The Broken Shore

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Extract

CASHIN WALKED around the hill, into the wind from the sea. It was cold, late autumn, last glowing leaves clinging to the liquidambars and maples his great-grandfather's brother had planted, their surrender close. He loved this time, the morning stillness, loved it more than spring.

The dogs were tiring now but still hunting the ground, noses down, taking more time to sniff, less hopeful. Then one picked up a scent and, new life in their legs, they loped in file for the trees, vanished.

When he was near the house, the dogs, black as liquorice, came out of the trees, stopped, heads up, looked around as if seeing the land for the first time. Explorers. They turned their gaze on him for a while, started down the slope.

He walked the last stretch as briskly as he could and, as he put his hand out to the gate, they reached him. Their curly black heads tried to nudge him aside, insisting on entering first, strong back legs pushing. He unlatched the gate, they pushed it open enough to slip in, nose to tail, trotted down the path to the shed door. Both wanted to be first again, stood with tails up, furry scimitars, noses touching at the door jamb.

Inside, the big poodles led him to the kitchen. They had water bowls there and they stuck their noses into them and drank in a noisy way. Cashin prepared their meal: two slices each from the cannon-barrel dog sausage made by the butcher in Kenmare, three

handfuls each of dry dog food. He got the dogs' attention, took the bowls outside, placed them a metre apart.

The dogs came out. He told them to sit. Stomachs full of water, they did so slowly and with disdain, appeared to be arthritic. Given permission to eat, they looked at the food without interest, looked at each other, at him. Why have we been brought here to see this inedible stuff?

Cashin went inside. In his hip pocket, the mobile rang.

'Yes.'

'Joe?'

Kendall Rogers, from the station.

'Had a call from a lady,' she said. 'Near Beckett. A Mrs Haig. She reckons there's someone in her shed.'

'Doing what?'

'Well, nothing. Her dog's barking. I'll sort it out.'

Cashin felt his stubble. 'What's the address?'

'I'm going.'

'No point. Not far out of my way. Address?'

He went to the kitchen table and wrote on the pad: date, time, incident, address. 'Tell her fifteen-twenty. Give her my number if anything happens before I get there.'

The dogs liked his urgency, rushed around, made for the vehicle when he left the building. On the way, they stood on station, noses out the back windows. Cashin parked a hundred metres down the lane from the farmhouse gate. A head came around the hedge as he approached.

'Cop?' she said. She had dirty grey hair around a face cut from a hard wood with a blunt tool.

Cashin nodded.

'The uniform and that?'

'Plainclothes,' he said. He produced the Victoria Police badge with the emblem that looked like a fox. She took off her smudged glasses to study it.

'Them police dogs?' she said.

He looked back. Two woolly black heads in the same window.

'They work with the police,' he said. 'Where's this person?'

'Come,' she said. 'Dog's inside, mad as a pork chop, the little bugger.'

'Jack Russell,' said Cashin.

'How'd ya know that?'

'Just a guess.'

They went around the house. He felt the fear rising in him like nausea.

'In there,' she said.

The shed was a long way from the house, you had to cross an expanse of overgrown garden, go through an opening in a fence lost beneath rampant potato-creeper. They walked to the gate. Beyond was knee-high grass, pieces of rusted metal sticking out.

'What's inside?' Cashin said, looking at a rusted shed of corrugated iron a few metres from the road, a door half open. He felt sweat around his collarbones. He wished he'd let Kendall do this.

Mrs Haig touched her chin, black spikes like a worn-down hair brush. 'Stuff,' she said. 'Junk. The old truck. Haven't bin in there for years. Don't go in there.'

'Let the dog out,' he said.

Her head jerked, alarmed. 'Bastard might hurt im,' she said.

'No,' he said. 'What's the dog's name?'

'Monty, call them all Monty, after Lord Monty of Alamein. Too young, you wouldn't know.'

'That's right,' he said. 'Let Monty out.'

'And them police dogs? What bloody use are they?'

'Kept for life-and-death matters,' Cashin said, controlling his voice. 'I'll be at the door, then you let Lord Monty out.'

His mouth was dry, his scalp itched, these things would not have happened before Rai Sarris. He crossed the grassland, went to the left of the door. You learned early to keep your distance from potentially dangerous people and that included not going into dark sheds to meet them.

Mrs Haig was at the potato-creeper hedge. He gave her the thumbs up, his heart thumping.

The small dog came bounding through the grass, all tight muscles and yap, went for the shed, braked, stuck its head in the door and

snarled, small body rigid with excitement.

Cashin thumped on the corrugated iron wall with his left hand. 'Police,' he said loudly, glad to be doing something. 'Get out of there. Now!'

Not a long wait.

The dog backed off, shrieking, hysterical, mostly airborne.

A man appeared in the doorway, hesitated, came out carrying a canvas swag. He ignored the dog.

'On my way,' he said. 'Just had a sleep.' He was in his fifties perhaps, short grey hair, big shoulders, a day's beard.

'Call the dog, Mrs Haig,' Cashin said over his shoulder.

The woman shouted and the dog withdrew, reluctant but obedient.

'Trespassing on private property,' said Cashin, calmer. He felt no threat from the man.

'Yeah, well, just had a sleep.'

'Put the swag down,' Cashin said. 'Take off your coat.'

'Says who?'

'I'm a cop.' He showed the fox.

The man folded his bluey, put it down on his swag, at his feet. He wore laced boots, never seen polish, toes dented.

'How'd you get here?' Cashin said.

'Walking. Lifts.'

'From where?'

'New South.'

'New South Wales?

'Yeah.'

'Long way to come.'

'A way.'

'Going where?'

'Just going. My own business where I go.'

'Free country. Got some ID? Driver's licence, Medicare card.'

'No.'

'No ID?'

'No.'

'Don't make it hard,' Cashin said. 'I haven't had breakfast. No ID, I take you in for fingerprinting, charge you with trespass, put you in the

cells. Could be a while before you see daylight.'

The man bent, found a wallet in his coat, took out a folded sheet of paper, offered it.

'Put it in the pocket and chuck the coat over.'

It landed a metre away.

'Back off a bit,' Cashin said. He collected the coat, felt it. Nothing. He took out the piece of paper, often folded, worn. He opened it.

Dave Rebb has worked on Boorindi Downs for three years and is a hard worker and no trouble, his good with engines, most mechanic things. Also stock. I would employ him again any time.

It was signed Colin Blandy, manager, and dated 11 August 1996. There was a telephone number.

'Where's this place?' said Cashin.

'Queensland. Near Winton.'

'And this is it? This's your ID? Ten years old?'

'Yeah.'

Cashin found his notebook and wrote down the names and the number, put the paper back in the coat. 'Scared the lady here,' he said. 'That's not good.'

'No sign of life when I come,' said the man. 'Dog didn't bark.'

'Been in trouble with the police, Dave?'

'No. Never been in trouble.'

'Could be a murderer,' said Mrs Haig behind him. 'Killer. Dangerous killer.'

'Me, Mrs Haig,' said Cashin, 'I'm the policeman, I'm dealing with this. Dave, I'm going to drive you to the main road. Come back this way, you'll be in serious trouble. Okay?'

'Okay.'

Cashin took the two steps and gave the man back his coat. 'Let's go.'

'Charge him!' shouted Mrs Haig.

In the vehicle, Dave Rebb offered his hands to the dogs, he was a man who knew about dogs. At the T-junction, Cashin pulled over.

'Which way you going?' he said.

There was a moment. 'Cromarty.'

‘Drop you at Port Monro,’ Cashin said. He turned left. At the turnoff to the town, he stopped. They got out and he opened the back for the man’s swag.

‘Mind how you go now,’ Cashin said. ‘Need a buck or two?’

‘No,’ said Rebb. ‘Treated me like a human. Not a lot of that.’

Waiting to turn, Cashin watched Rebb go, swag horizontal across his back, sticking out. In the morning mist, he was a stubby-armed cross walking.

'NO DRAMA?' said Kendall Rogers.

'Just a swaggie,' said Cashin. 'You doing unpaid time now?'

'I woke up early. It's warmer here, anyway.' She fiddled with something on the counter.

Cashin raised the hatch and went to his desk, started on the incident report.

'I'm thinking of applying for a transfer,' she said.

'I can do something about my personal hygiene,' Cashin said. 'I can change.'

'I don't need protecting,' she said. 'I'm not a rookie.'

Cashin looked up. He'd been expecting this. 'I'm not protecting you from anything. I wouldn't protect anybody. You can die for me anytime.'

A silence.

'Yes, well,' Kendall said. 'There are things here to be resolved. Like the pub business. You drive back at ten o'clock at night.'

'The Caine animals won't touch me. I'm not going to go to an inquiry and explain why I let you handle it.'

'Why won't they touch you?'

'Because my cousins will kill them. And after that, they'll be very nasty to them. Is that a satisfactory answer, your honour?' He went back to the report but he felt her eyes. 'What?' he said. 'What?'

'I'm going to Cindy's. Ham and egg?'

'I'll let you face the savage bitch? On a Friday morning? I'll go.'

She laughed, some of the tension gone.

When she was at the door, Cashin said, 'Ken, bit more mustard this time? Brave enough to ask her?'

He went to the window and watched her go down the street. She had been a gymnast, represented the state at sixteen, won her first gold medal. You would not know it from her walk. In the city, off duty, she went to a club with a friend, a photographer. She was recognised by a youth she had arrested a few months before, an apprentice motor mechanic, a weekend raver, a kicker and a stomper. They were followed, the photographer was badly beaten, locked in his car boot, survived by luck.

Kendall was taken somewhere, treated like a sex doll. After dawn, a man and his dog found her. She had a broken pelvis, a broken arm, six broken ribs, a punctured lung, damaged spleen, pancreas, crushed nose, one cheekbone stove in, five teeth broken, a dislocated shoulder, massive bruising everywhere.

Cashin returned to the paper work. You could get by without identification but Rebb had been employed, there might be some tax record. He dialled the number for Boorindi Downs. It rang for a while.

'Yeah?'

'Victoria Police, Detective Cashin, Port Monro. Need to know about someone worked on Boorindi Downs.'

'Yeah?'

'Dave Rebb.'

'When's that?'

'1994 to 1996.'

'No, mate, no one here from then. Place belongs to someone else now, they did a clear-out.'

'What about Colin Blandy.'

'Blands, oh yeah. I know him from before, he got the bullet from the Greeks, went to Queensland. Dead, though.'

'Thanks for your time.'

Cashin thought that he had made a mistake, he should have fingerprinted Rebb. He had cause to, he had allowed sympathy to dictate.

Could be a murderer, said Mrs Haig. Killer.

He rang Cromarty, asked for the criminal investigation man he knew.

'Got a feeling, have you?' said Dewes. 'I'll tell them to keep a lookout.'

Cashin sat, hands on the desk. He had threatened Rebb with this, the fingerprinting, the long wait in the cells.

'Sandwich,' said Kendall. 'Extra mustard. She put it on with a trowel.'

An ordinary shift went by. Near the end, the word came that the first electronic sweep found no David Rebb on any government database in the states and territories. It didn't mean much. Cashin knew of cases where searches had failed to find people with strings of convictions. He clocked off, drove out to the highway, turned for Cromarty.

Rebb had walked twenty-three kilometres. Cashin pulled in a good way in front of him, got out.

He came on, a man who walked, easy walk, stopped, a tilt of shoulders, the tilted cross.

'Dave, I've got to fingerprint you,' Cashin said.

'Told you. Done nothing.'

'Can't take your word, Dave. Can't take anyone's word. Got to charge you with trespass,' Cashin said.

Rebb said nothing.

'That's so we can take your prints.'

'Don't lock me up,' said Rebb, softly, no tone. 'Can't go in the cells.'

Cashin heard the fear in the man's voice and he knew that once he would not have cared much. He hesitated, then he said, 'Listen, you interested in work? Dairy cows, cow stuff. Do that kind of thing?'

Rebb nodded. 'Long time ago.'

'Want some work?'

'Well, open to offers.'

'And garden stuff, some building work maybe?'

'Yeah. Done a bit of that, yeah.'

'Well, there's work here. My neighbour's cows, I'm clearing up an old place, might rebuild a bit, thinking of it. Work for a cop?'

'Worked for every kind of bastard there is.'

'Thank you. You can sleep at my place tonight. There's a shed with bunks and a shower. See about the job tomorrow.'

They got into the vehicle, Rebb's swag in the back. 'This how they get workers around here?' he said. 'Cops recruit them.'

'All part of the job.'

'What about the fingerprints?'

'I'm taking your word you're clean. That's pretty dumb, hey?'

Rebb was looking out of the window. 'Saved the taxpayer money,' he said.

CASHIN WOKE in the dark, Shane Diab on his mind, the sounds he made dying.

He listened to his aches for a time, tested his spine, his hips, his thighs—they all gave pain. He pushed away the lovely warm burden of the quilts, put feet in the icy waiting boots, and left the room, went down the passage, through Tommy Cashin's sad ballroom, into the hall, out the front door. It was no colder out than in, today the mist blown away by a strong wind off the ocean.

He pissed from the verandah, onto the weeds. It didn't bother them. Then he went inside and did his stretching, washed his face, rinsed his mouth, put on overalls, socks, boots.

The dogs knew his noises, they were making throat sounds of impatience at the side door. He let them in and the big creatures snuffled around him, tails swinging.

Thirsty, he went to the fridge and the sight of the frosted beer bottles made him think he could drink a beer. He took out the two-litre bottle of juice, eight fruits it said. Only a dickhead would believe that.

He held the plastic flagon in both hands, took a long drink, a tall glass at least. He took the old oilskin coat off the hook behind the door, picked up the weapon. When he opened the door to the verandah, the dogs pushed through, bounded down the steps, ran for the back gate. They jostled while they watched him come down the path, shrugging into the coat as he walked. Gate open, they ran down

the path, side by side, reached the open land and made for the trees, jumping over the big tufts of grass, extravagant leaps, ears floating.

Cashin broke the little over-and-under gun as he walked, felt in his side pockets and found a .22 slug and a .410 shell, fed the mouths. He often had the chance to take a shot at a hare, looked through the V-sight at the beautiful dun creature, its electric ears. He didn't even think of firing, he loved hares, their intelligence, their playfulness. At a running rabbit, he did take the odd shot. It was just a fairground exercise, a challenge. He always missed—his reaction too slow, the .410's cone of shot not big enough, too soon dissolved and impotent.

Cashin walked with the little weapon broken over his arm, looking at the trees, dark inside, waiting for the dogs to reach them and send the birds up like tracer fire.

The dogs did a last bound and they were in the trees, triggering the bird-blast, black shrapnel screeching into the sky.

He walked over the hill and down the slope, the dogs ahead, dead black and light-absorbing, heads down, quick legs, coursing, disturbing the leaf mulch. On the levelling ground, on the fringe of the clearing, a hare took off. He watched the three cross the open space, black dogs and hare, the hare pacing itself perfectly, jinking when it felt the dogs near. It seemed to be pulling the dogs on a string. They vanished into the trees above the creek.

Cashin crossed the meadow. The ground was level to the eye but, tramping the long dry grass, you could feel underfoot the rise and fall, the broad furrows a plough had carved. The clearing had once been cultivated, but not in the memory of anyone living. He had no way of knowing whether his ancestor Tommy Cashin had planted a crop there.

It was a fight to get to the creek through the poplars and willows, thousands of suckers gone unchecked for at least thirty years. When he reached the watercourse, a trickle between pools, the dogs appeared, panting. They went straight in, found the deepest places, drank, walked around, drank, walked around, the water eddied weakly around their thin, strong legs, they bit it, raised pointed chins, beards draining water. Poodles liked puddles, didn't like deep water, didn't like the sea much. They were paddlers.

Across the creek, they began the sweep to the west, around the hill, on the gentle flank. In the dun grass, he saw the ears of two hares. He whistled up the dogs and pointed to the hares. They followed his arm, ran and put up the pair, which broke together and stayed together, running side by side for ten or fifteen metres, two dogs behind them, an orderly group of four. Then the left hare split, went downhill. His dog split with him. The other dog couldn't bear it, broke stride, swerved left to join his friend in the pursuit. They vanished into the long grass.

After a while, they came back, pink of tongues visible from a long way, loped ahead again.

Walking, Cashin felt the eyes on him. The dogs running ahead would soon sense the man too, look around, turn left and make for him. He walked and then there were sharp and carrying barks.

The man was out of the trees, the dogs circling him, bouncing. Cashin was unconcerned. He saw the hands the man put out to them, they tried to mouth them, delighted to see their friend. He angled his path to meet Den Millane, nearing eighty but looking as he had at fifty. He would die with a dense head of hair the colour of a gun barrel.

They shook hands. If they didn't meet for a little while, they shook hands.

'Still no decent rain,' said Cashin.

'Fuckin unnatural,' said Millane. 'Startin to believe in this greenhouse shit.' He rubbed a dog head with each hand. 'Bugger me, never thought I could like a bloody poodle. Seen the women at the Corrigan house?'

'No.'

They both had boundaries with the Corrigan property. Mrs Corrigan had gone to Queensland after her husband died. No one had lived in the small redbrick house since then. The weather stripped paint from the woodwork, dried out the window putty, panes fell out. The timber outbuildings listed, collapsed, and grass grew over the rotting pieces. He remembered coming for a weekend in summer in the early nineties, hot, he was still with Vickie then, a big piece of roof had gone, blown off. He asked Den Millane to contact Mrs Corrigan and the roof was fixed, in a fashion. Roofs decided whether empty houses would become ruins.

'The Elders bloke brung em,' said Den, not looking up. 'He's a fat cunt too. The one's got short hair, bloke hair. Like blokes used to have. Then they come back yesterday, now it's three girls, walkin around, they walk down the old fence. Fuckin lesbian colony on the move, mate.'

'Spot lesbians? They have them in your day?'

Millane spat. 'Still my bloody day, mate. Teachers in the main, your lessies. Used to send the clever girls out to buggery, nothin but dickheads there couldn't read a comic book. Tell you what, I was a girl met those blokes, I'd go lessie. Anyway, point is, you ever looked at your title?'

Cashin shook his head.

'Creek's not the boundary.'

'No?'

'Your line's the other side, twenty, thirty yard over the creek.' Millane passed a thumb knuckle across his lower lip. 'Claim the fuckin creek or lose it, mate. Fence that loop or say goodbye.'

'Well,' Cashin said, 'You'd be mad to buy the place. House needs work, ground's all uphill.'

Millane shook his head. 'Seen what they're payin for dirt? Every second dickhead wants to live in the country, drive around in the four-wheel, fuckin up the roads, moanin about the cowshit and the ag chemicals.'

'No time to read the real estate,' Cashin said. 'Too busy upholding the law. Still need someone to take the cows over to Coghlans?'

'Yeah. Knee's getttin worse.'

'Got someone for you.'

'There's a bit of other work, say three days, that's all up. No place to stay, though.'

'I'll bring him over.'

Den was watching the dogs investigating a blackberry patch. 'So when you gonna leave the fancy dogs with me again?'

'Didn't like to ask,' Cashin said. 'Bit of a handful.'

'I can manage the fuckin brutes. Bring em over. Lookin thin, give em a decent feed of bunny.'

They said goodbye. When Cashin was fifty metres away, Den shouted, 'Ya keep what's bloody yours. Hear me?'

THE CALL came at 8.10 am, relayed from Cromarty. Cashin was almost at the Port Monro intersection. As he drove along the coast highway, he saw the ambulance coming towards him. He slowed to let them reach the turn-off first, followed them up the hill, around the bends and through the gates of The Heights, parked on the forecourt.

A woman was standing on the gravel, well away from the big house, smoking a cigarette. She threw it away and led the paramedics up the stairs into the house. Cashin followed, across an entrance hall and into a big, high-ceilinged room. There was a faint sour smell in the air.

The old man was lying on his stomach before the massive fireplace, head on the stone hearth. He was wearing only pyjama pants, and his thin naked back was covered with dried blood through which could be seen dark horizontal lines. There was blood pooled on the stones and soaked into the carpet. It was black in the light from a high uncurtained window.

The two medics went to him, knelt. The woman put her gloved hands on his head, lifted it gently. 'Significant open head injury, possible brain herniation,' she said, talking to her companion and into a throat mike.

She checked the man's breathing, an eye, held up his forearm. 'Suspected herniation,' she said. 'Four normal saline, hyperventilate 100 per cent, intubation indicated, 100 mils Lidocaine.'

Her partner set up the oxygen. He got in the way and Cashin couldn't see what was happening.

After a while, the female medic said, 'Three on coma scale. Chopper, Dave.'

The man took out a mobile phone.

'The door was open,' said the woman who had been waiting on the steps. She was behind Cashin. 'I only went in a step, backed off, thought he was dead, I wanted to run, get in the car and get out of there. Then I thought, oh shit, he might be alive and I came back and I saw he was breathing.'

Cashin looked around the room. In front of a door in the left corner, a rug on the polished floorboards was rucked. 'What's through there?' he said, pointing.

'Passage to the south wing.'

A big painting dominated the west wall, a dark landscape seen from a height. It had been slashed at the bottom, where a flap of canvas hung down.

'He must have gone to bed early, didn't use even half the wood Starkey's boy brought in,' she said.

'See anything else?'

'His watch's not on the table. It's always there with the whisky glass on the table next to the leather chair. He had a few whiskies every night.'

'He took his watch off?'

'Yeah. Left it on the table every night.'

'Let's talk somewhere else,' Cashin said. 'These people are busy.'

He followed her across a marble-floored foyer to a passage around a gravelled courtyard and into a kitchen big enough for a hotel. 'What did you do when you got here?' he said.

'I just put my bag down and went through. Do that every day.'

'I'll need to take a look in the bag. Your name is…?'

'Carol Gehrig.' She was in her forties, pretty, with blonded hair, lines around her mouth. There were lots of Gehrigs in the area.

She fetched a big yellow cloth bag from a table at the far end of the room, unzipped it. 'You want to dig around?'

'No.'

She tipped the contents onto the table: a purse, two sets of keys, a glasses case, makeup, tissues, other innocent things.

'Thanks,' Cashin said. 'Touch anything in there?'

'No. I just put the bag down, went to the sitting room to fetch the whisky glass. Then I rang. From outside.'

Now they went outside. Cashin's mobile rang.

'Hopgood. What's happening?' He was the criminal investigation unit boss in Cromarty.

'Charles Bourgoyne's been bashed,' he said. 'Badly. Medics working on him.'

'I'll be there in a few minutes. No one touches anything, no one leaves, okay?'

'Gee,' Cashin said. 'I was going to send everyone home, get everything nice and clean for forensic.'

'Don't be clever,' said Hopgood. 'Not a fucking joking matter this.'

Carol Gehrig was sitting on the second of the four broad stone steps that led to the front door. Cashin took the clipboard and went to sit beside her. Beyond the gravel expanse and the box hedges, a row of tall pencil pines was moving in the wind, swaying in unison like a chorus line of fat-bellied dancers. He had driven past this house hundreds of times and never seen more than the tall, ornate chimneys, sections of the red pantiled roof. The brass plate on a gate pillar said The Heights, but the locals called it Bourgoyne's.

'I'm Joe Cashin,' he said. 'You'd be related to Barry Gehrig.'

'My cousin.'

Cashin remembered his fight with Barry Gehrig in primary school. He was nine or ten. Barry won that one, he made amends later. He sat on Barry's shoulders and ground his pale face into the playground dirt.

'What happened to him?'

'Dead,' she said. 'Drove his truck off a bridge thing near Benalla. Overpass.'

'I'm sorry. Didn't hear about that.'

'He was a deadshit, always drugged up. I'm sorry for the people in the car he landed on, squashed them.'

She found cigarettes, offered. He wanted one. He said no.

'Worked here long?'

'Twenty-six years. I can't believe it. Seventeen when I started.'

'Any idea what happened?'

'Not a clue. No.'

'Who might attack him?'

'I'm saying, no idea. He's got no enemies, Mr B.'

'How old is Mr Bourgoyne?'

'Seventy something. Seventy-five, maybe.'

'Who lives here? Apart from him?'

'No one. The step-daughter was here the day before yesterday. Hasn't been here for a long time. Years.'

'What's her name?'

'Erica.'

'Know how to contact her?'

'No idea. Ask Mrs Addison in Port Monro, the lawyer. She looks after business for Mr Bourgoyne.'

'Anyone else work here?'

'Bruce Starkey.'

Cashin knew the name. 'The football player?'

'Him. He does all the outside.' She waved at the raked gravel, the trimmed hedges. 'Well, now his boy Tay does. Bit simple, Tay, never says a word. Bruce sits on his arse and smokes mostly. They come Monday, Wednesday and Friday. And when he drives Mr B. Sue Dance makes lunch and dinner. Gets here about twelve, cooks lunch, cooks dinner, leaves it for him to heat up. Tony Crosby might as well be on a wage too, always something wrong with the plumbing.'

The male paramedic came out. 'There's a chopper coming,' he said. 'Where's the best place to land?'

'The paddock behind the stables,' said Carol. 'At the back of the house.'

'How's he doing?' Cashin said.

The man shrugged. 'Probably should be dead.'

He went back inside.

'Bourgoyne's watch,' said Cashin. 'Know what kind it was?'

'Breitling,' said Carol. 'Smart watch. Had a crocodile-skin strap.'

'How do you spell that?'

'B-R-E-I-T-L-I-N-G.'

Cashin went to the cruiser, got Hopgood again. 'They're taking him to Melbourne. You might want to have a yarn with a Bruce Starkey and his young fella.'

'What about?'

'They're both part-time here.'

'So?'

'Thought I'd draw it to your attention. And Bourgoyne's watch's probably stolen.' He told him what Carol had said.

'Okay. Be there in a couple of minutes. There's three cars coming. Forensic can't get a chopper till about 10.30.'

'The step-daughter needs to be told,' Cashin said. 'She was here the day before yesterday. You can probably get an address from Cecily Addison in Port Monro, that's Woodward, Addison & Cameron.'

'I know who Cecily Addison is.'

'Of course.'

Cashin went back to Carol. 'Lots of cops coming,' he said. 'Going to be a long morning.'

'I'm paid for four hours.'

'Should be enough. What was he like?'

'Fine. Good boss. I knew what he wanted, did the job. Bonus at Christmas. Month's pay.'

'No problems?'

Eyes on him, yellow flecks in the brown. 'I keep the place like a hospital,' she said. 'No problems at all.'

'You wouldn't have any reason to try to kill him, would you?'

Carol made a sound, not quite a laugh. 'Me? Like I'd kill my job? I'm a late starter, still got two kids on the tit, mate. There's no work around here.'

They sat on the steps in the still enclosure, an early winter morning, quiet, just birdsounds, cars on the highway, and a coarse tractor somewhere.

'Jesus,' said Carol, 'I feel so, it's just getting to me…I could make us some coffee.'

Cashin was tempted. 'Better not,' he said. 'Can't touch anything. They'd come down on me like a tanker of pigshit. But I'll take a

smoke off you.'

Weakness, smoking. Life was weakness, strength was the exception. Their smoke hung in sheets, golden where it caught the sun.

A sound, just a pinprick at first. The dickheads, thought Cashin. They were coming with sirens.

'Cromarty cops'll take a full statement, Carol,' he said. 'They'll be in charge of this but ring me if there's anything you want to talk about, okay?'

'Okay.'

They sat.

'If he lives,' said Cashin, 'it's because you got to work on time.'

Carol didn't say anything for a while. 'Reckon I'll keep getting paid?'

'Till things are settled, sure.'

They listened to the sirens coming up the hill, turning into the driveway, getting louder. Three squad cars, much too close together, came into the forecourt, braked, sent gravel flying.

The passenger door of the first car opened and a middle-aged man got out. He was tall, dark hair combed back. Senior Detective Rick Hopgood. Cashin had met him twice, civil exchanges. He walked towards them. Cashin stood.

The whupping of a helicopter, coming out of the east.

'End of shift,' said Hopgood. 'You can get back to Port.'

Irrational heat behind his eyes. Cashin wanted to punch him. He didn't say anything, looked for the chopper, walked around the house to the far hedge and watched it settle on the paddock, a hard surface, a dry autumn in a dry year. The local male medic was waiting. Three men got out, unloaded a stretcher. They went around the stables and into the house through a side door.

'Take offence?'

Hopgood, behind him.

'At what?' said Cashin.

'Didn't mean to be short,' said Hopgood.

Cashin looked at him. Hopgood offered a smile, yellowing teeth, big canines.

'No offence taken,' said Cashin.

'Good on you,' said Hopgood. 'Draw on your expertise if needed?'

'It's one police force,' said Cashin.

'That's the attitude,' said Hopgood. 'Be in touch.'

The medics came out with the stretcher, tubes in Bourgoyne. They didn't hurry. What could be done had been done. After the stretcher was loaded, the local woman said a few words to one of the city team, both impassive. He would be the doctor.

The doctor got in. The machine rose, turned for the metropolis, flashed light.

Cashin said goodbye to Carol Gehrig, drove down the curving avenue of Lombardy poplars.