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THE DRAGON MAN

'Totally captivating.' *Age*



PENINSULA CRIMES

Detective Inspector Hal Challis showered with a bucket at his feet. He kept it economical, but still the bucket overflowed. He towelled himself dry, dressed, and, while the espresso pot was heating on the bench-top burner in his kitchen, poured the bucket into the washing machine. Couple more showers and he'd have enough water for a load of washing. Only 19 December but already his rainwater tanks were low and a long, dry summer had been forecast. He didn't want to buy water again, not like last summer.

The coffee was ready. As he poured he glanced at an old calendar pinned to the corkboard above his bench. He'd bought the calendar by mail order three years ago, and kept it opened at March. The vintage aeroplane for that month was a prototype of the de Havilland DH84 Dragon. Then the toaster pinged and Challis hunted for the butter and the jam and finally took his toast and coffee on to the deck at the rear of his house.

The early sun reached him through the wisteria with the promise of a hot day ahead. He felt bone-tired. A suspected abduction on the Old Peninsula Highway two nights ago—the investigation ultimately dumped into his lap. Frankston uniforms had taken the call, then referred it to the area Superintendent,

who'd rung at 1 a.m. and said, 'Maybe your boy's struck a second time, Hal.' Challis had spent the next four hours at the scene, directing a preliminary search. When he'd got home again at 5 a.m. yesterday there hadn't seemed much point in going back to bed, and he'd spent the rest of the day in the car or on the phone.

A little four-stroke engine was chugging away on the bank of his neighbour's dam. Cows once drank there. Now the cows were gone and the hillside stretched back in orderly rows of vines. Challis couldn't spot his neighbour among the vines, but the man was there somewhere. He usually was, weeding, pruning, spraying, picking. Challis thought of the insecticide spray, of the wind carrying it to his roof, where the rain would wash it into his underground tank, and he tossed out his coffee.

He stepped down from the verandah and made a circuit of his boundary fence. Half a hectare, on a dirt lane west of the Old Peninsula Highway, tucked in among orchards, vineyards and a horse stud, and Challis made this walk every morning and evening as a kind of check on his feelings. Five years now, and still the place was his port in a storm.

As he collected the *Age* from his mailbox on the dirt lane at the front of his property, a voice called from the next driveway, 'Hal, have you got a minute?'

The man from the vineyard was walking toward him. Small, squint-eyed from the angling sun, about sixty. Challis waited, gazing calmly, as he did with suspects, and sure enough the man grew edgy.

Challis stopped himself. The fellow didn't deserve his CIB tricks. 'What can I do for you?'

'Look, I realise it's nothing, but you know the ornamental lake I've got, over near the house?'

'Yes.'

'Someone's been fishing in it,' the neighbour said. 'After the trout. The thing is, they're scaring the birds away.'

Ibis, herons, a black swan, moorhens. Challis had watched them for half an hour one day, from a little hide the man had constructed in the reeds. 'Do you know who?'

'Probably kids. I found a couple of tangled lines and fishhooks, half a dozen empty Coke cans.'

Challis nodded. 'Have you informed the local station?'

'I thought, you being an inspector—'

'Inform the local station,' Challis said. 'They'll send a car around now and then, make their presence felt.'

'Can't you...'

'I'm very sorry, but it would look better if you lodged the complaint.'

Challis left soon after that. He locked the house, backed his Triumph out of the garage and turned right at his gate, taking the lane in bottom gear. In winter he negotiated potholes, mud and minor flooding; in summer, corrugations and treacherous soft edges.

He drove east, listening to the eight o'clock news. At five minutes past eight he turned on to the Old Peninsula Highway, meeting it quite near the abduction scene, and headed south, toward the town of Waterloo, hearing the screams the dying leave behind them.

He could have been more helpful to the neighbour. He wondered what the man thought of him, a detective inspector and 'New Peninsula'.

The Peninsula. People talked about it as if it were cohesive and indivisible. You only did that if you didn't know it, Challis thought. You only did that if you thought its distinctive shape—a comma of land hooking into the sea south-east of Melbourne—gave it a separate identity, or if you'd driven through it once and seen only beaches, farmland and quiet coastal towns.

Not that it covered a large area—less than an hour by road from top to bottom, and about twenty minutes across at its widest point—but to a policeman like Challis there were several Peninsulas. The old Peninsula of small farms and orchards, secluded country estates, some light industry and fishing, and sedate coastal towns populated by retirees and holidaying families, was giving way to boutique wineries, weekender farms, and back roads populated with bed-and-breakfast cottages, potteries, naturopathy clinics, reception centres, tearooms and galleries. Tourism was one of the biggest industries, and people with professions—like Challis himself—were flocking to buy rural hideaways. Some local firms made a good living from erecting American-style barns and installing pot-belly stoves, and costly four-wheel drives choked the local townships.

But although there was more money about, it wasn't necessarily going to more people. A community centre counsellor friend of Challis's had told him of the growing number of homeless, addicted kids she dealt with. Industries and businesses were closing, even as families were moving into the cheap housing developments that were spreading at the fringes of the main towns, Waterloo and Mornington. The shire council, once one of the biggest employers, was cutting expenses to the bone, using managers whose sense of humanity had been cut to the bone. The adjustments were never forewarned or carried out face to face. Challis's counsellor friend now sold home-made pickles and jams at fairs and markets. There had been a letter, telling her she was redundant, her whole unit closed down. 'Just three days' notice, Hal.'

It was happening everywhere, and the police were usually the ones to pick up the pieces.

Which didn't mean that the Peninsula wasn't a pleasant place to live in. Challis felt as if he'd come home, finally.

And the job suited him. In the old days of murder or abduction investigations he'd been sent all over the state, city

and bush, with a squad of specialists, but the Commissioner had introduced a new system, intended to give local CIB officers experience in the investigation of serious crimes alongside their small-time burglaries, assaults and thefts. Now senior homicide investigators like Challis worked a specific beat. Challis's was the Peninsula. Although he had an office in regional headquarters, he spent most of his time in the various Peninsula police stations, conducting investigations with the help of the local CIB, calling in the specialists only if he got derailed or bogged down. It was a job that entailed tact, and giving as much responsibility to the local CIB as possible, or the fallout was resentment and a foot-dragging investigation.

He didn't expect that from the Waterloo CIB. He'd worked with them before.

Challis drove south for twenty kilometres. The highway ran down the eastern side of the Peninsula, giving him occasional glimpses of the bay. Then the Waterloo refinery came into view across the mangrove flats, bright oily flames on the chimneys, and glaring white tanks. There was a large tanker at anchor. The highway became a lesser road, bisecting a new housing estate, the high plank fences on either side hiding rooftops that varied greatly but were never more than a metre apart. He crossed the railway line and turned right, skirting the town, then left on to a main road that took him past timber merchants, boat yards, Peninsula Cabs, crash repairers, an aerobics centre, the Fiddlers Creek pub and a corner lot crammed with ride-on mowers and small hobby tractors.

The police station and the adjacent courthouse were on a roundabout at the end of High Street, opposite a Pizza Hut. Challis glanced down High Street as he turned. The water glittered at the far end; frosted Santas, reindeer, sleighs, candles, mangers and bells swung from lampposts and trees.

He parked in the side street opposite the main entrance to the police station, got out, and walked into trouble.

‘That windscreen’s not roadworthy.’

A uniformed constable, who had been about to get into a divisional van that idled outside the station with a young woman constable at the wheel, had changed his mind and was approaching Challis, flipping open his infringement book and fishing in his top pocket for a pen. He’s going to book me, Challis thought.

‘I’ve ordered a new windscreen.’

‘Not good enough.’

The Triumph was low-slung. On the back roads of the Peninsula, it was always copping stones and pebbles, and one had cracked the windscreen on the passenger side.

‘This your car?’

‘It is.’

A snapping of fingers: ‘Licence.’

Challis complied. The constable was large—tall and big-boned, but also carrying too much weight. He was young, the skin untested by time and the elements, and his hair was cut so short that his scalp showed through. Challis had an impression of acres of pink flesh.

‘Quickly, quickly.’

A classic bully, Challis thought.

Then the constable saw the name on Challis’s licence, but, to his credit, did not flinch. ‘Challis. Inspector Challis?’

‘Yes.’

‘Sir, that windscreen’s not roadworthy. It’s also dangerous.’

‘I realise that. I’ve ordered a new one.’

The constable watched him for a long moment, then nodded. He put his book away. ‘Fair enough.’

Challis hadn’t wanted to be booked, and telling the constable to follow the rules and book him would have been an embarrassment and an irritation for both of them, so he said nothing. The

constable turned and made for the van. Challis watched it leave.

‘A real prick, that one,’ a voice said.

There was a work-dented Jeep parked outside the courthouse. The rear doors were open and a man wearing overalls was unloading air-conditioning vents. Challis glanced at the side of the Jeep: *Rhys Hartnett Air-Conditioning*.

‘The bastard did me over yesterday. Hadn’t been here five minutes and he booked me for a cracked tail-light. Shouted in my face, spit flying, like I was some kind of criminal.’

Challis steered the conversation away from that. ‘Are you working in the police station?’

The man shook his head. ‘The courthouse.’

He snapped a business card at Challis. He did it in a way that seemed automatic, and Challis had a vision of hundreds of people walking around with unwanted cards in their pockets. He glanced at it. *Rhys Hartnett, Air-Conditioning Specialist*.

‘Well, I wish you were doing the police station.’

Hartnett seemed to straighten. ‘You a copper?’

‘Yes.’

‘Just my luck. I was wasting my breath complaining to you about police tactics.’

‘Not necessarily,’ Challis said, turning away and crossing the road.

The police station was on two levels. The ground floor was a warren of interview rooms, offices, holding cells, a squad room, a canteen and a tearoom. The first floor was quieter: a small gym, lockers, a sick bay. It was also the location of the Displan—Disaster Plan—room, which doubled as the incident room whenever there was a major investigation.

A senior sergeant was in overall charge of the station. He had

four sergeants and about twenty other ranks under him, including a handful of trainees, for Waterloo was a designated training station. The CIB itself was small, only a sergeant and three detective constables. There were also two forensic technicians—police members, and on call for the whole Peninsula—and a couple of civilian clerks. Given that over thirty people worked at the station, that shift work applied to most of them, and that the uniformed and CIB branches generally had little to do with each other, Challis wasn't surprised that the young constable hadn't recognised him from his two earlier investigations in Waterloo.

The tearoom was next to the photocopy room. Challis crossed to the cluttered sink in the corner, four young uniformed constables falling silent as he filled a cup with tap water. He looked at his watch. Time for the briefing.

He wandered upstairs and found the CIB detectives and a handful of uniformed sergeants waiting for him in the Displan room. The morning light streamed in. It was a large, airy room, but he knew that it would be stuffy by the end of the day. The room had been fitted with extra phone lines, photocopiers, computers, large-scale wall maps and a television set. Every incoming telephone call could be automatically timed and recorded on cassette, and there was a direct line to Telstra so that calls could be traced.

Challis nodded as he entered the room. There were murmured hellos in return and someone said, 'Here's the dragon man.' He crossed to a desk that sat between a whiteboard and a wall of maps. He positioned himself behind the desk, leaned both hands on the back of a chair, and said, without preamble:

'On Sunday night a young woman named Jane Gideon made an emergency call from a phone box on the Old Peninsula Highway. She hasn't been seen since, and given that another young woman, Kymbly Abbott, was found raped and murdered by the side of the highway a week ago, we're treating the circumstances as suspicious.'

He straightened his back and looked out above their heads. 'You're Jane Gideon. You work at the Odeon cinema. You catch the last train to Frankston from the city, collect your car, an old Holden, and head down the highway, your usual route home. Picture the highway at night. Almost midnight. No street lighting, cloudy moon, very few cars about, no sense of humankind out there except for a farmhouse porch light on a distant hillside. It's a hot night, the hills are steep in places, your car badly needs a tune. Eventually the radiator boils over. You limp as far as the gravelled area in front of Foursquare Produce, which is a huge barn of a place, set in the middle of nowhere, but there *is* a Telstra phone box nearby. No doors on it, very little glass, mostly steel mesh painted blue-grey. Feeling exposed to the darkness, you call the VAA.'

He slipped a cassette tape into a machine and pressed the play button. They strained to listen:

'Victorian Automobile Association. How may I help you?'

'Yes, my name's Jane Gideon. My car's broken down. I think it's the radiator. I'm scared to keep going in case I break something.'

'Your membership number?'

'Er—'

They heard a rattle of keys. *'Here it is: MP six three zero zero four slash nine six.'*

There was a pause, then: *'Sorry, we have no record of that number. Perhaps you allowed your membership to elapse?'*

'Please, can't you still send someone?'

'You'll have to rejoin.'

'Jesus Christ,' someone muttered. Challis held up his hand for quiet.

'I don't care. Just send someone.'

'How would you like to pay?'

There was a pause filled with the hiss of radio signals in the dark night. Then Jane Gideon's voice came on the line again, an edge to it.

'Someone's coming.'

'You don't require assistance after all?'

'I mean, there's a car. It's slowed right down. Hang on.'

There was the sound of more coins being fed into the phone.

'I'm back.'

The operator's tone was neutral, as though she could not sense the black night, the isolated call box and the young woman's fear.

'Your address, please.'

'Um, there's this shed, says Foursquare Produce.'

'But where? Your membership number, that's the Peninsula, correct?'

'I'm on the Old Peninsula Highway. Oh no, he's stopping.'

'Where on the highway? Can you give me a reference point? A house number? An intersecting road?'

'It's a man. Oh God.'

The operator's tone sharpened. *'Jane, listen, is something going on there where you are?'*

'A car.'

'Is there a house nearby?'

'No.' She was sobbing now. 'No house anywhere, just this shed.'

'I'll tell you what I'm going to do. You—'

'It's okay, he's driving away.'

'Jane. Get inside your car. If it's driveable, find somewhere off the road where it can't be seen. Maybe behind that shed. Then stay inside the car. Lock all the doors and wind up all the windows. Can you do that for me?'

'Suppose so.'

'Meanwhile I'll call the police, and I'll also send one of our breakdown vehicles out to you. You can rejoin the VAA on the spot. Okay? Jane? You there?'

'What if he comes back? I'm scared. I've never been so scared.'

Her voice was breaking as her fear rose. The operator replied calmly, but there was no comfort in her advice: *'Get in the car, lock the doors, do not speak to anyone, even if they offer help.'*

'I could hide.'

Clearly the operator was torn. The Victorian Automobile Association had been taping its emergency calls ever since a member had sued them for offering wrong advice which proved costly, with the result that operators were now careful not to offer advice of any kind—but a young woman alone on a deserted road at night? She deserved wise counsel of some kind.

'I don't know,' the operator confessed. *'If you think it would do any good. Hide where? Hello? Hello?'*

There was the sound of a vehicle, muffled voices, a long pause, then the line went dead.

'The rest you know,' Challis said. 'The VAA operator called 000, who contacted Frankston, who sent a car down there. They found Jane Gideon's car. The phone was on the hook. No signs of a struggle. They searched around the nearby sheds and orchards in case Gideon *had* decided to hide herself, but found nothing.' He glanced at his watch. 'Uniforms started searching the area at daybreak yesterday. Our first task will be a door knock.'

He paused. 'It's early days, so try not to let one case colour the other, but we can't discount the possible links between Kymbly Abbott's murder and Jane Gideon's disappearance. Since I'm already working on Abbott, I've brought her files with me. Any questions so far?'

'What are the links, boss?'

'The Old Peninsula Highway for a start,' Challis said. He turned to a wall map. It showed the city of Melbourne, and the main arteries into the rural areas. Pointing to a network of streets which marked the suburb of Frankston, on the south-eastern edge of the city, he said, 'Kymbly Abbott had been at a party here, in Frankston. The highway starts here, a few hundred metres away. Abbott was last seen walking toward it, intending to hitch a ride home.' He traced the highway down the hook of the Peninsula. 'She lived with her parents here, in Dromana. They own a shoe

shop. I have her leaving the party at one o'clock in the morning, possibly drunk, possibly stoned, so her judgment would have been shot. No-one at the party gave her a lift, though I will be talking to them all again. Her body was found here, by the side of the highway, just seven kilometres south of Frankston. We're appealing for witnesses, the usual thing, did anyone see her, give her a lift, see someone else give her a lift.'

'But that suggests our man's also prowling in Frankston itself, not simply up and down the highway.'

'I know. Or he lives in the Frankston area and was just setting out somewhere, or lives down here and was on his way home. Now, other similarities. Both incidents happened late at night. Both victims are young women who were alone at the time.'

He passed out crime-scene photographs. They showed Kymbly Abbott like a cast-aside rag doll in death, her throat and her thighs swollen and cruelly bruised. 'Raped and strangled. If that was the first time for our man, he might have been on a high for a few days, eager to try again on Sunday night.'

'Slim, boss,' someone said.

'I know it's slim,' said Challis, showing some heat for the first time, 'but until we've got more to go on what can we do but use our imaginations and think our way into what might have happened?' He tapped his right temple. 'Try to get a feel for this guy.'

'What about the VAA mechanic?'

'He got there after the police did. He's in the clear.'

A detective said, 'I got called to a Jane Gideon's maybe six, seven months ago? Here in Waterloo. She'd had a break-in. A flat near the jetty.'

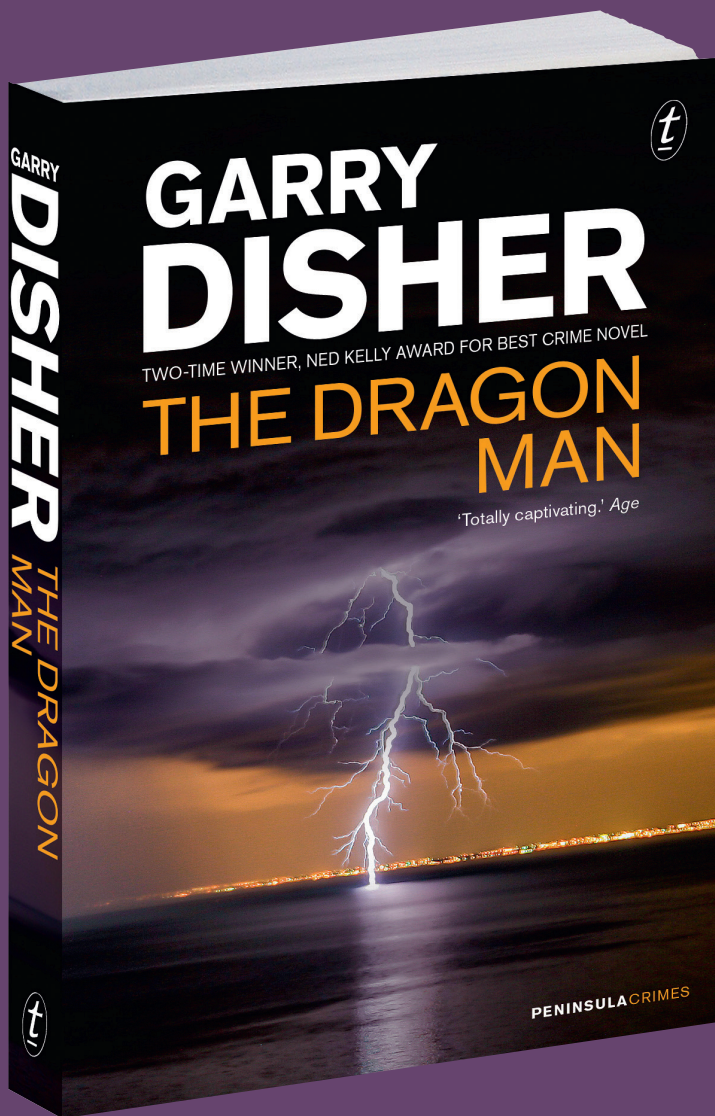
'That's her,' Challis said. 'I checked her flat in the early hours of Monday morning to see if she'd simply been given a lift home.'

He put his hands on his hips. 'There's a lot riding on this. Waterloo's not a big place. A lot of people would have known her.'

They're going to be upset, edgy, wanting results in a hurry.'

He waited. When there were no more questions, he turned to a Lands Department aerial survey map on the wall behind him. 'I want two of you to take a few uniforms and conduct a door-to-door along the highway. Much of it's through farmland, so that helps. I drove along it on my way here this morning and saw only a couple of utilities and a school bus. One 24-hour service station here, where the Mornington road cuts it. Most of the farmhouses are set back from the road, but they'll still need checking out. And certain businesses. A place called The Stables, sells antiques. A couple of wineries. A deer farm, ostrich farm, flying school, Christmas tree farm—they'll be doing increased trade at this time of the year. A pottery, a mobile mechanic—look twice at him, okay? See if he had any late calls on Sunday night and the night Kymbly Abbott was killed. Also, in addition to Foursquare Produce there are two other fruit and vegetable places with roadside stalls.'

He turned to face them again. 'That's it for now. We'll meet here again at five o'clock. Scobie, I want you to draw up a list of known sex offenders who live on the Peninsula. Ellen, come with me.'



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