

Quite Prepared to Die

Jensen Carver

© Jensen Carver

INXXA6LSNFTWQ5BAIJZGK5DUEBGGC3LC

Contents

Contents	2
Prologue	4
Chapter 1	9
Chapter 2	19
Chapter 3	24
Chapter 4	28
Chapter 5	33
Chapter 6	42
Chapter 7	48
Chapter 8	54
Chapter 9	66
Chapter 10	86
Chapter 11	92
Chapter 12	104
Chapter 13	113
Chapter 14	119
Chapter 15	131
Chapter 16	135
Chapter 17	145
Chapter 18	152
Chapter 19	158
Chapter 20	172
Chapter 21	183

Chapter 22	191
Chapter 23	198
Chapter 24	209
Chapter 25	218
Chapter 26	230
Chapter 27	239
Chapter 28	250
Chapter 29	263
Chapter 30	269
Chapter 31	277
Chapter 32	283
Epilogue	292

Prologue

I could hear a tinny radio above the chatter of conversation, the sizzle of barbecues and the distant sound of children laughing: *The End* by The Doors. Jim Morrison was singing something about elaborate plans and summer rain.

The dream, when it surfaces, always starts with that damned song. Then the smells: the slightly damp odour of the canvas tent, the summer air thick with humidity. The sky opened up earlier and everyone retreated to their tents. The parched ground had become soggy and the roof of the tent had started to sag.

“Where’s Lucy?”

The question always incites a sinking feeling. My sister’s voice is laced with concern and criticism. She doesn’t say it, but the meaning is implied.

You were supposed to be watching her.

There is a flurry of shouts as our voices cry out into the dusk. In the dream, our voices are muted. Alarm gnaws away at the pit of my

stomach. There is a flurry of movement and activity. the concerned faces of other campers.

We must find her.

Every minute that a child is missing increases the chance they might not come back. I remember clinging desperately to the idea that she might be visiting friends and the sickening, slipping sensation that followed.

Jane headed towards the activity centre at the far end of the caravan park. The collection of old board games and promise of table tennis always attracted the kids. I nodded and turned towards the beach. She *knew* she wasn't supposed to go down there at night. I took off at a sprint, running up the narrow sandy path, tea trees scratching my face in the half-light. I turned a sharp corner and collided with someone. Collapsing, the breath knocked out of me for a moment, I started to apologise, then I noticed what he was wearing.

It immediately struck me as *wrong*.

The dream intensifies that feeling of dissonance, the feeling of reality slipping away.

Our eyes lock and he reaches into the dark, crimson robe, producing a knife. At that point, training kicks in and I'm on my feet. There is a sudden, savage burst of movement as he lunges. I dodge and deflect the blade, turning away and regaining my balance before he can strike again. I feel a sudden surge of adrenalin and know, in the surreal certainty that comes with lucid dreams, that I'll be awake soon, disoriented and gasping for breath. In the moment, instinct dictated the next few seconds. In the dream, I'm overwhelmed by feelings of alarm and inevitability. I've been caught off-guard and completely unprepared and I know that I won't make it to the foreshore in time.

The man recovers his footing and lashes out again. This time I'm not quick enough and the knife glances off my arm. There is a sudden, searing flash of pain. I grit my teeth, grimace, and before he can strike again, my fingers close around his knife arm and I punch. My fist connects with his nose. There is a satisfying crunch of cartilage and bone. He drops the knife, stumbles and falls backwards, crashing to the ground. In the growing darkness, the blood from his nose is black, teeth white as he smiles.

“You’re too late,” he said, gesturing towards the beach. “You can’t stop it.”

In that instant, I *knew* he was talking about Lucy. I kick him savagely, hear him cry out in agony, grab the knife and turn towards beach.

The sand was impossibly soft as I sprinted up the narrow, winding track. It was almost completely dark beneath the canopy of twisted branches. When I burst onto the beach, there was enough moonlight to get my bearings and see the tiny figure in the denim dress and striped t-shirt.

My heart sank and I was overcome by a dream-like sense of disbelief and desperation.

I’d arrived too late.

I screamed her name from the crest of the dunes and started running. The tide was completely out and she was standing on the edge of the water. She swayed slightly, as if hypnotised., and I tried to focus on the *thing* in front of her. There were moments of clarity when I managed to glimpse its entirety: a sprawling, seething mass of tentacles that rose and fell with the ebb of the waves. When I tried to focus more

intently, to comprehend what I was seeing, my eyes seemed to slide off it as if it wasn't actually there. I grasped the knife tighter and increased my pace, lungs burning with exertion as my feet slammed into the sand. Nearer, I could taste the *stench* of it. With a primal, guttural scream of desperation, I raised the knife over my head and launched myself into the water.

In the dream, it feels like the very nature of reality pulsed and shifted.

I was alone, sobbing in the shallow water, looking desperately for the small, delicate figure in the denim overalls.

In the moonlight, with snot and tears running down my face and the taste of saltwater in my mouth, I looked down at the gleaming knife with its intricately carved tentacles rising up from the pommel.

Contrary to what you might be thinking, that wasn't the moment everything changed. That happened *much* later.

1

Details filtered in as I woke: the numbers on the alarm clock that softly ticked over to 6.00 am, the crackle of the radio as it came to life, the insistent rattle of the back door. My feet hit the floor and I rubbed the stubble on my face, shuffling towards the kitchen, opening the door and bracing myself against the cold. Shithead circled my feet, curled her tail, and meowed as I emptied a can of cat food into her bowl.

Music filtered into the kitchen. The Skyhooks were on the radio again.

Horror Movie.

Bloody hell, I thought, mixing a cup of Nescafe and looking out the kitchen window. The garden of the station house was wreathed in fog. I grabbed a pack of Peter Stuyvesant ciggies from the kitchen table, thumbed open the lid, and held an unlit cigarette between my fingers as I sipped the coffee.

It was that time of year again.

The dreams always returned about now. The box was taped up in the back of the station and I let myself open it once a year: I'd review the case files, go back over the witness testimonies, read the notes from the crime scene. And, every year, I'd tape it up and put it back on top of the old filing cabinets.

Might as well get it over and done with.

My regular patrol down the main street could wait.

In a small town like Holbrooke, it pays to be visible. I wander down the main street every morning, chat to Peter at the news agency and give a noncommittal wave to the other businesses as they open.

Friendly but not friends.

That's what it's like when you're the only cop in a small town.

That and you're a bloody Jack of all trades.

I'm the traffic cop, the crime-scene man, the marriage counsellor, the search-and-rescue unit, and the tactical response team. I'd be the dog handler, too, but the station doesn't have a K9 unit. Instead, we've got Shithead, a calico cat that turned up one day and has steadfastly refused to leave. I feed her regularly and make sure she's got somewhere

comfortable to sleep. I've always thought you can tell a lot about a person by the way they treat animals. Plus, she's kind of adorable.

Unfortunately, Shithead doesn't provide much in the way of operational support. At least, not when I'm faced with domestic disputes or drunken and disorderly behaviour.

The *other* stuff?

Well, that's an entirely different story.

Shithead has an innate talent for detecting the sort of weird and disturbing bullshit that happens around here. The sort of things that would scare the shit out of most people. The sort of things that, particularly this time of year, keep me awake at night.

Holbrooke seems to attract weird and disturbing bullshit.

On the radio, the song ended in a fading whirlwind of guitars and the DJ excitedly announced that Errol Hodges was on the line with some dramatic news from his farm.

This ought to be good, I thought.

It was a well-established fact that Errol, who had a thin, neatly groomed moustache in the style of his namesake, was completely full of shit. The unfortunate newspaper article last month about my

investigation of the unexplained lights over his farm, appeared above the fold in the *Holbrooke Herald*. There was a large photograph of Errol— with his bloody stupid moustache—pointing at the sky where the mysterious lights had appeared. The article noted that local police were taking the matter very seriously. In truth, I'd spent about ten minutes trudging around a muddy paddock in my gumboots and swearing under my breath. The 'investigation' had been a complete, embarrassing waste of time. And I hadn't heard the bloody end of it.

“You're on the air, Errol!”

“Good morning, Holbrooke,” he said in a voice that reminded me of Orson Welles introducing an episode of *Suspense*.

“What *spooky* news have you got for us today?”

“Well, Archie, you know there have been some mysterious and frankly disturbing occurrences of the, uh, paranormal variety out this way lately. Occurrences, I might add, that our local constabulary are taking *very* seriously.” I groaned. “Things are starting to get out of hand. Today, my prize heifer—”

“That would be Marjory?”

Marjory had become quite the talking point during Errol's routine calls to the breakfast show on 3HFM, which broadcast from a small room above Thommo's Fish'n'Chips.

“Correct, Archie. This morning, I found Marjory floating three inches above the ground.”

“A *levitating* cow! I bet the local cop shop is going to be *very* interested in that.”

There was an irritating honking sound—the sort of sound made only by eighteenth-century cyclists and FM radio announcers—and Archie introduced the next song.

Draining the last of the coffee, I returned the cigarette to its packet and left it sitting on the corner of the kitchen bench.

This morning, Holbrooke could bloody well wait.

A cardboard box full of painful memories was waiting out the back of the station.

The box was sitting, where I'd left it twelve months ago, on top of the filing cabinets at the back of the station. The filing cabinets contained what I liked to think of as the *real* files. If you wanted information on

burglary, arson, public intoxication or nudity, check the filing cabinets at the front. The truly toe-curling stuff was kept out the back. Of course, even *that* was written with a degree of bureaucratic brilliance. I like to think that fastidious paperwork is the cornerstone of good policing and felt an obligation to keep a record of what I have unofficially labelled ‘weird and disturbing bullshit’. The paperwork was full of creative euphemisms. *Aggressive cephalopod. Clinical lycanthropy. Unruly manifestation.* These files were the sort of thing that I didn’t want to fall into the hands of the sceptical and incredulous.

On one occasion, they had.

Residents past Eagle’s Point had seen strange shimmering lights in the sky. Colin—the utter *bastard*—had leafed through that file when he’d stopped in last year and I hadn’t heard the end of it, particularly when the local newspaper had misquoted me in an article about the sighting.

I cleared the paperback novels and medical textbooks from the front desk and was about to peel the tape from the cardboard box when the phone rang.

Answering, I fought back a sigh when I heard the voice of a small boy on the other end.

“I’m calling to report a grave and serious crime,” the voice said.

“Grave and serious are exactly the same thing, Nigel, what is it this time?”

“It’s something that you *need* to investigate. A matter of utmost importance.”

There was a moment of silence.

“It’s The Bayside Lady,” he whispered. The Bayside Lady was a cafe I frequented whenever I couldn’t be bothered stirring my own cup of instant coffee.

“What about it?”

“It’s their breakfast,” he said, pausing for dramatic effect, “they’re serving unidentified *frying* objects.”

“A pleasure as usual, Nigel. Time to piss off to school, don’t you think?”

I dropped the phone in its cradle and pulled back the tape on the cardboard box.

The phone rang again.

I sighed and waited for it to stop. It didn’t. Frustrated, I picked up.

“Listen, you little dickhead,” I replied, trying to sound jovial but not really feeling it, “this is a police station and I’ve bloody-well got work to do so bugger off.”

The phone line crackled.

“Hello?”

A woman’s voice.

“Holbrooke Police Station, Sergeant Steven Night,” I said, recovering quickly and hoping she hadn’t noticed. “Everything okay?”

“It’s Daphne Cuthbert,” she said, “it’s about my daughter—”

She faltered for a moment before going on.

“She didn’t come home last night and I’m worried.”

“Sandy?” I asked, searching my memory for everything I knew about the Cuthberts. They lived on Butcher’s Place, out near Drake’s Timber Yard, rough as guts but basically decent people. Her father was a bit of a prick who shot through a couple of years ago. Probably for the best. Sandy, who was still in high school, had won Miss Holbrooke in 1973. Her mother had pushed her to enter the pageant. It was probably the eyes that did it. Miss Holbrooke was a pageant that typically attracted the vapid and shallow. Sandy had piercing, intelligent eyes that gave the

impression that she was always thinking. Bloody good at school, too, from what I remembered.

Daphne's voice faltered for a moment and she stumbled forward. "She's been hanging around with this boy," she said. "I don't trust him."

"I'm not sure this is my area of expertise, I'm sure she'll be home soon enough."

"You're not *listening* to me," she hissed. "He's not *normal*." That got my attention. The phone continued its whispered crackle as I waited for her to speak.

"I've heard about you," she said softly, "you *help* people. This town is *different* and I know you've handled this sort of thing before."

She was talking slowly now, choosing each word carefully, inching the conversation forward.

"Isn't Sandy eighteen now? She's an adult, capable of making her own decisions, I'm sure she'll be fine and find her way home soon."

"She's still in school, Steve."

Another silence.

"Okay," I said. "I'll look into it."

There was an audible sigh of relief.

“I’ll help find her but, in the eyes of the law, she’s an adult and I can’t make her go home if she doesn’t want to.”

She told me where the boy was living. I could picture the house. It was a large, white federation building that was impeccably maintained, obviously owned by someone from the city.

“His name?” I asked, holding the receiver with my chin and shoulder, reaching for my notepad.

“Julian Grey,” she said, and I neatly wrote his name down. We said goodbye and I put the phone in its cradle, the clack of Bakelite against Bakelite.

Shithead was pacing nervously and staring through the glass of the station’s front window.

“Bloody hell,” I muttered, grabbing my jacket, and heading out into the foggy morning.

2

Even through the fog, I could see The Giant Prawn at the end of the street. Its stupid antennae swayed gently. As usual, I felt a surge of irritation towards the pricks at the local council who thought it would be a good idea to squander the community's money on a giant crustacean to attract tourists.

The tape had been cut and the attraction had been open to the public for almost eight months. As far as I could tell, it hadn't contributed a brass razoo to the local economy. The thing that *really* annoyed me is that Holbrooke wasn't even known for its prawn industry. Might as well build a giant bloody werewolf. At least that had some basis in reality.

I adjusted my holster, tucked the notebook in my pocket, and pulled open the door to the patrol car.

A voice from the end of the drive stopped me.

“Sergeant?”

It was Ethel Winter.

She was tall and elegant, slightly stooped with age, but carrying herself with a dignity and cultivation you don't often see in Holbrooke. Holbrooke is the sort of town that's generally known for its prodigious rate of alcohol abuse and frequent brawls at the Coach and Horses which every Saturday, like clockwork, I had the pleasure of breaking up and throwing the dickheads responsible in the lockup until they were appropriately apologetic.

"Time for that cup of tea?" she asked.

My heart sank.

"Not now, Ethel," I said. "Things to do."

"Surely there can't be that much crime in Holbrooke on a Monday morning."

No crime, I thought, just really weird bullshit.

"If only you knew," I said, turning back to the patrol car.

"How long have you been here, Sergeant?"

"Ten years," I said, nodding politely to bow out of the conversation.

"We can talk about that over that cup of tea."

"Wouldn't exactly say you fit in."

“I’m the local copper, Ethel. It doesn’t pay to get too friendly. I’ll stop by the house later today.”

When I closed the car door, I immediately felt bad.

Ethel’s husband Reg died last year.

I’d joined the funeral procession, mainly because I knew how much it meant to her grandson Sharkey. Reg loved his cars and there was a procession down the main street. Sharkey rolled down the windows on his bright orange Holden HQ and *We’ll Meet Again* by Vera Lynn filtered from the cassette player. “There’s a song for every occasion,” she said simply, as Sharkey put the cassette in and the engine spluttered to life.

I waved sheepishly as I pulled out onto the street.

Things to do.

Friendly but not friends, I thought, pulling away with thoughts of the weird and disturbing bullshit waiting for me in the house on the hill near Eagle’s Point.

There was a burst of static from the radio as I pulled out on the highway.

“Holbrook 303. Clear for a Code 14?”

“Jesus Christ,” I muttered, grabbing the radio. “Holbrook 303. Go ahead.”

“This one’s bad, Steve. Robbery in Woorack. Perpetrator armed and headed in your direction.”

I slammed the brakes, spun the wheel and accelerated towards Woorak.

It never fucking rains in Holbrooke.

Weird and disturbing bullshit is like that.

The first hint of something odd and things get crazy.

Ask any copper what it’s like on a full moon and that will give you an indication of what happens when things get weird in Holbrooke. It’s the moment before a storm when the air is heavy and expectant with crazy. The tipping-point. The moment before an angry crowd breaks into violence. Welcome to Holbrooke. The secret, of course, was making sure things *didn’t* get out of hand.

I flicked on the lights and sirens and pressed my foot to the floor. The car surged forward.

“VKC, Holbrooke 303. How much time do I have? Over.”

“Approximately ten minutes, Holbrooke 303. He’s driving fast. We’re scrambling support right now.”

I cursed under my breath.

Five minutes to wake the cops in Woorak, another five to get on the road, I’d be on my own by the time the car reached Holbrooke, *especially* if he was driving like a bat out of hell. Peppermint gums whipped past as I shot down the highway.

I needed a plan.

The petrol station on the outskirts of town approached. I slammed my foot on the brakes, leapt out of the car and dropped a coin into the pay phone.

Sharkey answered on the second ring.

“Mate,” I said, “I need to borrow your truck and a shirt.”

3

Sharkey is thinner than a slice of Devon ham and spends most of his time cultivating the sort of physique that ends in men with tight-fitting shirts looking for trouble down at the pub.

Fortunately, he'd given me one of the larger flannelettes from his wardrobe before bugging off.

It was clinging to my gut uncomfortably.

We'd parked the truck across the highway. I was making a show of inspecting the tyres and regretting my life decisions when I heard the car approaching.

It belted around the corner and screamed to a halt.

The stupid bastard had stolen a Reliant Regal, perhaps the most ridiculous car in motoring history, which was notable for its lack of a fourth wheel.

My bemusement disappeared when I saw the man behind the wheel.

I'd misjudged this situation.

Badly.

He was young, unshaven and unkempt, eyes dark with fury.

There were some people who committed crimes because they were desperate or afraid or they needed the money or were trying to stave off boredom. Most criminals were pretty harmless. There was something dark and furious behind those eyes.

He raised a sawn-off shotgun, pointed in my direction and gestured to the side of the car.

I raised my hands in surrender but remained stationary. My service revolver was sitting within reach on the top of the tyre. Stepping away from the truck would send the situation spiralling out of my control. There was still a quarter inch of windshield between me and the shotgun. Probably enough to absorb the pellets. Probably enough to buy a few seconds.

“Shit, mate!” I said. “Don’t shoot!”

He unbuckled his seatbelt and stepped out of the car. The shotgun didn’t waver.

“Still work?” he demanded.

I nodded.

“Give me the keys.”

“They’re in the cabin.”

“Get them *slowly*. Don’t try to be a hero, mate.”

There was an edge to the word ‘mate’. It sounded off, like he wasn’t used to saying it.

I reached into the cabin and removed the keys.

We stood in silence for a moment.

“*Now!*” he barked.

I tossed them underarm, deliberately threw wide, and they clattered to the side of the road.

He didn’t move.

His eyes and the barrel of the shotgun were still fixed on me.

“Pick them up,” he said patiently.

Hands raised, I moved towards the side of the road, bending slowly and picking them up. He snatched them from my hands and climbed into the cab, slammed the door and turned the key.

In the time it took for the engine to turn over, I’d grabbed the revolver, raised it quickly and had it trained on him. “Sergeant Steve Night, Holbrooke Police. Raise your hands slowly and step out of the truck.”

There were sirens in the distance.

Not a moment too soon.

Plus, there hadn't been any weird bullshit.

Maybe today *wouldn't* be a complete write-off.

"Hurry up," I prompted. "Try not to be a dickhead about it."

The man's eyes blazed and he lunged towards the passenger door.

Jesus Christ.

He was out the other side and running into the paddock before I could react.

He was *fast*.

Clearing the corner of the truck, I raised my revolver and looked at him down the sights.

Ten years in Holbrooke and I'd never fired a shot.

My finger hovered over the trigger.

Before I had a chance to shoot, the man burst into flames.

4

There was a surge of adrenalin and I found myself frozen for a second before acting. That's the thing about being a copper. Instinct kicks in almost immediately. The shock of it had cost a few vital seconds.

I desperately hoped I wasn't too late. I dashed off the shoulder of the road and towards the paddock. The man was less than fifty metres away, gouts of flame reaching skyward and plumes of smoke whorling, as he flapped his arms desperately and collapsed on all fours. His skin was black and beginning to blister. Waves of heat radiated from the conflagration, I pulled off the flannelette shirt and started beating at the flames. They arced wildly as if fighting back. The stench of cooking meat filled my nostrils and I gagged on the smoke, stumbling backwards and choking. Gasping for breath, I tried again, launching myself at the burning man. The intense heat kept me from getting close and the smoke burned my eyes. I staggered backwards and looked at him from a distance. He'd stopped moving, dead now, corpse twisted and charred, the sizzle and pop drowned out by the approaching sirens.

“You dripping, syphilitic cock,” Detective Senior Sergeant Colin Peterson muttered, standing at the edge of the paddock, hands on the hips of his flared jeans.

I was perched in the back of an ambulance with a blanket around my shoulders. The shaking had subsided but I was still pale and lightheaded. I took deep, regular breaths and pushed my way through the shock, taking small sips from a mug of hot tea. It was a purely physical reaction but the cracks in my composure, particularly in front of Peterson, irritated me. Problematic didn’t even begin to describe the situation. There would be reports and paperwork. The death of a suspect in a high-speed police pursuit always attracted scrutiny, even before spontaneous human combustion was factored into the equation.

Peterson was going to make my life *hell*.

He despised country policing. Woorak and Holbrooke were just a pitstop on the way to something grander. The publicity surrounding the UFO incident was bad enough. How was he going to explain *this* to his superiors?

“What the *hell* happened?”

“I identified myself. The suspect fled on foot.” I paused for a moment and took a gamble. “He smelled of petrol. Something must have happened when he knocked over that petrol station. He was carrying a lighter. Then...”

I gestured to the field.

“Fucking hell,” Peterson declared. “Write it up. Mail it to headquarters in the morning.”

He stormed back to his car, the door slammed and it disappeared into the distance. I glanced back at the corpse. The funeral director from Woorak, who doubled as the coroner when things got grim, was busy photographing the scene.

Like all career cops, Peterson had a vested interest in playing down the incident. I could almost imagine the coroner’s findings. Death by suicide. Drug-affected individual. The problem with Colin ‘Dickhead’ Peterson is that he didn’t actually give a shit about anyone. Investigating crime wasn’t about doing the right thing, upholding the law...it was about protecting and promoting his career. I listened to the muted pop of the coroner’s flashbulbs and sipped my tea.

Unlike Peterson, I needed to know what happened. There was weird bullshit afoot and I had to do something about it before more people were hurt. Shrugging off the blanket, I took another sip of scalding tea and paced towards the Regal. The constables from Woorak had already dusted for prints and the driver's door was ajar while we waited for the tow truck. There was a small satchel on the passenger seat which had been taken for evidence. Some cigarette papers, a paperback by Hemingway that I hadn't read, and a few notes. The car's cigarette lighter was missing. Removing a pen from my pocket—best not to muddy the waters by leaving my fingerprints on the car—I pulled open the car's ashtray. It was overflowing but, curiously, the car didn't smell of tobacco. I hadn't smoked for three months. There's something nagging about the smell of tobacco. Walking past the Coach and Horses, I'll always feel a lingering desire to light up. He wasn't smoking tobacco. I couldn't detect the pungent, piney stench of marijuana. For a moment, I thought it might be the effect of smoke inhalation but...no, I'd had a chance to clear the acrid taste from the back of my throat. There was something odd about the car. A faint, persistent odour of...incense? I reached into the ashtray and removed one of the butts.

Definitely not tobacco.

Definitely not cannabis.

It was crimson and I could feel its lumpy texture through the tightly rolled cigarette paper. I remembered the crazed intensity of the man's eyes.

A mysterious drug that causes spontaneous human combustion?

Fucking hell, I thought, trudging back down the highway towards the patrol car.

5

It was mid-afternoon by the time I finished the paperwork. I'd rushed through because I still needed to check on Daphne's daughter. When I was done, I'd stopped for a quick coffee, and flipped through *Mysteries of the Unexplained*. It was a hardcover book that I'd borrowed from the Holbrooke Public Library. I think the librarian was getting slightly shitty that I hadn't returned it yet. On the cover, there was a picture of a solar eclipse, and a pyramid with a disembodied eye floating in front of it. It was the only source of admittedly inaccurate information that I had on all the weird bullshit I'd been dealing with in Holbrooke. At least it was right about the werewolves. I flipped through the book quickly, past the page on sasquatches—which always gave me the willies—until I found the page on spontaneous human combustion.

Unusually hot fires without any source of ignition. There are stories about it throughout history. In 1641, an Italian knight had a little too much to drink and started vomiting fire before exploding into flames. In 1725, a French innkeeper woke to the smell of smoke and discovered

that his wife was nothing but a pile of ashes. The common denominator seemed to be alcohol. No mention of strange, crimson weed. I closed the book in frustration and rubbed the stubble on my chin. The memory of the burning, bubbling flesh was still vivid in my mind.

I looked at the cigarette butt which was tagged and bagged on the desk.

No leads and a Detective Senior Sergeant intent on shutting down the case. Maybe I expected too much looking for answers in a book called *Mysteries of the Unexplained*. I marked the page with an old receipt and left it by the typewriter on my desk.

Need to check on Sandy.

Finishing the paperwork, I took a quick walk down the main street, glaring at The Giant Prawn most of the way.

Bloody wankers.

When there are rumours of a dramatic police chase and subsequent death around town, it's good to remind people that you're still on the beat.

I dropped the paperwork in the post box and paid seventy-five cents for a western called *The Devil's Number* by Clay Anthony. With

things getting weirder and more bullshittier, I needed to retreat into something clear-cut where the good guys triumphed and outlaws didn't spontaneously burst into flames. Jack Fowler down at the news agency knew pretty much everything that happened around Holbrooke so I asked him about the family who owned the house where Sandy's boyfriend was supposed to be living. There was money there, he said, they came up every summer from Kew or Cambetwell, wasn't sure which.

There was a chill in the air when I returned to the station and pointed the patrol car towards the highway. Leaving the town limits, I accelerated, the ocean on one side and the rolling hills on the other, heading towards the old, white house on Eagle Point Road.

I didn't know who owned the house but everything about it suggested money. Most of the year, the windows were dark and the house was unoccupied. Nevertheless, the lawn was well-maintained and the long winding driveway that was lined with ancient cypress trees was raked regularly. Most people in Holbrooke couldn't afford that sort of thing which meant we were forced to spend at least half of Saturday in

the garden red-faced and swearing as we tried to cajole our lawnmowers into action.

I'd occasionally seen a car at the property during summer: a sleek, black BMW that would have been hideously expensive to maintain.

I pulled up outside the house and killed the engine which ticked quietly as it cooled.

In situations like this it, it is often advantageous to take your time and give people a chance to shit themselves. Whoever was in the house would be wondering why the local constabulary had pulled up outside their house. They'd get nervous and make mistakes when I eventually talked to them. For a job where you were often racing against the clock, silence was sometimes a copper's best friend.

I stepped out of the car, strode up to the veranda and knocked on the door, detecting movement through the lace curtains.

I knocked again.

Louder and more impatiently this time.

"Police. We need to talk." I raised my hand to knock again when the door suddenly opened.

There was a young man on the other side.

Calm and composed.

There was a smile beneath the blue eyes. His blonde hair was parted on one side and slightly shaggy like Robert Redford in *The Sting*.

“Good afternoon, Officer. How can I help you?” There was a hint of concern in his voice but the words were too calm and calculated. Within a few seconds, I decided that I didn’t trust the little shit much further than I could throw him.

“Sorry to bother you,” I said, playing along with the pretence of civility, “I’m looking for Sandy Cuthbert. Her mother tells me she didn’t return home last night and I’m attempting to determine her whereabouts.”

“Sandy?” he asked innocently. “She’s asleep upstairs.”

“May I talk to her?”

“She’s very tired.”

“Perhaps you could wake her.”

“She’s *really* tired,” he replied, running a hand through his blonde hair, adding “if you know what I mean.”

I gave him a cold stare.

The kid remained silent. “Would you like to come in?”

That caught me off guard. I thought he was going to turn me away but he'd changed tactics suddenly, doubling down on the charm offensive.

There was something *off* about the kid.

Every word, every gesture seemed calculated to win me over.

It was the sort of thing that probably worked on others.

Charm had probably seen him through most of his life. In my time, I'd seen that sort of false smile and dead-eyed stare before. There were criminals who drove around with a body in the trunk hoping they'd be pulled over and charm their way out of a minor traffic infraction. Then there were the ones who smiled and chuckled with you in the interview room, pretending they were your best mate while sharing a cigarette.

Even *they* were smarter and more charismatic than this little shit.

"Sure," I said, "I'd love to come in."

I pushed the door open and he was forced to step back.

"Julian, right?" I said, wandering into the living area and casting my eye around.

Definitely off-guard now.

Coppers. We're worse than vampires.

Don't invite us in. We're not going to drain your blood, but we are going to take a bloody good look around. This little prick had seriously misjudged. He'd just given me legal carte blanche to take a good nosey look around.

I marched into the living room. There was a pile of textbooks and some periodicals on the corner of the coffee table, I picked one up and started leafing through. "University student?" He took the publication from my hand, gave a forced smile and returned it to the pile.

"Yes," he said. "Law, mostly."

"And a little bit of literature as well."

"Bit of a reader myself. Westerns mostly. Love a good cowboy story, don't you?"

"Not really my type of thing. I tend to read contemporary literature."

There was something refined and utterly slappable about the way that he pronounced *contemporary*. "Ever read any Hemingway?" I asked, peering through to the kitchen, where I could see a table with two places set.

His face remained impassive.

“Hemingway hasn’t written much lately,” he said.

Another smug smile.

“No,” I replied, “don’t imagine he has.”

I turned my back on the kid and walked over to the window, watching him from the corner of my eye. He glanced fleetingly at the second-floor landing.

I rested a hand on the butt of my service revolver.

“Wouldn’t mind a cuppa,” I said, gesturing towards the kitchen.

“It’s been quite an eventful day.”

He hesitated for a moment before disappearing into the kitchen. There was the sound of water, the clink of cups and the slow rumble of an electric kettle.

“Didn’t finish university myself,” I said, attempting to keep him talking. “Joined the police force instead. How’s the law degree going?” I padded quietly to the foot of the stairs, stole a glance at the landing: two doors probably leading to bedrooms.

Grey reappeared in the kitchen doorway. “I told you,” he said, “she’s sleeping.”

I nodded slowly. The kettle clicked off. He turned and I heard him pouring water into the cups.

“I have a placement next year,” he said, rummaging around in the cupboard, “with quite a prestigious firm.”

I stole up the stairs quietly while he was preparing the tea. His pretentious voice droned on downstairs. You could always depend on people who were obsessed by the sound of themselves.

My footsteps were silent as I padded across the carpet to the first door. Afternoon light leaked through the closed blinds of an upstairs window. Glancing over my shoulder, I nudged it open with the toe of my boot. The room was empty. Turning quickly, hoping to make it downstairs before he noticed that I was gone, I opened the second door.

When I saw what was inside, my hand reached instinctively for the revolver at my hip, and I spun around.

There was a flicker of movement in the corner of my eye.

Didn't clear the room.

Bloody hell.

The first blow knocked me to the ground, revolver cartwheeling across the carpet. The second blow knocked me out entirely.