

# Truth

Peter Temple

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*Peter Temple*

Quercus

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‘But because truly, being here is so much; because everything here apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which in some strange way keeps calling to us. Us, the most fleeting of all.’

*Rainer Maria Rilke*

ON THE Westgate Bridge, behind them a flat in Altona, a dead woman, a girl really, dirty hair, dyed red, pale roots, she was stabbed too many times to count, stomach, chest, back, face. The child, male, two or three years old, his head was kicked. Blood everywhere. On the nylon carpet, it lay in pools, a chain of tacky black ponds.

Villani looked at the city towers, wobbling, unstable in the sulphurous haze. He shouldn't have come. There was no need. 'This air-conditioner's fucked,' he said. 'Second one this week.'

'Never go over here without thinking,' said Birkerts.

'What?'

'My grandad. On it.'

One spring morning in 1970, the bridge's half-built steel frame stood in the air, it crawled with men, unmarried men, men with wives, men with wives and children, men with children they did not know, men with nothing but the job and the hard, hard hangover and then Span 10-11 failed.

One hundred and twelve metres of newly raised steel and concrete, two thousand tonnes.

Men and machines, tools, lunchboxes, toilets, whole sheds – even, someone said, a small black dog, barking – all fell down the sky. In moments, thirty-five men were dead or dying, bodies broken, sunk in the foul grey crusted sludge of the Yarra's bank. Diesel fuel lay everywhere. A fire broke out and, slowly, a filthy plume rose to mark the scene.

‘Dead?’ said Villani.

‘No, taking a shit, rode the dunny all the way down.’

‘Certainly passed on that shit-riding talent,’ said Villani, thinking about Singleton, who couldn’t keep his hands off the job either, couldn’t stay in the office. It was not something to admire in the head of Homicide.

On the down ramp, Birkerts’ phone rang, it was on speaker. Finucane’s deep voice:

‘Boss. Boss, Altona, we’re at the husband’s brother’s place in Maidstone. He’s here, the hubby, in the garage. Hosepipe. Well, not a hosepipe, black plastic thing, y’know, like a pool hose?’

‘Excellent work,’ said Birkerts. ‘Could’ve been in Alice Springs by now. Tennant Creek.’

Finucane coughed. ‘So, yeah, maybe the scientists can come on here, boss. Plus the truck.’

‘Sort that out, Fin. Might be pizza though.’

‘I’ll tell the wife hold the T-bones.’

Birkerts ended the call.

‘Closed this Altona thing in an hour,’ he said. ‘That’s pretty neat for the clearance.’

Villani heard Singo:

*Fuck the clearance rate. Worry about doing the job properly.*

Joe Cashin had thought he was doing the job properly and it took the jaws to open the car embedded in the fallen house. Diab was dead, Cashin was breathing but no hope, too much blood lost, too much broken and ruptured.

Singleton only left the hospital to sit in his car, the old Falcon. He aged, grey stubble sprouted, his silken hair went greasy. After the surgery, when they told him Joe had some small chance and allowed him into the room, he took Joe’s slack hand, held it, kissed its knuckles. Then he stood, smoothed Joe’s hair, bent to kiss Joe’s forehead.

Finucane was there, he was the witness, and he told Villani. They did not know that Singleton was capable of such emotions.

The next time Cashin came out of hospital, the second time in three years, he was pale as a barked tree. Singo was dead by then, a second stroke, and Villani was acting boss of Homicide.

‘The clearance rate,’ Villani said. ‘A disappointment to me to hear you use the term.’

His phone.

Gavan Kiely, deputy head of Homicide, two months in the job.

‘We have a dead woman in the Prosilio building, that’s in Docklands,’ he said. ‘Paul Dove’s asked for assistance.’

‘Why?’

‘Out of his depth. I’m off to Auckland later but I can go.’

‘No,’ said Villani. ‘I bear this cross.’

HE WENT down the passage into the bedroom, a bed big enough for four sleepers, mattress naked, pillows bare. Forensic had finished there. He picked up a pillow with his fingertips, sniffed it.

Faintest smell of perfume. Deeper sniff. The other pillow. Different perfume, slightly stronger smell.

He walked through the empty dressing-room into the bathroom, saw the glass bath and beside it a bronze arm rising from the floor, its hand offering a cake of soap.

She was on the plastic bag in a yoga posture of rest – legs parted, palms up, scarlet toenails, long legs, sparse pubic hair, small breasts. His view was blocked by the shoulder of a kneeling forensic tech. Villani stepped sideways and saw her face, recoiled. For a terrible heart-jumping instant, he thought it was Lizzie, the resemblance was strong.

He turned to the wall of glass, breathed out, his heart settled. The drab grey bay lay before him and, between the heads, a pinhead, a container ship. Gradually it would show its ponderous shape, a huge lolling flat-topped steel slug bleeding rust and oil and putrid waste.

‘Panic button,’ said Dove. He was wearing a navy suit, a white shirt and a dark tie, a neurosurgeon on his hospital rounds.

Villani looked: rubber, dimpled like a golf ball, set in the wall between the shower and the head of the bath.

‘Nice shower,’ said Dove.



A stainless-steel disc hung above a perforated square of metal. On a glass shelf, a dozen or more soap bars were displayed as if for sale.

The forensic woman said, 'Broken neck. Bath empty but she's damp.'

She was new on the job, Canadian, a mannish young woman, no make-up, tanned, crew cut.

'How do you break your neck in the bath?' said Villani.

'It's hard to do it yourself. Takes a lot to break a neck.'

'Really?'

She didn't get his tone. 'Absolutely. Takes force.'

'What else?' said Villani.

'Nothing I can see now.'

'The time? Inspired guess.'

'Less than twenty-four or I have to go back to school.'

'I'm sure they'll be pleased to see you. Taken the water temperature into account?'

'What?'

Villani pointed. The small digital touchscreen at the door was set at 48 degrees.

'Didn't see that,' she said. 'I would have. In due course.'

'No doubt.'

Little smile. 'Okay, Lance,' she said. 'Zip it.'

Lance was a gaunt man, spade beard. He tried to zip the bag, it stuck below the woman's breasts. He moved the slider back and forth, got it free, encased her in the plastic.

Not ungently, they lifted the bag onto the trolley.

When they were gone, Dove and Weber came to him.

'Who owns this?' said Villani.

'They're finding out,' said Dove. 'Apparently it's complicated.'

'They?'

'The management. Waiting for us downstairs.'

‘You want me to do it?’ said Villani.

Dove touched a cheekbone, unhappy. ‘That would be helpful, boss.’

‘You want to do it, Web?’ said Villani, rubbing it in to Dove.

Weber was mid-thirties, looked twenty, an unmarried evangelical Christian. He came with plenty of country experience: mothers who drowned babies, sons who axed their mothers, access fathers who wasted the kids. But Old Testament murders in the rural welfare sumps didn’t prepare you for women dead in apartments with private lifts, glass baths, French soaps and three bottles of Moët in the fridge.

‘No, boss,’ he said.

They walked on the plastic strip, passed through the apartment’s small pale marble hall, through the front door into a corridor. They waited for the lift.

‘What’s her name?’ Villani said.

‘They don’t know,’ said Dove. ‘Know nothing about her. There’s no ID.’

‘Neighbours?’

‘Aren’t any. Six apartments on this floor, all empty.’

The lift came, they fell thirty floors. On the sixth, at a desk, three dark suits, two men and a woman, waited. The plump fiftyish man came forward, pushing back limp hair.

‘Alex Manton, building manager,’ he said.

Dove said, ‘This is Inspector Villani, head of Homicide.’

Manton offered his hand. It felt dry, chalky.

‘Let’s talk in the meeting space, inspector,’ Manton said.

The room had a painting on the inner wall, vaguely marine, five metres by three at least, blue-grey smears, possibly applied with a mop. They sat at a long table with legs of chromed pipe.

‘Who owns the apartment?’ said Villani.

‘A company called Shollonel Pty Ltd, registered in Lebanon,’ said Manton. ‘As far as we know, it’s not occupied.’

‘You don’t know?’

‘Well, it’s not a given to know. People buy apartments to live in, investment, future use. They might not live in them at all, live in them for short or long periods. We ask people to register when they’re in residence. But you can’t force them.’

‘How was she found?’ said Villani.

‘Sylvia?’ said Manton. ‘Our head concierge, Sylvia Allegro.’

The woman, dolly face. ‘The apartment’s front door wasn’t fully closed,’ she said. ‘The lock didn’t engage. That triggers a buzzer in the apartment. If it isn’t closed in two minutes, there’s a security alert and they ring the apartment. If that doesn’t work, they go up.’

‘So there in four, five minutes?’ said Villani.

Sylvia looked at Manton, who was looking at the other man, fortyish, head like a glans.

‘Obviously not quite,’ said the man.

‘You are?’ said Villani.

‘David Condy, head of security for the apartments and the hotel.’ He was English.

‘What’s not quite mean?’

‘I’m told the whole electronic system failed its first big test last night. The casino opening. Orion. Four hundred guests.’

‘The open door. The system tells you when?’

‘It should do. But what with . . .?’

‘That’s no?’

‘Yes. No.’

‘Panic buttons up there.’

‘In all the apartments.’

‘Not pressed?’

Condy ran a finger in his collar. ‘No evidence of that.’

‘You don’t know?’

‘It’s difficult to say. With the failure, we have no record.’

‘That’s not difficult,’ said Villani. ‘It’s impossible.’

Manton held up a pudgy hand. ‘To cut to the whatever, inspector, a major IT malfunction. Coinciding with this matter, so we look a little silly.’

Villani looked at the woman. ‘The bed’s stripped. How would you get rid of sheets and stuff?’

‘Get rid of?’

‘Dispose of.’

The woman flicked at Manton. ‘Well, the garbage chute, I suppose,’ she said.

‘Can you tell where garbage has come from?’

‘No.’

‘Explain this building to me, Mr Manton. Just an outline.’

Manton’s right hand consulted his hair. ‘From the top, four floors of penthouses. Then six floors, four apartments each. Beneath them, it’s fourteen floors of apartments, six to a floor. Then it’s the three recreation floors, pools, gyms, spas, and so on. Then twelve more floors of apartments, eight to a floor. Then the casino’s four floors, the hotel’s ten floors, two floors of catering, housekeeping. And these reception floors, that’s concierge, admin and security. The casino has its own security but its systems mesh with the building’s.’

‘Or don’t.’ Villani pointed down.

‘Under us, the business floors, retail, and hospitality, ground floor plaza. Five basement levels for parking and utilities.’

In Villani’s line of sight, the door opened. A man came in, a woman followed, even height, suits, white shirts.

‘Crashing in,’ said the man, loud. ‘Introductions, please, Alex.’

Manton stood. 'Inspector Villani, this is Guy Ulyatt of Marscay Corporation.'

Ulyatt was fat and pink, cornsilk hair, tuber nose. 'Pleasure, inspector,' he said. He didn't offer a hand, sat down. The woman sat beside him.

Villani said to Manton, 'This person's got something to tell us?'

'Sorry, sorry,' said Ulyatt. 'I'm head of corporate affairs for Marscay.'

'You have something to tell us?' said Villani.

'Making sure you're getting maximum co-operation. No reflection on Alex, of course.'

'Mr Manton is helping us,' said Villani. 'If you don't have a contribution, thank you and goodbye.'

'I beg your pardon?' said Ulyatt. 'I represent the building's owners.'

Silence in the big room. Villani looked at Dove. He wanted him to learn something from this. Dove held his eyes but there was no telling what he was learning.

'We Own The Building,' said Ulyatt, four distinct words.

'What's that got to do with me?' said Villani.

'We'd like to work with you. Minimise the impact on Prosilio and its people.'

'Homicide, Mr Elliot,' said Villani. 'We're from Homicide.'

'It's Ulyatt.' He spelled it.

'Yes,' said Villani. 'You might try talking to some other branch of the force. Impact minimisation division. I'm sure there's one, I'd be the last to know.'

Ulyatt smiled, a genial fish, a grouper. 'Why don't we settle down and sort this out? Julie?'

The woman smiled. She had shoe-black hair, she'd been under

the knife, knew the needle, the dermabrasion, detailed down to her tyres like a saleyard Mercedes.

‘Julie Sorenson, our key media person,’ said Ulyatt.

‘Hi,’ she said, vanilla teeth, eyes like a dead deer, ‘It’s Stephen, isn’t it?’

‘Hi and goodbye,’ said Villani. ‘Same to you, Mr Elliot. Lovely to meet you but we’re pushed here. A deceased person.’

Ulyatt lost the fish look. ‘It’s Ulyatt. I’m trying to be helpful, inspector, and I’m being met by hostility. Why is that?’

‘This is what we need, Mr Manton,’ said Villani. ‘Ready?’

‘Sylvia?’ said Manton.

She had her pen ready.

‘All CCTV tapes from 3pm yesterday, all lifts, parking,’ said Villani. ‘Also duty rosters, plus every single recorded coming and going, cars, people, deliveries, tradies, whatever.’

Ulyatt whistled. ‘Tall order,’ he said. ‘We’ll need a lot more time.’

‘Got that down?’ said Villani to Sylvia Allegro.

‘Yes.’

‘Also the CVs and rosters of all staff with access to the thirty-sixth floor or who could allow anyone access. And the owners of apartments on the floor and other floors with access to the floor. Plus the guest list for the casino function.’

‘We don’t have that,’ said Ulyatt. ‘That’s Orion’s business.’

‘The casino function was in your building,’ said Villani. ‘I suggest you ask them. If they won’t co-operate, let Detective Dove here know.’

Ulyatt was shaking his head.

‘We’ll show the victim on television tonight, ask for information,’ said Villani.

‘I can’t see the necessity at this stage,’ said Ulyatt.

Villani delayed looking at him, met the eyes of Dove, Weber,

Manton, Allegro, not Condy, he was looking away. Then he fixed Ulyatt. ‘All these rich people paying for full-on security, the panic buttons, the cameras,’ he said. ‘A woman murdered in your building, that’s a negative?’

‘It’s a woman found dead,’ said Ulyatt. ‘It’s not clear to me that she was murdered. And I can’t see why you would go on television until you’ve examined the information you want. Which we will provide as speedily as we can, I can assure you.’

‘I don’t need to be told how to conduct an investigation,’ said Villani. ‘And I don’t want to be told.’

‘I’m trying to help. I can go further up the food chain,’ said Ulyatt.

‘What?’

‘Talk to people in government.’

Awake at 4.30am, Villani was feeling the length of the day now, his best behind him. ‘You’ll talk to people in government,’ he said.

Ulyatt’s lips drew back. ‘As a last resort, of course.’

‘So resort to it, mate,’ said Villani, pilot flame of resentment igniting the burner. ‘You’re dealing with the bottom feeders, there’s nowhere to go but up.’

‘I certainly will be putting our view,’ said Ulyatt, a long sour look, he rose, the woman rose too. He turned on his black shoes, the woman turned, they both wore thin black shoes, they both had slack arses, one fat, one thin, the surgery hadn’t extended to lifting her arse. They left, Ulyatt taking out his mobile.

‘No garbage to leave the premises, Mr Manton,’ said Villani. ‘I’ve always wanted to give someone that instruction.’

‘It’s gone,’ said Manton. ‘It goes before 7am, every day except Sunday.’

‘Right. So. How do you get up there?’

‘Private lifts,’ said Manton. ‘From the basements and the ground floor. Card-activated, access only to your floor.’

‘And who’s got cards?’

Manton turned to Condyl. ‘David?’

‘I’d have to check,’ said Condyl.

Villani said, ‘You don’t know?’

‘There’s a procedure for issuing cards. I’ll check.’

Villani moved his shoulders. ‘Getting into the apartment?’ he said. ‘How’s that work?’

‘Same card, plus a PIN and optional fingerprint and iris scanning,’ said Condyl. ‘The print and iris are in temporary abeyance.’

‘Temporary what?’

‘Ah, being finetuned.’

‘Not working?’

‘For the moment, no.’

‘So it’s just the card?’

‘Yes.’

‘Same card you don’t know how many people have.’

Villani turned to Dove.

‘I’m off,’ he said. ‘If we don’t get the fullest co-operation here, I’ll be on television saying that this building is a management disaster and a dangerous place to live and residents should be alarmed.’

‘Inspector, we’re trying to be . . .’

‘Just do it, please,’ said Villani, rising.

In the ground-floor foyer, he said to Dove and Weber, ‘One, get Tracy onto the company that owns the apartment. Two, ID’s the priority here. Run her prints. See what vision they’ve got, get someone to take down every rego in the parking garage. And get that casino guest list.’

Dove nodded.

Weber said, scratching his scalp, ‘Fancy set-up, this. Like a palace.’



‘So what?’ said Villani.

Weber shrugged, awkward.

‘Just another dead person,’ said Villani. ‘Flat in a Housing Commission, this palace, all the same. Just procedure. Bomb it to Snake.’

‘Excuse, boss?’

‘Know the term, Mr Dove? Honours degree of any use here?’

‘I’d say it’s a technical Homicide term,’ said Dove. He was cleaning his rimless glasses, brown face vulnerable.

Villani looked at him for a while. ‘Follow the drill. The procedure. Do what you’ve been taught. Tick stuff off. That way you don’t have to ask for help.’

‘I didn’t ask for help,’ said Dove. ‘I asked Inspector Kiely a few questions.’

‘Not the way he saw it,’ said Villani. His phone tapped his chest.

‘Please hold for Mr Colby,’ said Angela Lowell, the secretary.

The assistant commissioner said, ‘Steve, this Prosilio woman, I’ve had Mr Barry on the line. Broken neck, right?’

‘They say that.’

‘So he understands it could be an accident. A fall.’

‘Bullshit, boss,’ said Villani.

‘Yeah, well, he wants nothing said about murder.’

‘What’s this?’

‘Mr Barry’s request to you. I’m the fucking conduit. With me, inspector?’

‘Yes, boss.’

‘Talk later, okay?’

‘Yes, boss.’

Ulyatt hadn’t been bluffing. He’d gone close to the top of the food chain. Perhaps he’d gone to the top, to Chief Commissioner Gillam, perhaps he could go to the premier.

Dove and Weber were looking at him.

‘Media out there?’ said Villani.

‘No,’ said Dove.

‘No? What happened to media leaks? Anyway, if they show up, say a woman found dead, cause not established, can’t rule out anything. Don’t say murder, don’t say suspicious, don’t say anything about where in the building. Just a dead woman and we are waiting for forensic.’

Dove blinked, made tiny head movements, Villani saw his anxiety. His impulse was to make him suffer but judgment overrode it.

‘On second thoughts, you do it, Web,’ he said. ‘See how you go in the big smoke.’

Wide eyes, Weber said, ‘Sure, boss, sure. Done a bit of media.’

Villani passed through the sliding doors, the hot late afternoon seized his breath, his passage was brief, no media, down the stairs, across the forecourt, a cool car waiting.

On the radio, Alan Machin, 3AR’s drive man, said:

*. . . 35-plus tomorrow, two more days and we break the record. Why did I say that? People talk as if we want to break records like this. Lowest rainfall for a century. Hottest day. Can we stop talking about records? Gerry from Greenvale’s on the line, what’s on your mind, Gerry?*

‘Radio okay, boss?’

‘Fine.’

*. . . years ago, you ring the cops, the ambos, they come. Five minutes. Saturday there’s shit across the road here, I ring the cops, twenty minutes, I ring again, it’s a bloody riot out there, mate, girls screamin, animals trashin cars, they throw a letterbox through my front window, there’s more arrivin all the time, no cops. I ring again, then there’s two kids stabbed, another one’s head’s smashed in, somebody calls the medics.*

*So how far’s the nearest police station, Gerry?*

*Craigieburn Road, isn't it? Too far's all I can say. Twenty-five minutes for the ambos to get here, they say the one kid's dead already. And the ambos load them up and they're gone before the bloody cops get here.*

*So it's what, more than an hour all-up before the police respond, is that . . .*

*Definitely. You notice they find hundreds when some dork gets lost bloody bushwalkin? That sorta thing?*

*Thanks for that, Gerry. Alice's been waiting, go ahead, Alice.*

*It's Alysha, actually, with a y. I wanted to talk about the trains but your caller's bloody spot on. We get riots around here, I'm not joking, riot's the only . . .*

*Where's that, Alisha, where's around . . .*

*Braybrook. Yeah. Police don't give a stuff, let them kill each other, gangs, it's like you don't see an Aussie face, all foreigners, blacks, Asians. Yeah*

*. . .*

*'They don't like cops much, do they, boss?' said the driver.*

*'They can't like cops,' said Villani. 'Cops are their better side.'*

IN HIS office, Gavan Kiely gone to Auckland, Villani switched on the big monitor, muted, waited for the 6.30pm news, unmuted.

A burning world – scarlet hills, grey-white funeral plumes, trees exploding, blackened vehicle carapaces, paddocks of charcoal, flames sluicing down a gentle slope of brown grass, the helicopters' water trunks hanging in the air.

*. . . weary firefighters are bracing themselves for a last-ditch stand against a racing fire front that threatens the high country village of Morpeth, where most residents have chosen to stay and defend their homes despite warnings to heed the terrible lessons of 2009 . . .*

When it was full dark, his father and Gordie would see the ochre glow in the sky, Morpeth was thirty kilometres by road from Selborne but only four valleys away.

A plane crash in Indonesia, a factory explosion in Geelong, a six-car freeway pile-up, the shut-down of an electronics company.

The wide-eyed newsreader said:

*. . . four hundred A-listers, many of them high-rolling gamblers from Asia, the United States and Europe, last night had a preview of the Orion, Australia's newest casino and its most exclusive . . .*

Men in evening dress, women in little black dresses getting out of cars, walking up a red carpet. Villani recognised a millionaire property developer, an actor whose career was dead, a famous footballer you could rent by the hour, two cocaine-

addicted television personalities, a sallow man who owned racehorses and many jockeys.

A helicopter shot of the Prosilio building, then a spiky-haired young man on the forecourt said:

*The boutique gambling venue is housed in this building, the newly commissioned Prosilio Tower, one of Australia's most expensive residential addresses. It's a world of total luxury for the millionaire residents, who live high above the city behind layers of the most advanced electronic and other security . . .*

His phone.

'Pope Barry is pleased,' said Colby.

Villani said, 'About what?'

'Prosilio. The girl.'

'Nothing to do with me. The absent media, who arranged that?'

'I'd only be guessing.'

'Yeah, right. This Prosilio prick, Elliot, Ulyatt, his company owns the building. Came on like we're from the council about overhanging branches.'

'And you said?'

'Well I said fuck off.'

'Well I can say he went somewhere. I can say that.'

'I don't like this stuff, boss.'

'They don't want bad news.'

'The casino?' said Villani.

'The casino's not it, son,' said Colby. 'Up there in the air there's like a whole suburb of unsold million-buck apartments. All spruiked to be as safe as living next door to the Benalla copshop in 1952. You make all this money and you can buy anything and then some deranged psycho shithead invades your space and kills you. Fucks you and tortures you and kills you.'

'I see the unappealing part of that.'

‘So you’ll also try to grasp the charm of a murder in the building.’

Anna Markham on the screen, cold, pinstriped jacket. He had looked at the dimple in her chin from close range, thought about inserting his tongue into the tiny cleft.

‘I’ll work on that, boss,’ he said.

‘Front and fucking centre. In the big game now. Not in Armed Robbery anymore. Not you, not me.’

*. . . today’s poll shock, the threat of a nurses’ strike, the questions over the Calder Village project and next week’s demonstrations in the Goulburn Valley. With the election weeks away, Premier Yeats has a few things to be worried about . . .*

She had the private-school voice, the expensive tones.

The anchorman said:

*. . . political editor Anna Markham. Now to finance news. In a surprise development in the media world today, a new . . .*

The phone. Mute.

‘Media on the line, boss. Mr Searle.’

‘Stevo, how you going?’ Hoarse cigarette voice.

‘Good. What?’

‘To business. Like that in a man. Listen, this Prosilio woman, got anything?’

‘No.’

‘Okay, so we keep it off the agenda till you have, no point in . . .’

‘If we don’t ID her before,’ said Villani, ‘I want her on all news tomorrow.’

‘My word,’ said Searle. ‘And obviously it’s not stressing the Prosilio angle, it’s a woman we want identified, that’s basically . . .’

‘Talk tomorrow,’ said Villani. ‘Calls waiting.’

‘Inspector.’

Villani sat for a long time, head back, eyes closed, thinking about the girl-woman who looked like Lizzie lying in a glass bath in a glass room high above the stained world.

Three levels of security, panic buttons, so many barriers, so insulated. And still the fear. He saw the girl's skin, grey of the earliest dawn, he saw the shallow bowl between her hipbones and her pubic hair holding droplets like a desert plant.

The water would have been bobbed, flecked and scummed with substances released by her body. He was glad he hadn't seen that.

Time to go, put an end to the day.

No one to have a drink with. He could not do that anymore, he was the boss.

Go home. No one there.

He rang Bob Villani's number, saw the passage in his father's house, the phone on the rickety table, heard the telephone's urgent sound, saw the dog listening, head on one side. He did not wait for it to ring out.

Inspector. Head of Homicide.

He knew he was going to do it but he waited, drew it out, went to the cupboard and found the card in her spiky hand. He sat, pressed the numbers, a mobile.

'Hello.'

'Stephen Villani. If I've got the right number, I'm exploring the possibility of seeing someone again.'

'Right number, explorer. When did you have in mind?'

'Well, whenever.'

'Like tonight?'

He could not believe his luck. 'Like tonight, I would have that in mind, yes.'

'I can change my plans,' she said, the arrogant voice. 'I can be where I live in . . . oh, about an hour.'

‘You want to change your plans?’

‘Let me think. Yes, I want to change my plans.’

‘Well, I can be there.’

‘Don’t eat. Be hungry.’

‘So that’s how hunger works,’ said Villani. ‘Give me the address.’

‘South Melbourne. Eighteen Minter Street. Exeter Place. Apartment twelve.’

He felt the blood in his veins, the little tightness in his chest, the way he felt in the ring before the bell, before the fight began.