



GARRY DISHER

TWO-TIME WINNER, NED KELLY AWARD FOR BEST CRIME NOVEL

WHISPERING DEATH

'A rare pleasure.' *New York Times*



PENINSULA CRIMES

Grace was as good a name as any, and this morning Grace was in Hobart, strolling through a well-heeled corner of Sandy Bay, casing the secluded houses. A Friday morning in spring, a sea fret receding to Storm Bay and the Tasman Sea, it was good to be alive, and she attracted no attention in her tennis whites worn over tracksuit pants, sunglasses, Nike trainers and perky billed cap. A racquet handle poked out of her gym bag, telling you she was an idle young wife, maybe a young professional on her day off, even—if you were the suspicious type—an adulterer wearing a cover story.

But no warning bells. No cause for a stop-and-search. She belonged there.

In fact, it was hide in plain sight, Grace hiding behind the cap and shades, hiding the fact that the tennis skirt was Velcroed to the bodice and the gym bag held burglary tools, gloves and heavy-duty vinyl sacks. One shouted accusation, one query, and she'd be gone. Rip away the skirt, ditch it together with the cap, bag and shades and she'd be transformed into a jogger, and who looks twice at a jogger?

'Always expect the worst,' Galt had drummed into her, 'and you'll never be caught off guard.'

Another thing Galt told her was to avoid apartment buildings. Well, there were none here. There's always someone at home in an

apartment block, Galt said, always a sad soul sitting at a window all day long, hoping for a diversion to brighten the unvarying hours.

Next, Grace checked for children: toys, bikes, skateboards, even a little pink gumboot, discarded in a front yard. Yes, kids go to school, Galt would say; but not if they're a toddler or they've got the chickenpox, not if it's a curriculum day for their teachers. And a kid at home means an adult at home.

Vehicles were on Galt's checklist too. Grace knew she was in a land of two-car households, two adults working nine to five in highly paid jobs. No shift workers here. Play it safe, Galt always said. If there's a vehicle in the driveway, the carport, move on. Or a closed garage door. Doesn't mean the garage is empty.

Finally, choose your targets to minimise the nosy-neighbour problem. The people worth stealing from paid top dollar to block an outsider's line of sight, Galt said. She should look for high hedges, sloping land, tree density and curved streets.

The rest Galt hadn't taught her. 'I can show you how to stay under the radar,' he'd said. 'I can keep my people off your back, but you were the break-in queen long before I found you.'

Grace made a rapid pass through the little neighbourhood. Trees and bushes crowded most of the houses. No one about, only a workman bolting a gate to a picket fence, another rolling a lawnmower off a ute. The houses ranged from weatherboard bungalows to sharply modern glass and concrete structures, with Tudor houses, Tuscan villas and small, tiled, steeply-gabled 1930s mansions in between. She mentally selected four targets and went to work.

The first was a nightmarish arrangement of interconnected concrete cubes, set well back from the street behind a high fieldstone wall. She entered the grounds briskly as she always did, as if her best friend lived there and they'd arranged to play tennis. When she was halfway to the front door she blew a high-frequency whistle, the kind audible only to dogs. She was answered at once by frenzied barking, one deep-chested, the other a high yap.

She retreated.

In the next street was a low 1970s ranch house set among gumtrees. No dogs. She made a quick circuit of the building, testing knobs and handles and peering through windows. Occasionally she found unlocked doors and windows, fake alarm boxes or no security at all, but often those places had nothing worth stealing. Grace circled the house again, this time running a small camping compass around the door and window frames. The compass needle dipped to indicate a live current at all but the front door. People had a misplaced faith in the security of their front doors, perhaps because most front doors face the street. Grace tested it again. A slight deflection of the needle near the latch.

It was a glass door, comprising a single pane secured around the edges by narrow wooden beadings. Grace fished a metal bar from the gym bag and prised away the beadings, stacking the strips neatly beside her, until the whole pane was revealed. Then she removed it using a pair of glazier's suction caps and propped it against the wall beside the entryway.

She slipped into the house, and into the smell of money. The building itself was ugly, a throwback, but the interior was starkly modern, with polished floorboards, minimalist glass and leather, a pair of Brett Whiteley bird drawings on one wall. The Whiteleys might bring a few grand but their size ruled them out. She photographed them. She might come back for them, in a year or so, when the owners had recovered from their shock and dismay. Meanwhile she'd show the images to Finch, see if he knew a potential buyer. She also snapped a pair of Fuzan Satsuma vases. Turn of the last century, she thought. Worth about \$5000. A few hundred bucks from Finch, but they were too big to go in the gym bag without risk of damage.

After a quick assessment of the house, Grace settled on the main bedroom and the study. The starkness was modified here by everyday clutter: in the bedroom a cracked-spine paperback, a foil strip of painkillers, an errant sock; in the study a couple of chewed ballpoint

pens, an in-tray stacked with invoices and letters, a set of golf clubs and a water pistol. It all said something about home life, family life, neither of which interested Grace. She began to tug open the drawers.

She was out of the house within five minutes. In the bag were a pair of emerald earrings, a Bulova watch, an iPod Classic, a Toshiba laptop and some unused AutoCAD software, still in the box. The software alone was \$6000 new, the computer \$3000.

In the next street was a plain weatherboard cottage with a modern extension at the rear, vast and airy. No dogs, another easy front door, but at the last moment she saw a cornice-mounted red light blinking through a gap in the sitting-room curtain. She checked another room: another red light. She had no intention of going in against motion detectors. She moved on to the fourth and last target on her list, a pretty loft house with a steeply pitched roof and cathedral ceilings. Again, dog-free. No motion detectors that she could see, and a front door that was alarmed only at the latch. Every part of the door was wooden: an outer frame, a cross member, and plywood panel inserts secured by thin beadings. She decided to remove the bottom panel and crawl through.

But first, a diversion. She took a pair of shoes, size 11, from her bag, slipped them over her runners and walked through the loamy soil against the side wall. Something to occupy the detectives who would be called to investigate.

Then she went to work. Prise away the beadings, fasten two eyehooks to the panel—wiped clean and sprayed with bleach to screw with her DNA. When the fumes cleared she jerked the panel out of its seating and put it aside.

She crawled in. Her hip caught in the narrow opening, snagging a tiny white thread. She always incinerated her outfits after a job—clothing, gloves, footwear—but she paused to remove it anyway. Why give the cops a chance to add ‘possibly wears tennis whites’ to her profile?

This house was fussy and careworn. The carpeting was expensive

but the pattern varied from room to room and never quite matched the walls or curtains. There were too many knickknacks: porcelain shepherd girls, nests of wooden bowls, glass paperweights threaded with colour, family photographs in heavy silver frames (plate, she noticed), and someone liked elephants. Herds of them—wood, glass, papier-mâché—trampled and trumpeted along window ledges and corner tables.

But there was a little Sydney Long aquatint on one wall, possibly a family heirloom. Grace removed it from its ugly frame, rolled it into a narrow tube and slid it into a hollowed-out racquet handle.

She checked all of the rooms and settled on some easy-to-move electronics—a portable hard drive, a video camera and the prize, a top-flight Canon digital SLR worth over ten grand.

Grace strolled back to the pub on the corner and then down the hill to her rental car, parked outside a gym beside the water. No one stopped her and if they looked, it was at the arrogant way she loped along. All the young women loped here. They felt entitled. Grace liked messing with that.

2

Grace used a restroom at Hobart airport to reinvent herself as an executive in a hurry: pantyhose, heels, black jacket, narrow skirt and a briefcase. If you were an airport official, you wouldn't tangle with her.

By late morning she was on the mainland, changing clothes again, dressing down this time: loose jeans, grubby trainers, stretched cotton hoodie. Then she collected her Golf from the long-term car park and headed along the Tullamarine Freeway towards the centre of Melbourne, knowing it would be hours yet before her break-ins were noticed.

The Golf hummed. She'd thought long and hard about her choice of car. All of her rules were simple. 'Don't get caught', obviously, and 'know when to walk away from a job' and 'have a fallback position'. But a central one was 'never work close to home'. She always operated outside of the state. Perth, Brisbane, Adelaide, the Gold Coast, Noosa, Launceston, Hobart...Wherever the money was. Never in New South Wales. The wrong people knew her there. Galt people. Interstate then, and sometimes she drove to and from a job. Long distances, so comfort was important. If she ever had to run, she wanted plenty of torque and power. Plenty of safety features, in case she rolled or pranged. Good handling on hairy corners and switchback roads.

Hence the Golf. A Porsche, Audi, BMW or Alfa would have been nice, but noticeable. No one would look twice at a Falcon, Holden or Camry, but they were salesmen's cars, they handled like boats, and Grace needed a convincing cover story ready to explain what she was doing on a major interstate in the middle of the night. And so she drove a 2-litre diesel Golf, a young woman's car, perfect for a cute young contracts lawyer with a fear of flying. No self-respecting drug courier or jewel thief would drive one; no highway cop would get an itch to chase one.

Of course, it made sense to fly sometimes. Imagine being subjected to a spot search on a car ferry with a boot-load of gear...

Today she had a clear run on the toll road between Melbourne airport and the city, and again when she headed over the West Gate Bridge, high winds buffeting the little car, and down into Williamstown, where the mean grind of old Melbourne co-existed with bright young mortgages. Factories and workshops sat next to pastelly little townhouses with cute, candy-coloured cars in the driveways. Grace wound down her window. The air, dense and still, was faintly salted from the Bay. The trees, branches barely moving, seemed dazed from the years-long drought.

She parked in a cramped yard behind a corner pub. She'd dressed down at the airport, and now her demeanour was down, too, a little defeated-looking as she trudged with a plastic shopping bag down the block to Steve Finch's second-hand shop. Leaning on his display window as if to remove a stone from her shoe, she scanned the area for stakeout vans, cameras behind curtains or cops inside the shop. Nothing. She went in. If the cops came now, she was just a punter with a few bits of rubbish to pawn.

Nothing ever changed in Finch's shop. Open seven days a week, dusty TV sets and VCRs in the window, boxy computer monitors on card tables, cartons of vinyl records, cassette tapes and paperback books. Islands of unloved and unlovely furniture to negotiate before she found Steve at an ink-stained counter, working the keyboard of a

sleek new Mac. He reeked of aftershave. It fought the mustiness and won.

‘Be with you in a minute.’

He hadn’t looked up; wouldn’t have heard her above the radio, set to a thrash station and marked down to \$15. But he would have seen her on the security monitors. Cameras covered all the corners and overlooked the street, side paths and back yard. In fact, Grace had advised him what to install where.

Hadn’t looked up, and hadn’t used body language to warn her either, meaning there were no cops behind a wardrobe or lurking in his office. She studied him. Finch’s face was crammed with large features slapped onto a narrow skull, nose and chin hooking forward, ears like sails. He wore his hair long as if to bulk up the narrowness. He was about forty, tall, well-dressed in a cotton shirt and trousers. His grimy fingers were probably from tinkering inside the guts of the turntable lying in pieces beside the computer.

‘Needs a new motor and rollers,’ he said, reading her mind. Still not looking at her.

He tapped a few more keys and peered at the screen. ‘Place in California can ship them to me.’

‘Worth it?’

Now he looked at her. ‘Is it worth it? Collector’s item, Suze.’

Susan was as good a name as Grace, or any of the others she used. She also had passports, credit cards and driver’s licences in names she hadn’t used yet, names of babies that had died around the time she was born. And there was an old name, Nina, lurking in her dreams that seemed real where the others didn’t. But just now, with Steve Finch, she was Suze, short for Susan.

He grinned at her as a thought entered his head and raised one finger. ‘Something to show you.’

A photograph of his baby son, the child clutching a chair and looking outraged. ‘Took his first steps about ten seconds later,’ Finch said.

‘How gorgeous,’ Grace said.

The new young wife, the pregnancy, the maternity ward and now the first footsteps, recorded in photographs that Steve insisted on showing her whenever she came to do business.

‘How’s *your* little one?’ he said now. ‘Any new photos?’

‘Steven Finch, dealer in stolen property and sentimental family man,’ said Grace, opening her wallet to a series of small photographs in clear plastic sleeves, the first a toothy blonde three-year-old.

Finch grabbed the wallet and peered. ‘Cute,’ he said, then flipped through.

‘Awww, look at her in her tutu.’ He peered again, read aloud—‘Hurstbridge Community Childcare Centre’—and glanced worriedly at Grace. ‘Your sister’s out there, right?’

Grace let pain show fleetingly, evidence of an old heartache, a heroin habit to feed, trying to get back on track but you know how it is. She swallowed, coughed, and managed to say, ‘I see her whenever I can.’

Steve nodded, still doubtful. ‘Who’s this? Your parents?’

Grace leaned over the counter, cocked her head at the opened wallet. ‘Yes.’

‘Autumn Years...Where’s that?’

‘Out in Lakes Entrance.’

He frowned. ‘Not exactly close by.’

‘Can we get on with it?’

Finch was still looking at the image of Grace and an elderly couple posed before a home unit in a series of home units. ‘You look too young to have parents in a retirement village.’

Grace shrugged.

‘Sorry, none of my business,’ said Finch, who liked to make her well-being his business. ‘What have you got for me?’

She described the morning’s takings.

‘Let’s have a look-see.’

She left the shop first, and drove the Golf to a car park behind an

abandoned factory. When Finch arrived in his van, she opened the boot. His face emotionless, he drew on cotton gloves and sifted through the items. 'No coins, stamps? Those I can always handle.'

'Not this time.'

He ran an ultraviolet light over laptop, iPod and cameras. When a name and a phone number showed on the Canon, he thrust it away as if scorched. 'Get rid of this.'

She would. Several grands' worth, into the sea.

He was frowning at the ground, working out costs and disbursements. 'I can go two grand,' he said.

His tone was always apologetic, but, in Grace's mind, \$2000 was pretty good for an hour's work, and sometimes he paid a lot more, depending on what she had. The apology also said that he knew how soon she'd run through the money, feeding her habit, but what could he do? He had a business to run.

She showed him her photographs of the vases and the Whiteleys. 'I might go back for them one day.'

Finch gave her a half nod as if to say yeah maybe, if she lasted that long, then counted out her cut in crisp \$100 notes. 'Stay in touch, okay?'

'Sure.'

Grace had a landline, an iPhone and several cheap pre-paid mobiles, but no one ever called her, she called them. If someone wanted her, they used the Hotmail account.

Then Finch glanced around at the cracked concrete wastes and said, 'Can't stay, can you?'

She never had stayed. She didn't want to have sex with him, or listen to his crap. *Clean yourself up, spend time with your daughter, family's important...*

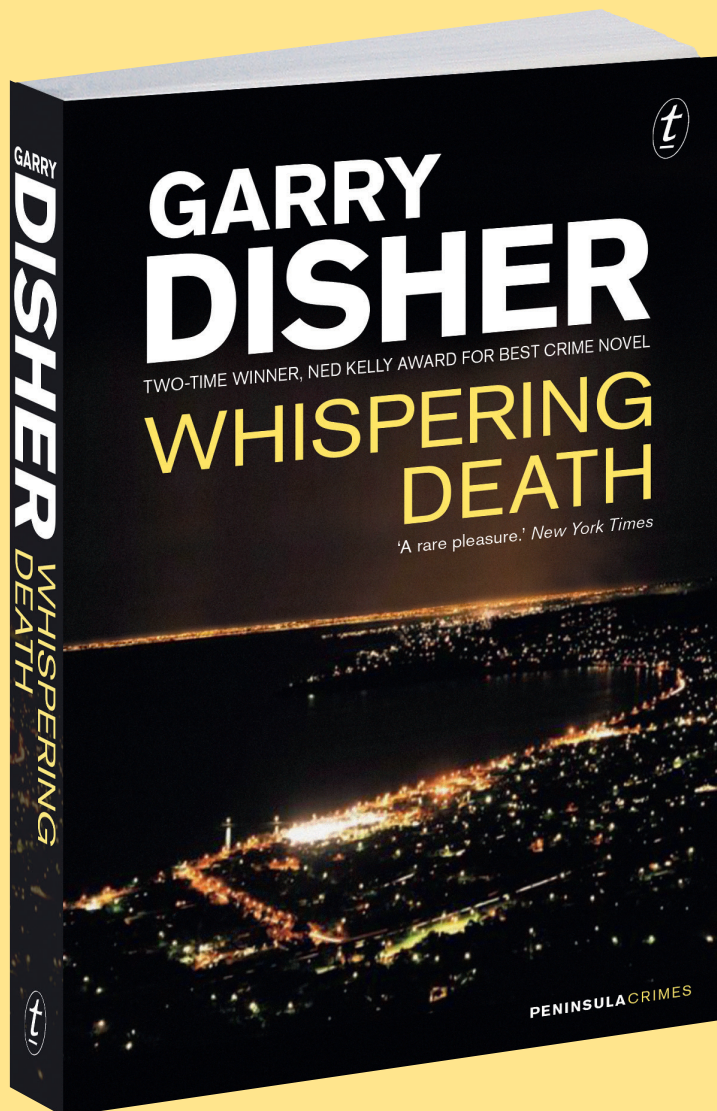
'What's the time?' she asked, as if she wasn't rejecting him out of hand.

'Noon.'

'I'd better go,' she said. 'I'm having a new fridge delivered.'

‘Fair enough.’

She pointed the Golf at the city, up and over the West Gate Bridge, but wasn’t going home. Home was in another direction, and she didn’t need a new fridge. She was on her way to the Peninsula town of Waterloo. Out of habit and instinct, she would avoid the toll-roads and drive sedately for the speed and intersection cameras.



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