



PENINSULA CRIMES

# GARRY DISHER

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

## SIGNAL LOSS

'One of the best writers in  
the country.' *Australian*





LOVELOCK AND PYM. They sounded like some kind of show-business duo—magicians, maybe; folk singers.

In fact they worked for Hector Kaye, who used to run with the Finks out of Kings Cross. That was before he set up as a legitimate businessman and started importing crystal meth from China. They didn't come cheap, Lovelock and Pym. Kaye paid them well and he'd bought them each a house and a car in the past year.

Their next project was to knock off a guy named Owen Valentine down in Victoria. Fifty grand plus a thousand a day each for expenses. Four days minimum, two days on the road from Sydney, two days back. The coast route, not the Hume: fewer cops. There was no reason why they couldn't fly down on fake IDs, they had plenty to choose from, but neither of them had ever seen the south coast. They'd be renting a Mercedes with one of the fake IDs, a big sedan with room in the boot for a body.

That was the basic set-up. Now Hector moved on to the finer detail: 'Grab this Valentine prick as soon as his girlfriend and kids have left the house, pack up his clothes and toiletries and shit so it

looks like he's done a runner, whack him, disappear the body.'

The three of them were on Hector's deck overlooking Double Bay, sitting around a glass and stainless steel outdoor setting, sipping margaritas. Lovelock, a literal-minded man who despised fag drinks like margaritas, said, 'Whack him at his house, or take him somewhere first?'

'Not at his fucking house, genius. He's done a *runner*, right? No blood.'

'Then disappear him,' Lovelock repeated flatly.

'Bury him,' Kaye specified. 'Deep. You'll need a shovel.'

Lovelock had never been to Victoria. 'Where?'

'Here,' said Kaye, tapping a map. He had the long, clean forefingers of a businessman. No grease, scars or swollen knuckles. Only with his sleeves rolled back you could see a scroll of black ink: *Respect Few, Fear None*.

Lovelock and Pym studied the map dubiously. It was a bad fax, or more likely a scan, showing a twenty-kilometre-square detail of the Mornington Peninsula south-east of Melbourne. Kaye had used pink highlighter to mark a coastal town, Moonta, and an inland track named Lintermans Lane.

'Grab the guy in Moonta, bury him in Lintermans Lane. Got it,' said Lovelock.

Meanwhile Pym was examining the other paperwork on the table: head-and-shoulders shots of their victim, typed information, a mobile number. A slight, nervy man who liked to query and quibble, he stared at Kaye. 'You're sending us to the dark side of the moon, boss.'

'It's not the fucking Simpson Desert, it's an hour from Melbourne,' said Kaye. 'If you don't want the job, I'll send someone else.'

'Can't you use a local guy?'

'It's a *favour* for a local guy, all right? He doesn't want anything to come back on him. You go in, do it, get out. Jesus, you're getting paid enough.'

Sea birds wheeled above the water, blindingly blue under the early summer sun. A solitary cloud above. Pym ignored all that. Curious to know how far he could push, he said, 'What's your cut?'

'The satisfaction of doing a favour for an associate,' Kaye snarled, 'all right?'

Pym saluted him. 'You're the boss.'

'That I am.'

SO LOVELOCK AND PYM took the coast road, the ocean only occasionally visible. Stopped Wednesday night at Bega, where they fitted the Mercedes with plates from a Victorian car, and then down through Gippsland to the tip of Westernport Bay. After ascertaining that Moonta was no more than a bunch of beach houses with a single shop, they drove another ten minutes to the town of Waterloo, which had a motel. Pym went for a run as soon as they checked in, then drove to the Bunnings on the edge of town and bought a shovel and tarp. Paid cash, the visor of his John Deere cap low on his brow. Lovelock stayed in, sinking a six-pack of Victoria Bitter as he watched the T20 game on Fox. Over dinner—chicken salad for Pym, meat-lovers pizza for Lovelock—they studied the paperwork again.

Lovelock chewed, swallowed, burped. 'Guy looks like a meth head.'

Pym nodded. In photographs, Owen Valentine had a narrow, bruised, hunted-looking face under a firebreak haircut, his parted dry lips revealing mossy teeth.

Lovelock snatched another bite and ruminated. 'You ever ask yourself what we're doing?'

*Christ*, thought Pym, hating it when Lovelock got philosophical. 'No.'

Lovelock waved his pizza slice, tumbling a lump of greyish meat onto the nasty bedspread. 'I mean, all we ever do is what we're told. You ever thought of going independent?'

‘No,’ Pym said, without much hope it would shut Lovelock up.

‘Okay, so ask yourself: here’s a meth head, and we’re getting fifty grand to waste him. Makes you think, right? All that money?’

‘Think what?’

‘Whatever this Valentine character did to piss off Hector’s mate, it must have been big. I mean, fifty grand.’

‘So?’

‘So he knows something, stole a shitload of drugs, something.’

‘So?’

‘So yeah, we top him, bury him. But why not ask a few questions first?’ Lovelock said, getting out his cigarettes.

Pym made him take his filthy habit outside, Pym who didn’t touch steroids, ice, nicotine, alcohol. He was a killer these days, but quite a bit of the old Pym lingered from before. Clean, straight. Good job as an aide to a Liberal Party MP, before a small misstep in the form of a Facebook post. A few frank thoughts on immigrants and Muslims that prompted a swift change of careers.

He made Lovelock take his filthy habit outside, but still kissed him goodnight.

ON FRIDAY MORNING—AFTER Pym’s run and Lovelock’s sleep-in—they drove back up to Moonta. Through farmland that backed onto the mudflats and mangroves, along small, tight roads to the little township. It was no more than a collection of short, sandy streets settled with beach houses of various kinds, some costly, others renovated cottages, with a few wood and plaster kit homes of the kind pictured in brochures with names like ‘The Inlander’ or ‘The Californian’.

The house where Owen Valentine lived with his girlfriend and their kids was a shabby fibro structure set amid ti-trees on a narrow dirt track unobservantly named Banksia Court. Pulling the Mercedes under a nearby tree, Lovelock and Pym watched and waited, and presently a rusty white Corolla pulled out of the car

shed at the side of the house, a woman and one child aboard.

‘So far so good,’ Pym said.

‘There’s supposed to be two kids. Where’s the other one?’

‘Maybe it’s too tiny to see,’ said Pym, irritated. ‘How the fuck would I know?’

‘I’m just saying.’

They stared at the house gloomily, wondering if they’d have to factor in a second killing. It would mean more work.

‘Okay, time to rock and roll,’ Pym said.

THEY ENTERED BY THE CAR shed and a connecting door to the kitchen. Found Owen Valentine asleep on a sofa in the sitting room. Pym was disgusted. Takeaway food containers, wine bottles, overflowing ashtrays, a greasy meth pipe on the coffee table. And the place stank. Drugs, garbage, pine sap from a miserable Christmas tree in the corner, dog shit.

‘Hey there, cutie,’ murmured Lovelock, bending to a tiny black toilet brush of a dog. Dogs loved him, and this one licked his hand.

‘Leave it,’ snapped Pym.

He kicked the sleeping man’s leg. Valentine snorted, a skinny, ice-ravaged creature dressed in shorts and a T-shirt. Gummy eyes, when they finally opened. Three or four days’ worth of whiskers, grubby feet with a yellow talon at the end of each toe.

‘Get up, asshole,’ Pym said. To get the message across, he scraped the blade of his boning knife along the ridges and whorls of his left thumb.

‘Who the fuck are you?’ croaked Valentine.

‘Your worst nightmare,’ Lovelock said, grabbing Valentine by the shirt, lifting him out of the chair, driving his fist into the skinny belly.

The dog yapped, appreciating the game.

‘Careful,’ said Pym. ‘No blood, no signs of disturbance.’

So they moved to the car shed, shut the street door and

duct-taped Valentine to a cobwebby green plastic garden chair. Lovelock scooped up the dog and tickled its ears as he looked around. Old paint tins, packaged screws and nails on a work bench, various edged tools hanging from the walls. Engine oil in the air; a hint of brine from the nearby beach.

And sweat. It was hot in the shed, getting hotter, the early December sun beating hard upon the roofing iron. Pissed pants now, too. Valentine bewildered and afraid, his eyes bugging out.

‘You’ve been a naughty boy, Owen,’ Lovelock said, aiming at the general, not the specific, hoping Valentine would spill some information they could profit from. ‘Haven’t you, eh? A liability. Some unhappy people.’

A look of resignation passed over Valentine’s face, chased by fear and ice twitches. He thrashed about in his chair and opened his mouth to yell. Lovelock slammed his fists left and right at Valentine’s head and stomach, and Valentine, reduced to skin and bone, rattled and jerked in the chair, not riding the blows at all.

Pym, fastidious, stood clear of the flying blood, sweat and mucus. Presently he said, ‘That’ll do.’ The two of them paused for a moment, regarding the miserable figure in the chair.

Valentine did nothing, said nothing, his head lolling. It made Lovelock mad. And his fists hurt.

He moved in again, screaming, ‘Where the *fuck* is it, you piece of shit?’

Valentine lifted his misshapen head. His eyes were reduced to puffy slits. He whispered, ‘I’m sorry,’ working his tongue and lips to moisten the rotting mouth.

‘My turn,’ Pym said, nudging Lovelock aside. He drew a line of blood beads along Valentine’s forearm with the tip of his knife. ‘You’re holding out on us, Owen.’

Valentine’s eyes rolled back and his chin dropped to his chest. Blood dripped from his arm, bloody drool gathered on his chin, a poor glistening thread of it stretching, finally reaching his lap.

‘Faking it,’ Lovelock said.

He leaned in, jetted smoke into Valentine’s face and shouted, ‘Where the fuck is it?’

Valentine tried to lift his head and failed.

‘What’s that?’ said Lovelock comically. ‘Can’t hear you, mate. Work those tonsils.’

Valentine’s chin fell to his chest but he was conscious, his eyes open. Lovelock said to Pym, ‘You have another go.’

Pym, gagging at the smell, flicked his blade tip at Valentine’s nostrils, earlobes, eyebrows. Fluids leaked, pooling around the chair, darkening the cement floor, and Valentine shuddered, his eyes fluttering, his head tipping to his shoulder.

Lovelock’s impatience grew. This shouldn’t be taking so long. Elbowing Pym away, he delivering another flurry of punches, left and right. ‘*Wake up, bozo.*’

Nothing. He tapped the bruised cheeks, lifted the mashed eyelids, felt for a pulse.

Found a pulse. Muttered, ‘Not dead, then,’ and slapped Valentine’s face. ‘Come on buddy, wake up. Don’t piss us about.’

Still nothing.

He stood back. ‘I’m not buying it, Owen,’ he said critically. ‘Wake the fuck up.’

‘Can I try?’ said Pym, his voice a whispery rasp, almost indistinguishable from the sound of the hot wind outside, leafy branches scraping the nearby walls, fences and rooftops.

‘Go for your life.’

Pym used his fingers this time, pinching and flicking, darting in like a wasp. Finding pleasure where, for Lovelock, administering a beating was merely work.

No response. Pym stood back and Lovelock took his place again. ‘Maybe he’s unconscious.’

‘Oh, do you think?’ said Pym. ‘You did hit him quite hard.’

Lovelock flushed.



He pulled out one of his phones, tapped the screen with a blunt forefinger.

*Three* taps, Pym noted. Appalled, he said, 'Who the fuck are you calling?'

'Triple zero.'

'You mad?'

Lovelock waved his free hand irritably, a shut-up gesture, and said pleasantly, 'Ambulance service, please.'

Pym blinked, checked the exits. There were two: the connecting door to Valentine's kitchen, currently open, and the roller door to the street, currently closed.

'No,' Lovelock was saying, 'I don't actually need an ambulance, not yet, but could you give me a couple of tips on how to revive a mate who—?'

He listened, nodded, said, 'No, he just fainted. The heat, I think.'

Listened again, said, 'No, an ambulance would be overkill, I just need...On drugs? I don't think so,' he added, glancing at Valentine as if to confirm the diagnosis. Listened a bit more, frustration growing. 'Look, should I pump his chest? Throw cold water on him? What? No, no, don't put me through to—'

He stabbed the off button. Stripped away the battery cover, removed battery and sim card, ground the whole phone into the concrete with his boot, put the pieces in his pocket.

'The mind boggles,' said Pym.

'She was going to put me through to the cops,' Lovelock said, sounding surprised.

'Jesus Christ. Look, let's just finish him off and get out of here.'

'Fine,' said Lovelock, smarting. 'Wait.'

He leaned his heavy face towards Valentine, peeled up the eyelids, felt for a pulse. 'Oh well. Mission accomplished.'

Pym checked, confirmed, sighed. 'I'll get the car. You grab his clothes and toilet bag.'

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LIFTING THE ROLLER DOOR, PYM glanced both ways along the street, jogged to the Mercedes and reversed it into the car shed, almost forgetting—until the sensor set up a frantic beeping—that Valentine was back there, strapped to a chair, blood pooling. He braked, switched off, got out, opened the boot and spread the tarp over the carpeted interior. Satisfied, he yelled for Lovelock: ‘Give us a hand.’

Lovelock wandered in from the house with a gym bag of shoes and clothing in one hand, an aluminium gun case in the other. ‘Check this out.’

Pym shook his head. ‘Put it back.’

‘You kidding? Not this beauty.’

He flipped open the lid to reveal an elegant wood and blued-steel rifle fitted with a scope.

‘Mate, please,’ Pym said.

‘Just for the rest of the day, okay?’

‘Fat chance. If we get pulled over...’

‘I’ll ditch it before we head back to Sydney, okay?’

With that, Lovelock opened a rear door of the Mercedes and stowed the gun case behind the front seats, concealed under a shirt and a pair of jeans from the gym bag.

Washing his palms together in satisfaction he said, ‘Now for our host.’

Pym sliced the body free of the tape, shoved the chair under a workbench and with a *one, two, three*, helped Lovelock toss Valentine into the boot before he noticed a police car pulling into the kerb. Blocking the driveway.

Without missing a beat, Pym shut the boot, crossed to the stack of paint tins and levered the lid from a litre of white undercoat. He poured the paint liberally over the blood- and mucus-stained concrete, splashed a little on his hands, trousers and shoes, and dropped the tin amid the muck.

Just as a uniformed cop stepped into the car shed. ‘Gentlemen.’

He paused for his eyes to adjust before edging down along the drivers side of the Mercedes.

Pym nodded, working a harassed look onto his face. He'd often felt harassed, so it was no great stretch. Lovelock, the idiot, merely looked alarmed.

'Constable Tankard, Waterloo police,' announced the cop. He was a pink, beefy, damp-looking guy, his flesh pushing hard against his waistband and collar. 'We had a complaint, a disturbance at this address.'

'Disturbance?' said Pym, frowning.

'Raised voices and so forth.'

Pym tried a rueful look. He'd never felt rueful in his life, only betrayed or let down, and struggled to get it right. 'No disturbance,' he said. 'As you can see, I just spilled paint everywhere. Probably people heard me swearing.'

The cop's heavy face took that in and he turned to Lovelock. Looked him up and down, paying attention to his knuckles. 'Hurt yourself, sir?'

Pym tensed but Lovelock handled it well. Scrutinising his hands, then his arms and knees, he said, 'The wife's always going off at me, can't drive a nail in without drawing blood.' He gave a little head shake. 'Sorry, we've both been in the wars this morning, sorry if we gave offence.'

The cop chuckled and had another look at the Mercedes, perhaps thinking, *Rich city blokes, hopelessly impractical*, and said with a grin, 'Okay, boys, I'll leave you to it.'

He returned to his car. Lovelock and Pym watched and waited through all of the cop stuff, the radio confirmation, time check and notebook record, followed by the mirror adjustment, the fastening of the seatbelt, the turning of the ignition key. Finally, he was gone.

'Let's get the fuck out of here,' Lovelock said.

Pym couldn't have put it better himself.

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FOLLOWING THE DIRECTIONS ON Hector's fax, they headed inland, into a hinterland area of dirt roads that serviced orchards and farms. Many were prosperous-looking places, shaved and combed, set back on hillsides far from the road. But closer to, faded by the sun and the roiling dust of passing vehicles, were one or two weatherboard hovels, abandoned or rented by the kinds of depressed, raw-faced men and women who wash up in rural areas to work with animals and machines.

Pym, slumped in the passenger seat, hated it. He was a city boy. Yeah, the coast was nearby, Melbourne no more than an hour away, but here, today, it was all dryness and hot dust tossed about by a dirty wind. Small stones pinged under the chassis.

And then Owen Valentine's dog jumped between the seats, made a few circles of his lap, and settled down to sleep.

Pym was aghast. Holding his hands away from his body, he shouted, 'What the fuck?'

Lovelock grinned. 'Mate, he just jumped in.'

'Bullshit. You put him in, you cunt.'

'Hey! Watch the tone.'

'I don't want a fucking dog in the car,' Pym said.

'Put him in the back if he bothers you.'

Cringing, Pym did that, then wiped his palms on his pants. He felt soiled. 'Filthy creature.'

'Yeah? Fuck you,' Lovelock said, driving with one hand, his elbow hanging on the sill of his open window, a negligent cigarette in his other hand. He drew hungrily on it, the tip flaring, flicked the ash into their slipstream, steered the car over the corrugations, drew smoke again.

'Bushfire weather,' warned Pym.

'Mate, summer's barely started.'

Pym folded his arms, stared glumly ahead. Lovelock finished his cigarette. Gave Pym a certain look, and flicked the butt into the ditch.

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PYM REMEMBERED: HE WAS supposed to text the client. He took a cheap disposable phone from his pocket and saw that he had no signal bars. When the signal returned he got halfway through the message; lost signal again. The fucking place was full of dead zones. Finally, message sent. No 'Dear Bill' or 'Fred' or 'Susan'. Hector Kaye hadn't told them who'd contracted the job. Just: *It's done.*

Then he removed and snapped the sim card and tossed it with the phone, battery cover and battery out of the window. He settled back. Peered at the map and said, 'Slow down, we turn just up here.'

They came to a T-intersection. 'Hang a left.'

Lovelock made the turn. The road, still dirt, was flat for the first half-kilometre, later climbing through grassy, heavily treed farmland and over a rise to more of the same. Just ahead of them huddled a large weatherboard house, a pretty place—garden beds, rosebushes and small native trees—but unfortunately sited too close to the road. On the grassy verge was a blackboard and a white chalked message: DUST, PLEASE SLOW DOWN.

Lovelock, grinning, said, 'Watch this,' and accelerated, flinging stones, raising an angry cloud. Pym glanced at the house as they passed. An elderly woman was in the garden, weeding. Enclosed in dust, a hazy shape, she flung a futile arm across her face and tucked her head, a picture of misery.

Pym shook his head. 'Yeah, good one.'

THE WIND WAS GUSTING ALL about, and it gusted over Lovelock's discarded cigarette.

Otherwise, the burning coal tip might have winked out eventually, but, revived by the wind, it glowed, red hot, finding nourishment in a dead stalk of grass. That stalk ignited another, which ignited a paper scrap. Flames spread, mere flickers at first, licking at the grass.

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LOVELOCK AND PYM, SOME kilometres away, had found the track marked on the map, Lintermans Lane. It arrowed through paddocks and stands of eucalypts to a disused reservoir where you might profitably bury a body. Except that local landowners and shire environment protection officers, fed up with the degradation left by trail bikes and four-wheel drives, had bolted a sturdy, lockable tubular metal gate across the entrance. There was a narrow gap for bushwalkers and a set of rails for horseriders but, without a key, Lovelock and Pym in the Merc were fucked.

‘We’re fucked,’ said Pym.

‘I could ram it.’

‘I don’t think so,’ Pym said, taking in the solid posts, the rigid iron. Not to mention the damage to the car.

‘Shit.’

‘Don’t sweat it,’ Pym said. ‘We’ll carry him in.’

Lovelock glanced around uneasily. No traffic, no nearby houses, only dust, trees whipping in the wind, a hint of distant smoke. ‘We could just dump him.’

‘Weren’t you listening? No body. It has to look like he did a runner.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ Lovelock said. He strapped on his combat knife, ninety-nine dollars on eBay from somewhere in Texas, and slung Owen Valentine’s rifle across his back. ‘Let’s do it.’

‘Oh for God’s sake,’ Pym snarled, grabbing the shovel. ‘We’re not going to war.’

‘You never know,’ Lovelock said, feeling a martial impulse deep inside him. He fitted his Ray-Bans, checked his image in the smoky glass of the Merc.

‘When you’re quite ready,’ Pym said.

‘You crack me up, mate,’ Lovelock said, unconcerned. He reached into the car and heaved. In one continuous motion he had Valentine’s body over his shoulder and was striding through the pedestrian gap and along the laneway.

SOON, TREES CROWDING ON either side, the track became a dim tunnel, the ground a mat of pine needles and dead grass, little sign that any vehicles had been along here in the recent past. Vigorous blackberry canes reached for them, the berries still clenched tight and green. A magpie watched them pass, a butterfly, a bull the size of a Volkswagen in an adjacent paddock. Lovelock and Pym were alone in the world but for a vapour trail high above. Pym tried to gauge the direction. Melbourne to Hobart? Meanwhile, the wind came marauding through every gap in the tree line and Pym blinked to rid his eyes of grit. And he could smell smoke. He wished this was over with.

They walked for a kilometre, stopping where the laneway stopped, at a locked farm gate in a fence choked with blackberries and bracken. A faded sign said DEVILBEND RESERVOIR NO ADMITTANCE. Lovelock merely tumbled the dead man over the gate to the forbidden side and climbed over.

Pym followed. He was hot and wind-lashed, vegetation cuts on his hands and forearms. He considered he was earning his share of the fifty grand.

Fifty grand to kill a man and hide the body. What was that about? Too late now, Valentine was taking his secrets to his grave.

They walked, reaching a marshy cove, where the water lapped at reeds and mud. They started digging.

MEANWHILE A MAN NAMED COLIN HAUSER was walking towards the laneway. He generally walked at daybreak, but this morning he'd had to hang around and take delivery of two ride-on mowers and a little Kubota tractor, and the driver was late, so it was ten before he could shower, have breakfast. Then he fixed a broken pump before taking a call from his lawyer, who'd been talking to his wife's lawyer about a late alimony payment. By then it was late morning.

He almost didn't walk. It felt out of kilter, walking just before lunch instead of at dawn. Plus the heat, the dust and the wind. But he did walk, out along his driveway, onto the dirt road and up and over the hill, passing Mrs Broderick's place, her dust-warning sign covered in dust, and finally to the road that would take him to the top of Lintermans Lane. The wind whipped his jeans and plastered his shirt to his back and in the air there was a trace of smoke. He glanced around uneasily: a hot northerly. A bad fire day, even if it was barely summer.

A Mercedes was parked at the barrier to the lane. Just beyond it, apparently returning from a stroll, were two men: Thick and Thin, he thought. Large and Small. The little guy stiffened to see Hauser's approach, a kind of feral alertness appearing on his face—*As though I've got no right to be here*, Hauser thought. He wanted to say, 'I walk here every day; who the fuck are you?'

By now he was ten metres from the gate. The big guy had some kind of hunting knife strapped to his thigh and was carrying a rifle—and not just any rifle but Arnold Coxhell's AR16. The only social intercourse Colin Hauser got these days was taking deliveries in the dark hours and hanging out at the Westernport Sporting Shooters firing range, where he'd become mates with Coxhell. He remembered the guy showing off his Colt one day. Semi-auto, the non-military version of a US Army rifle, accurate up to a thousand metres in the right conditions with a rapid fire capability and negligible kick. Fitted with a Redfield variable-power scope for low-light conditions.

And two weeks ago, Arnold mentioned he'd been burgled. They'd forced his gun cabinet and disappeared with his shotgun and his Colt.

'A lot of that going around,' Hauser had said. He personally knew of an orchardist and a poultry farmer who'd lost rifles to thieves in the past six months.

And here was the Colt. Had to be Arnold's. Couldn't be another



one like it on the Peninsula, fitted with that scope.

Disguising his interest, Hauser reached the gate, did some hamstring stretches against a rail, nodded hello and walked back the way he'd come, as if he did this every day, every day turned back when he reached the gate, every day saw strangers in the lane. He made mental notes as he walked back past Mrs Broderick's and up and over the hill: date, time, location, description of the men, their vehicle, the rifle, the shovel. Repeated it like a mantra, all the way home.

AS SOON AS THE GUY HAD disappeared into the nearby side road, Pym said, 'He saw us.'

Well, that was obvious. 'He totally did,' Lovelock said.

'Well?'

'Well what?'

Pym said, a tight vibration in his voice, 'Well ask yourself what we look like.'

'No big deal. Just a couple of guys out walking. Like him.'

'You want to wake up to yourself,' said Pym, 'with that stupid fucking knife and that gun, me with a muddy shovel. He'll go home and he'll start thinking about what he's just seen and in a couple of days or even a couple of hours he'll think maybe he should report it.'

Lovelock chewed his lip, thinking. Finally he slipped the rifle strap from his shoulder, smacked the stock into his left palm. 'Better safe than sorry, right?'

They climbed into the Mercedes and followed the man. Past the old woman's house to the top of the rise, where they paused to sneak a look. The guy was halfway down the slope, turning into a driveway. Pym narrowed his gaze: there was a house back there, a hundred metres in, concealed with several sheds and a windmill behind a stand of pine trees.

'All right then.'

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THE SMOKE HEAVIER NOW, a boiling cloud of it over in the east, Hauser hurried past his dogs in their kennels, through the garden gate and indoors. Straight to his study, where he wrote it all down on a blank sheet of printer paper before he forgot.

An explosion of barking outside.

THE BIG CAR PURRED DOWNHILL and into the driveway. Just inside it was a small clearing where the guy evidently stowed his garbage and recycle bins rather than wheel them to and fro on collection day. Lovelock steered into the clearing, sending both bins flying, stopped, grabbed the rifle and they got out.

Coming to the house, the sheds spread out on a slope beyond it, they were startled by barking, a pair of dogs lunging at them, caught short by chains. Slow learners, the dogs lunged again. 'Jesus Christ,' muttered Pym.

'Good doggies,' said Lovelock.

They paused at the garden gate. The house was small, an unloved 1970s brick veneer. Rosebushes grew wild around it, the lawn was knee high in drying grass, stiff dead plants sat in terracotta pots on the veranda. They stepped through the gate and onto the veranda. The front door was locked and smeared in a layer of pollen and dust, proof that it was never used. The kitchen door was unlocked and opened smoothly with barely a squeak.

The kitchen was a hovel, almost bereft of natural light, smelling of cooked meat, dust balls and greasy plates. The hallway was no better, a dingy tunnel offering a couple of half-open doors. An armchair before a giant TV in one room, an unmade bed in another. Old odours: stale air, unwashed clothes, unwashed armpits.

Finally, at the end, a small study, more loved than the other rooms: desk, shelves, computer and printer, phone, filing cabinets. And the man from the laneway gate, standing behind his desk.

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HAUSER FOLDED THE PAPER IN TWO and had slipped it between the pages of his desk diary when the voice warned, 'Don't touch the phone.'

Not that it mattered. Lovelock fired the Colt a millisecond later.

A huge sound, shocking, and the dogs, momentarily silenced, started up again, a different note this time, as if they were stricken with grief.

Lovelock stepped around the desk and fired again, straight down into Hauser's skull.

A KIND OF SILENCE SETTLED.

Then Pym took charge. 'Don't touch anything.'

'Mate, I'm not fucking stupid.'

'Pick up the cartridges.'

'Why? I never touched them. The cops will pin it on whoever's prints are on them.'

Pym opened his mouth to speak, reconsidered. 'Fair enough. Robbery gone wrong.'

'If you say so,' said Lovelock doubtfully, not seeing anything of value in the place.

'Pull out a few drawers, make a mess, grab small stuff.'

While Lovelock was doing that, Pym checked the desk phone, a handkerchief masking his fingers. The last number called was not the police but a mobile, a couple of hours earlier.

He knelt at the body, searched the pockets. A Swiss Army knife, a battered wallet containing cards and a five dollar note, which he took.

Lovelock returned, carrying an iPad, an old Nokia, a Ziploc bag of marijuana. 'Look what I found in the freezer,' he said, waving the weed.

'Good for you,' snapped Pym. 'Come on, let's get out of here.'

'You're a bundle of laughs.'

'What, you think we should throw a party? We've just killed

two men. We're a long way from home.'

Rolling his eyes, Lovelock followed Pym out of the house. Past the dogs, which seemed to cower this time, reading the men accurately, and down the driveway to the Mercedes.

Pym sniffed the air. 'Smoke.'

He turned full circle but the pines towered thickly, offering only a washed-out patch of noonday sky. What did he know about fires? Didn't want to be caught among pine trees, though.

Same as before, Lovelock drove, Pym rode shotgun, and Owen Valentine's toilet-brush dog lay curled asleep on the back seat. They passed the dust-warning sign and Lovelock accelerated again, but his heart wasn't in it this time.

A SERIES OF LEFT AND RIGHT turns, then they were east of the reservoir, approaching a sealed road. A police car was parked at the intersection, lights flashing, and the skyline over near the town they'd stayed in last night was thick with smoke, a nasty boiling heap of it.

Lovelock braked. 'He's seen us.'

Pym floated a hand from his lap and wrapped his fingers around Lovelock's meaty forearm, reassuring. What he always did when Lovelock lost it. 'Calm down. He's not after us.'

'How do you know?'

'Ask yourself what he's doing there, okay? It's the fire. He's warning traffic.'

'If you say so.'

'I say so. Just drive up normally, wind your window down, see what he says. If you U-turn now, he *will* remember us, especially if it turns out the fire was deliberately lit.'

Lovelock swallowed, his heavy features beaded with sweat, but accelerated slowly towards the intersection. The policeman, a young uniformed constable in wraparound sunglasses, turned to watch them. At the last moment an irritated expression crossed his face, as



if to say here was another moron too stupid to be out on the roads. He gestured at Lovelock: turn left, away from the fire.

Lovelock saluted, complied. 'Didn't even bother to talk to us,' he said, glancing at the rear-view mirror.

Then: 'Fuck, he's on his radio.'

'Settle down. He's been told to keep tabs on the traffic, that's all,' Pym said, craning his head around to peer back along the road. He couldn't see anything now, the road full of bends, the roadside trees.

'What if he calls in the plates?'

'Ah. Trouble.'

'So keep fucking watching,' said Lovelock tensely.

A half-minute, a minute, and the road behind them remained clear. 'Nothing,' Pym said.

'But what about *ahead* of us, did you think about that?'

'You're being paranoid.'

'There's a good reason for that,' Lovelock said, his hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel. He swung into the nearest side road. 'Soon as it's safe, I'm switching the plates again.'

'And ditch the fucking rifle,' Pym said.

'Yeah, yeah.'

Pym glanced around uneasily. The road—a narrow gravelled track through lightly timbered farmland—was heading in the right direction to meet the highway to Gippsland, but there were kilometres to go before that and now the smoke was a wall ahead of them.

His voice a tense squeak, he said, 'We need to go back.'

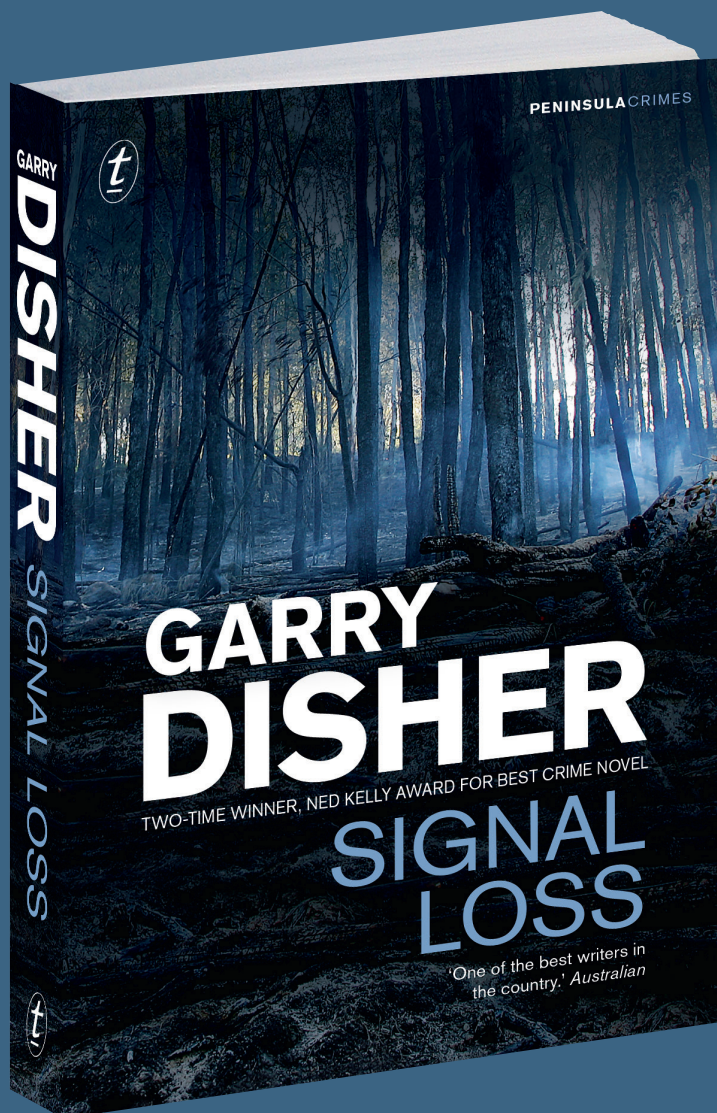
He'd seen a lick of flame in the smoke, sparks streaming on the wind. And the smoke was closing in suddenly. Not kilometres away after all. The treetops were thrashing, twigs and branches and a twist of roofing iron flying past the windscreen.

'Fuck.'

Embers were thick around them, touching off new fires, and now Pym was afraid. He clutched Lovelock's forearm for reassurance. 'Mate...'

Lovelock slowed the car. Brought it to a stop, gauging the width of the road. Too narrow for an easy turn, Pym could see that at a glance, and the ditches on either side were a mystery. Deep? Would they get stuck? He couldn't tell.

The engine stalled. Lovelock ground the starter motor as the heat smacked into them. Paint blistering, you never saw anything like it, felt heat like it or heard anything like the snarling fury. It came in hard. You couldn't speak, do anything.



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