiled, 'but I think she changed it recently. I don't know the new one, I'm afraid.'

'If you think of anything, let me know. There might be some vital piece of information on there. If we can't get into it, I know an IT guy who'll be able to crack it.'

Graham handed me names of Rachel's best friends and associates from the yacht and netball clubs but didn't have their numbers. As I was leaving, I remembered about the diary.

'Oh, Graham, do you know if Rachel kept a diary?'

'Yes, she did. I'm sure I saw her writing in it only recently.'

'If you find it lying around the place, I'd like to look at it to see if anything unusual had happened to her lately.'



The fresh air was a relief and I realised I'd been tense the whole time. I rolled the beast into traffic and headed slowly, with no particular direction in mind, along Beach Road towards Sandringham. Something was nagging away at my subconscious, a hunch whispering in my ear. I gritted my teeth and tried to drag the thought closer, but it sat just out of reach. I kept driving. Then it hit me. I steered the car into a beachside parking space. From my pocket I took out the list of Rachel's friends Graham just gave me. There it was, second last name. Brandon Keller. I thought back to the computer screen in Simmo's office. Graham Gallagher had been assaulted nineteen years earlier. The offender's name was Keller. Steven Keller. There's no way that was a coincidence. The Keller household seemed like a good place to go. They lived only minutes from where I was. Why not call around? Another hunch nudged me. As I pulled the car back onto Beach Road and up to cruising speed, I dialled Simmo's

office number. The phone rang only once before a female voice answered, identifying herself as Dianne Copeland. I worked with Di many years ago when we were both in uniform. She had come to South Melbourne as a trainee when I was an acting sergeant. She was pretty switched on and I always knew she'd go a long way. She sounded genuinely pleased when I told her who it was and we chatted for a short while about old times. She passed on her condolences for the loss of Stacey, a knife in my heart. I thanked her and asked if Greg Simkovic was there.

'He's just interviewing a witness, Cal. Is there anything I can do for you?'

I didn't want Di to be in Pianto's crosshairs too, so I told her to get him to give me a buzz on the mobile when he was finished.

On my way to the Kellers, I decided to take another visit to the yacht club. I had an idea there might be temporary moors for boats that come and go. It was possible that Rachel had got onto a yacht. Or, dare I say it, been dragged onto one. It was even possible that she was still on board. Once again, there were very few cars parked in the lot. I strolled around, pretending to know where I was and found the waterfront office on the bottom level along a narrow walkway. I entered and was faced with a glass divider in front of a reception desk. No one was at the desk, so I called out 'hello'. I heard some shuffling around inside and then a door to my right opened. A thickset, weathered man in his fifties, dressed in slacks and a red-and-blue spray jacket, stood in the doorway. He was about five feet ten, with thinning grey hair and large hands that betrayed years of hard work in the sun and salt. He raised bushy grey eyebrows and asked if he could help. I produced my ID.

'My name's Callum Thomas. I'm interested in finding out about the yachts that moor here. It's part of an investigation.'

'What exactly are you investigating, Mr . . .'

'Thomas. A teenager is missing and I've been—' I didn't finish.

'Rachel Gallagher!' he said, his English accent suddenly animated. 'You're looking for her? Come in, come in. I know Graham and Mary Gallagher very well—Graham and I go way back.' He thrust his hand towards me. 'Gilbert Trist—waterfront manager. Pull up a pew.' He dragged a huge leather chair out from an enormous, leather-topped desk and turned the adjacent chair to face it.

'Thanks, Mr Trist. I appreciate your time.'

'My old man was Mr Trist. People call me Gilly. Now, what do you need from me?'

'Well, there's a possibility Rachel's on one of the boats. Is there a list of temporary moorings?'

'My word, there is. We require a registration from everyone berthing here. Visitors can berth in rows B through D in a "first come, first tie-up" system. They are then expected to come and register. We keep all registrations in electronic copy.' He nodded at his desktop computer.

'Do they have to provide some ID?'

'We only really take a credit card for payment, not any formal identification.'

'Is it too much to ask to get a list of the permanent moorings and visitors registered around the eighteenth?'

Gilly thought for a moment, then lowered his voice and looked around conspiratorially.

'Look, I can get you a printout, but only temporarily. Just don't tell anyone that I gave it to you, OK? Privacy and all that. I'll bend a few rules to find Rachel.'

'I appreciate that. Gilly, could a boat sneak in here without registering or paying?' I asked.

'Well, visitors don't pay for the first forty-eight hours, so there's no reason to sneak around to avoid payment, unless they intend to stay longer. But I would spot any new boats that come in. Occasionally a boat will come into the marina and not know where to berth, so they tie up in one of the pens and then come and see me for a place.'

It all seemed a bit casual to me. 'Do people come and go as they please?'

'Yes. We don't place restrictions on movement, but they're supposed to fill out a vessel movement form that outlines their planned route and estimated dates.'

'And has anyone berthed for a while and then just left without paying?' I continued.

'We have had that in the past,' Gilly conceded, 'but it is a real rarity and it hasn't happened for quite some time.'

'What about security cameras?'

'There are cameras mounted near the boom gates at entry and down at the security gate at the start of row A.' Gilly took a plan of the marina and drew a red cross at the boom gates and one between the fuelling station and row A. I looked at the plan and took in the layout. pontoons labelled from row A to row F stretched out, like branches of a fern from the water's

edge, all protected by the breakwater. I also noticed that there was another pontoon jutting out from the beach about one hundred feet to the right of the yacht club.

'Who does this belong to?' I said, pointing to the unmarked pier.

'Oh, that's a public pier, where anyone can access the bay and go boating,' Gilly replied.

'Really? Who's in charge of that?'

'That would be controlled by Parks and Gardens people. We don't deal with them at all. We fall under the control of the Department of Sustainability and Environment.'

I considered speaking to the DSE about their systems for detecting the movements of boats to and from the public pier. Gilly picked up on my train of thought.

'If you're thinking of contacting the DSE about the public pier, don't bother. There are no cameras there, almost no way to know who's coming or going. Not only that, it's not regularly patrolled or monitored.'

Very disappointing. It meant that it was possible for Rachel to have been snatched from the foreshore without anyone knowing about it. It also meant that there were no means for tracking the boats that were there at the time. I changed tack.

'Do you mind if I take a look around?'

'No worries at all.' He dug into the top drawer of the desk and produced a large set of keys on which was an electronic key. 'This is the key to the boom gates and other areas around the facility. You'll find a circular port on each key pad. The key fits into that pad and unlocks the locking mechanism.'

'Thanks,' I said and then, holding up the key, I turned to him again. 'Are these things tracked?'

He shrugged thoughtfully. 'As a matter of fact . . . the system has been set up to allow for an audit of who has come and gone at any time. Each key has its own electronic signature, allowing us to match the key to the owner. I'll print out the audit for this month for you, too.'

'Thanks again, Gilly. I'm grateful for the help.'

'Just do me three things: don't tell anyone, return the key, and find that beautiful girl.'

I walked in brilliant morning sunshine past the hardstand, where boats were up on blocks for maintenance. Some of them stood over twenty feet above me. Then I walked past the fuelling station to the security gate. I inserted the electronic key and it opened immediately, so I walked slowly along the piers, looking casually around. The yacht owners were making

the most of a glorious day. Some were sitting on something, enjoying the sun, some were repairing something, and some were chatting and drinking something. I was interested in the ones that were hiding something. I spent thirty minutes wandering around, acting like I belonged there, taking things in. I even looked along the rocks of the breakwater and checked under the piers, around the pylons. I realised there were too many places to hide someone or dump evidence, so I satisfied myself that I now had a reasonable knowledge of the layout and function of the yacht club. I returned the keys to Gilly and thanked him again. He escorted me out to my car and shook my hand vigorously. He then slipped me a number of A4 papers stapled together.

'That list,' he said with a wink. I nodded thanks and got into the car. I slowly drove up the steep driveway so that I could inspect the scrub along the roadside. The walking tracks along the foreshore from Hampton to Beaumaris were thick with tea trees and other native shrubs. Places to dump a body were plentiful. I stared hard into the thickets. Why couldn't I just see where Rachel was? Some bloody gift!

I would've preferred to talk to Simmo before I knocked on the Keller's front door, but I still hadn't heard from him and the day was slipping by. I left the yacht club and followed Beach Road south to Mentone, where I turned up Warrigal Road away from the beach. I zigzagged through a couple of smaller streets and stopped on the corner of Cedar and Lachlan Streets. Once again I got my bearings. I was looking at a quiet middle-class suburban street with manicured gardens and nicely tended nature-strips, although a lot of the homes looked the same. The area is not as expensive as Acacia Street but I'd swap it for my place any day. I limped the car along the north side of Cedar Street and stopped opposite number fifteen, giving me a clear view of the Keller residence two houses away on the opposite side. It was one of the more boring homes in the area—a brick that couldn't decide if it was orange or cream and an ugly brown tiled roof. The three-foot front fence was made of the same brick and protected a sparse, dry yard with long brown grass. A lonely tree poked through. The gardens contained mostly neglected native plants that had lost all pride. There weren't any cars under the flat-top carport, so I resigned myself to coming back another time, but the front door burst open and a man and a woman stepped onto the front porch. The woman seemed to be about sixty and the man about forty. He wore a black suit complete with jacket, had short black hair, and looked to be lean and athletic. Although his back was towards me, I

could tell by his posture that he was not happy. The woman, partly obscured from my view by the man, wore a housedress with a light floral pattern and had her hands covering her mouth. She looked like she was crying, and scared.

As I watched, the man waved his arms around demonstratively and jabbed his finger at the woman. She kept her head bowed. Finally he spun on his heel and strode aggressively up the driveway, turned in my direction. I now had a clear view of the bloke. The priest's collar was a surprise and provided me with an answer to the question of his choice of dress on a hot summer day. He looked straight ahead as he marched along the footpath opposite, and I imagined that if he did glance in my direction, it would've been a dirty look. He was pissed off about something, which was odd. I couldn't remember ever seeing a man of the cloth so obviously and openly angry. I wondered what the conversation with the woman could've been about as I climbed out of the car with my notebook and walked to the front door. I pressed the doorbell but couldn't hear any chimes, so I knocked on the door. There was no sound from inside. After thirty seconds, I knocked again. I was starting to wonder if the woman had slipped out while I watched the angry priest when the door opened. Expecting the same woman to be standing there, I was stunned to see a beautiful woman in her early thirties in the doorway. Dressed in a short, sleeveless summer dress and sandals, she just about took my breath away. Long brown hair with blonde tips was pulled back in a ponytail, and she had the most dazzling blue-grey eyes. She was the type that makes you dry of mouth and tangled of tongue—sexy, sophisticated. I managed to blurt out a hello and asked to see her mother and father.

'They're not here right now. What's this about, Mr . . .'

'Thomas. Callum Thomas.' I fumbled with my ID and passed it to her. 'I need to ask you all some questions about Rachel Gallagher. I'm investigating her disappearance and was told your families are close.'

She gave a little smile. 'Close? Not really. We know them from the yacht club, but apart from my brother, we don't have much to do with them.' I could sense a little animosity mixed with . . . regret.

'You don't really like them either,' I said.

She screwed up her nose and shrugged. 'Why don't you come inside?'

She stepped back and I entered a narrow hallway with a polished timber floor and light yellow walls. A mirror opposite the door gave the area some dimension. I used it to check out if I looked OK, but also caught a glimpse of the sun filtering through her dress, outlining a fantastic set of legs, and more. It was hard not to check out her assets as she brushed past me and through a sliding door beside the mirror and into the kitchen. I tried to muster some professionalism.

The kitchen was tidy, with slate linoleum on the floor and timber benches, but was in need of some character. I sat on a wooden chair at a round dining table and looked past an empty birdcage and out of a large window onto a well-constructed brick-paved barbecue area.

'I didn't catch your name,' I said.

'Teesha,' she answered, joining me at the table. 'So, how is the private investigation business?'

'Why?' I asked with a laugh. 'Not thinking of getting into it, are you? I wouldn't do too well with you as my competition.' She laughed too, a beautiful musical sound, with hair tossed left and right and lots of white, shiny teeth.

'Maybe I can work with you sometime?' She flipped her hair behind her ears and smiled, flirtatiously. I smiled back and fumbled with my notebook, looking for something to do with my hands. I have never had trouble getting girls, although I'm not handsome in the traditional sense. I have thirty years of karate behind me and have a face that betrays a few fights—tournaments, pubs, parties. With my size, looks, and build, I usually attract women needing a 'man's man'. This stunning woman was giving the hormones a real workout, though. Flirt central. Again I rallied my concentration.

'What do you do at the moment?' I asked.

'I'm a photographer, portraits mainly. Perhaps you'd pose for me? I'd love to take your photo.'

It had been some time since I was in this position, and I was the epitome of a duck trying to remain cool on the surface but paddling hard underwater.

'Oh, no,' I said. 'I'm not very photogenic.'

'You know, they say looks that are pleasing to the eye are those that are symmetrical. Your face is symmetrical . . . and you have nice eyes.'

I had to steer the conversation back to business.

'Well, let me think about it. You said your brother knew Rachel Gallagher. Is he here? Maybe I can talk to him about Rachel?'

Her brightness faded. She lowered her head and picked at the placemat in front of her with her nails. I wasn't sure what was coming, but I knew I'd said something wrong and really wished I hadn't.

'Brandon died on his birthday last year in a freak car accident. The wheel of his car came off and he hit a tree.'

'Oh . . . shit, I'm so sorry,' I said.

'Mum and Dad didn't cope too well,' she continued. 'Bran was Dad's whole life, his shining light.' She looked up. Her eyes were moist. 'Then, eight months ago they found Dad's . . . body . . . on the rocks at the bottom of the cliff at Ricketts Point.' Her words were hushed. 'They said he jumped, but I think he must've . . . He wasn't the suicidal type, you know.'

I leaned forward and placed my hand over hers. She looked up at me and apologised but I waved it away and told her again how sorry I was for bringing it up. I wanted to hold her. Instead, I did the honourable thing.

'I'll come back another day to finish my enquiries.'

She took a deep breath and gathered herself. 'I guess.'

I picked up my notebook and headed for the door.

'Thank you for your time. I'm very sorry. It was a pleasure meeting you.'

'You too.' The flirtation was gone, but when she shook my hand, she slipped her business card into my palm.



As soon as I closed the door to the car, my mobile phone rang. I started the motor. As I answered the call, I looked back at the Keller residence and saw the curtain to one of the rooms held partially open and the older woman watching me leave. What was with the cat-and-mouse game? The voice on the other end of the phone called my name again.

'Thommo? Thommo, you there?' Simmo's voice.

'Sorry, Simmo, I was distracted.'

'Distracted? You're not down Collins Street, pervin' on the corporate ladies?'

'I wish. Listen, can you do me another favour?'

'You're kiddin', right?' he answered.

'No, mate. I need those details on Rachel's dad again. Especially about the burg on his place a couple of years ago. Also, the offender in the assault, Steven Keller, can you chase up his details?'

'*Rachel's* dad?' he replied, emphasising her name.

'It's her name,' I responded, a little too quickly.

'Hmmm . . .' he said.

I explained about Steven Keller's death and that I sensed there may have been a connection.

'Just as well I've got nothing better to do,' he said, sarcastically.

'I wouldn't ask—'

'I'll have to wait for prying eyes to leave. Get back to you later.'

I was starving. I headed home to grab a bite to eat—leftover pasta, again. I then drove down to St Kilda beach to think. I took the list of the boats moored at Sandringham, obligingly provided by my new friend, Gilbert Trist. Something wasn't sitting right with me.



I sat in the sand and leaned back in the shade of a rock wall, let the sounds drift around me as I read. With my bare feet buried in the warm sand, the breeze brushing across my face, and the lapping of the waves, there was only the list and my thoughts. I inhaled deeply the smells of the sand and the bay. My thoughts drifted to when I was a boy. My family spent almost every summer holiday at a caravan park by the beach at Torquay on the southern coast of Victoria, down past Geelong. My sisters and I paddled in the water while my mother and father watched from the comfort of the umbrella. The image is very vivid: Dad still dressed in his farming pants, flannel shirt, work boots, and hat, reading the paper; Mum wearing a light, floral summer frock and getting lunch for everyone. I never saw Dad get angry until one day he had to rescue my little sister, Lauren, from a rip that was taking her away from the beach. I had sensed that she was in trouble but couldn't see her anywhere

until Dad waded out of the surf with Lauren under one arm, sputtering and spitting seawater. His biggest complaint was that he got his boots and pants wet. Mum made everyone a ham-and-salad roll and everything settled back to normal. The sound of the waves on the sand, seagulls in the air, the laughter of children playing beach cricket, and Mum and Dad's quiet chatting is etched into my psyche, much like that of most kids that grew up in Australia in the 1970s and 1980s.

The buzzing of my phone in my pocket snapped my reverie. It was Simmo with some news. I withdrew my notebook and pen from my shirt. His voice was low and I assumed he was in his office.

'Right,' he said. 'The narrative on the assault states that the complainant was actually Mary Gallagher. Her husband and Steven Keller had a blue outside a church hall after some sort of function.'

My mind immediately flashed in front of me the picture of one hot-headed priest. I wondered what the fight was about. Simmo continued in hushed tones.

'The husband . . . ahh . . . Graham didn't want to press any charges, so it didn't go anywhere. Now, the narrative on the burg is more interesting. Gallagher accused Steven Keller of being the offender, and the local CI boys checked him out. They didn't find anything, so that went away too. The only item reported missing was some sort of gold fob watch, which was apparently a gift of sentimental value. Anyway, I couldn't find out anything more about that, so I checked the suicide details of Steven Keller. What do you reckon they found on him at the bottom of a cliff in Beaumaris?'

'The fob watch?'

'Yep. Nobody had tied it to the burg, so it was just listed as part of his belongings at death. I s'pose the family still had it.'

'Well, that might explain a couple of things. Did you happen to check the death of the son, Brandon Keller?' I asked.

'Yeah, hang onto your shorts. There was three of 'em in the car at the time the front wheel came off. Brandon was driving. The car slammed into a tree on Dandenong Road and the two in the front were killed. Have a stab at who was in the back at the time, and survived.'

'Don't tell me . . . Rachel Gallagher.'

I was having trouble writing all of this information in my daybook and keeping track in my head. Meanwhile, Simmo was enjoying himself. I could tell the case had piqued his interest, especially since it now seemed to be more than a missing girl. He loved the intricacies of the job and never tired of searching for the nexus between crime and criminal. I was always amazed at the enthusiasm of a bloke that worked sixty hours a week, got paid a fraction of his worth, and still couldn't get enough.

'I'm still waiting on a copy of the coroner's report on the death, then I'll get back to you,' he finished.

I wouldn't mind finding out why the wheel came off Brandon's car, too. I told Simmo I'd wait for his call. I needed time to sift through what I already had. I slumped back against the rock wall and exhaled. The plot was now a lot thicker.

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