

PENINSULA CRIMES



GARRY DISHER

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

KITTYHAWK DOWN

'Taut and terrific.' *Age*

The National Parks sign said 'Bushrangers Bay 2.6 km' and 'Cape Schank 5.4 km'. Hal Challis edged through the barrier designed to thwart trail-bikes and stepped out along the track, the bushland warm and some of the flora turning red and yellow on this Easter Saturday afternoon in early autumn.

Bushranger.

A name that denoted violent crime and romance. An apt name, given that Challis had come here for a murder and had come here for love.

Autumn. 'Fall', as the Yanks call it.

You couldn't get a better word than 'fall' to describe the season and his life now. Leaves everywhere had begun to fall. Since yesterday, Good Friday, his spirits had fallen, love gone wrong. And he thought of the body falling, falling through the water.

Challis strode on, disturbing a small snake. He was tall, thin but hard-boned, and looked slightly out of date in his jeans,

scuffed flying jacket and plain leather shoes. His sunglasses were not an accessory perched above his forehead but shaded his eyes. He'd never worn a T-shirt as an undershirt or tracksuit pants out of doors. He'd never owned a pair of runners. His hair was straight, dark and lifted a little in the wind. It was cut once a month by a young woman who worked beside her father in a Waterloo barbershop. She was skilful and attentive, and for the sum of \$10 returned him to the world with a neatly shaped head. And so Challis was outwardly unremarkable that day, nodding with grave courtesy to the people coming toward him along the track. This late on an Easter Saturday, five-thirty pm, couples and families were streaming back to the carpark. Only Challis headed the other way, happy to leave them to the roads of the Peninsula, which would be choked with holidaymakers right now. Very few noticed that he was wound tightly, as if insulating a knot of powerful feelings, and the sunglasses hid the habitually weary, unimpressed and disbelieving cast of his face.

There were better things that Challis could have been doing. He could have been halfway through an Easter walk of the Peninsula beaches with Tessa Kane, but yesterday he'd had to pull out, and that had been the start of his falling spirits. He could have been at home reading or mulching leaves, but early in the afternoon he'd found himself listening for the phone to ring with more bad news from the women's prison, where his wife was serving eight years, and so he'd left the house. He could have been spending time with friends, but they all had children and Easter was a time for family connectedness and strife, and no one wanted a forty-year-old single man hanging around them.

And so he'd started thinking about murder. As the Homicide Squad inspector for the Peninsula, thinking about murder was his job. In fact, there were two murders to think about, both relatively old and both unsolved. The first involved no body, only a strong suspicion. Ten months ago—June last year—a two-year-old

toddler named Jasmine Tully had gone missing. She lived with her mother, Lisa, and Lisa's defacto in a rundown fisherman's shack on the outskirts of Waterloo. CIB detectives at Waterloo suspected the defacto, Bradley Pike. When they had failed to shake Pike's story or turn up evidence of any kind, they'd called in Challis. Challis was inclined to suspect Brad Pike too, and had spent hours trying to break his story. Cases involving children were the worst. He hated them. They left him feeling scoured and futile.

But it was the second murder that had brought Challis to Bushrangers Bay.

That, and love. If Tessa Kane was sticking to the timetable they'd mapped out with each other, she'd be walking in from Cape Schank about now. Maybe he'd encounter her. Maybe she'd want to talk.

Maybe not.

As for the second murder, this time there was a body, and Tessa Kane had called it the Flinders Floater on the front page of her newspaper. Unfortunately the name had stuck, and now even Challis was calling it the Flinders Floater.

It had been found by a commercial fisherman from Flinders about six months ago. He was pulling in his anchor and noticed how heavy it was. He kept hauling, and that's when he saw the second anchor, caught in the tines of his own. But that alone hadn't accounted for the extra weight. Attached to the second anchor—belted on, in fact, so you could be sure it wasn't accidental—was a body.

The fisherman used his mobile phone to call the police, and bobbed in the sea off Bushrangers Bay for an hour until a police launch arrived to take charge.

No one knew who the dead man was. Challis saw the body before the pathologist had started sawing at it. The flesh was soupy, bloated, chewed about, apt to fall away from the bones like

a cooked chicken's. Only the finger-pads of the right thumb and forefinger remained intact, the tips badly softened and wrinkled, but by injecting fluid under the skin the lab had distended them sufficiently to make serviceable fingerprints. No matches with the national computer. Then, when it was suggested that the dental work was foreign, Challis had tried Interpol, the Home Office National Computer in the UK, and the FBI.

Still nothing.

The clothing—jeans, T-shirt, underwear and Nike running shoes—had been made in Asian sweatshops for sale in Australian stores. They were a dime a dozen.

All that Challis knew was, the guy was in his thirties and his skull had been smashed in before he'd been thrown into the water. There were also stab wounds to the stomach, but the cause of death was drowning, the pathologist said, noting the presence of a large volume of seawater in the lungs. The blow to the head? Possibly to stun the victim. The stab wounds? Probably to release gases and so ensure that the body remained under the surface of the water.

The blow to the head was possibly administered by the anchor that had taken him to the bottom, the pathologist reported, after comparing the shape of the indentation in the skull with the shaft of the anchor. The anchor had been intended to hold the body down until the fishes had picked the bones clean. Fortunately the fisherman had happened along about two or three days later. Or unfortunately, because identifying victim and culprit had become a headache for Challis.

At least the anchor told Challis a couple of things: the body had been dumped at sea, not pushed over a cliff, and he'd be saved the tedium of mapping body drift as determined by the tides and the shape of the coastline.

One other thing: the victim had been wearing a Rolex Oyster watch. Silver, with an expanding metal band. It wasn't the

costliest Rolex available, but it was a genuine Rolex, not a ten-dollar Singapore or Bangkok fake. If the Rolex spelt a certain level of class or income, nothing else about the murdered man did. The clothes and Nike trainers didn't.

Challis walked on, allowing the Flinders Floater to rest there in his head like a shimmering wraith that would one day clarify, take on a corporeal being and tell him the story of his final days and minutes before he was thrown into the water to die.

He could see kangaroos grazing in the early evening light on the grassy slope above the walking track. He nodded at a young family, stepping off to let them through, and wondered what he was going to do when he got to the fork on the cliff-top above the little bay. Walk down to the beach and commune with the elements in the hope that he'd solve the case? Continue toward Cape Schank and hope to encounter Tessa?

Dusk was settling. He could see lights on the water and the lights of Phillip Island beyond the water. A cool autumn wind blew in from the sea. He zipped up his windproof jacket. He was hungry, sleepy, cold, depressed—and owed it all to one phone call.

An ordinary everyday sort of man might not have answered the phone at seven o'clock on Good Friday morning. But Challis was a homicide inspector and always answered the phone. And had heard his wife, using her phone card at the prison, announce that she intended to kill herself.

Her spirits always deteriorated at holiday time. Her spirits always *fell*.

He'd hung on to the phone for twenty minutes, letting her talk herself out of her depression. But the damage was done. He'd been making love with Tessa when the call came, and an hour later—the mood for love gone and just as he'd been about to set out for the two-day walk of the Peninsula beaches with her—Challis's parents-in-law had rung to say that their daughter

had snapped her phone card in two and tried to saw through her wrists with it, and was in the prison infirmary. She wasn't in any danger, but Challis's presence would help stabilise her mood, and if he wasn't busy would he mind...

Challis had said yes.

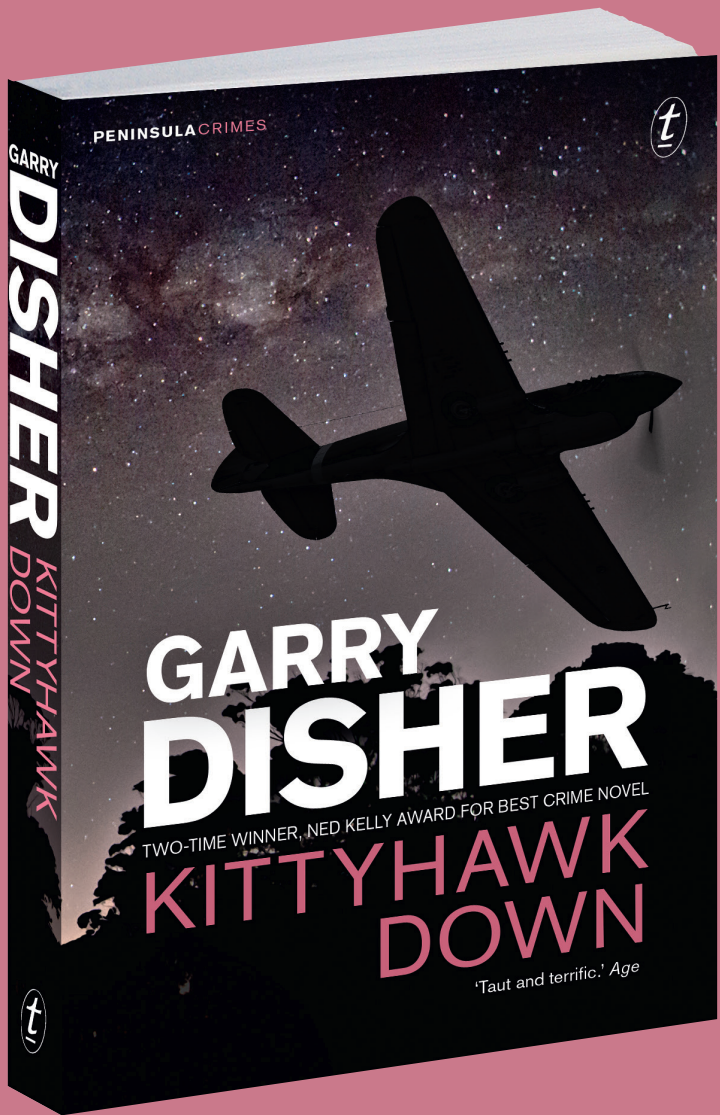
Tessa had said, 'It's time you let go of her, Hal,' then had driven off, announcing that she intended to undertake the walk alone.

Challis had almost set out to find her when he returned from seeing his wife in the afternoon.

Perhaps he should have. He was no good at gauging these things, but suspected that it would have been better then than now, a day later, when she'd had time to stew and set her mind and heart against him.

Self-conscious suddenly, he turned around and walked back to his car.

Almost six pm... On the way home he tuned in to the news. Two asylum seekers had escaped from the new detention centre near Waterloo. Challis shook his head, imagining the fallout, the divisions, the extra work for Ellen Destry and her CIB detectives.



Loved this extract?

Learn more at [Text Publishing](#)

