

**THE
OF
DERAILING
DOUGLAS
JONES**

MATT STREMPER

“Appear weak when you are strong,
and strong when you are weak.”

The Art of War, Sun Tzu

“You know I can’t afford to buy her pearls
But maybe, someday, when my ship comes in
She’ll understand what kind of guy I’ve been
And then I’ll win.”

Uptown Girl, Billy Joel

1

THE PROPOSITION

Bangle Train Station, November 10, 1984

Five days before Douglas Jones's fortieth birthday his best mate, Bill Carlisle, arrived at the customer service window with an odious proposal.

"I want you to steal my mail," Bill said, peeling off his Carrera sunglasses.

"Why?" Douglas said, though it didn't matter. He wasn't going to do it no matter how much Bill turned on the charm.

"Don't look at me like that, Jonesy. It's not really stealing if it's mine," Bill said. He puffed out his chest. "Douglas Jones, I hereby nominate you as executor of my mail. Chuck me a pen, I'll write up a contract."

He'd only been at the station a few minutes but his forehead was already sprinkled with perspiration. Except for his running attire, as usual, he looked like he'd just stepped out of a barber.

His swirl of hair defied gravity. He was clean-shaven, the still country air tinged with the pleasant spice of his sandalwood cologne. Though he worked mostly from home, seeing clients was immaterial to his appearance—he could have been putting the bins out and he'd still be immaculately presented.

“Are you going to tell me why?” Douglas said. After thirty years of friendship, he should have known better than to expect a logical explanation.

“It’s complicated and, frankly, boring.” Bill flipped the key to his Porsche in and out of his hand.

Douglas doubted it was boring. Nothing about Bill was boring. Yesterday’s newspaper was 100pt bold all-caps proof of that. Douglas took it from the recycling bin and slapped it in front of Bill. “What are you going to do about this?”

Bill turned away, and leaned on the counter. He polished his sunglasses with his singlet and squinted in the glare. “Just the usual slander. Nothing I can’t sort out with a few strongly-worded letters.”

“Bikies, Bill? Really?”

“Everyone has the right to legal representation, Jonesy.”

“I don’t mean that, I know you’ve defended them. I meant, do you think it’s wise to be ratting them out to the police?”

“Oh, that—” Bill swatted the air absently. “Yes, well. It’s all a bit of a misunderstanding. It’ll blow over.”

‘A bit of a misunderstanding’ should have been the slogan on Bill’s business card.

Bill looked into Douglas’s eyes; a practiced technique for manipulation. “You’d be really helping me out if you can get my mail for me.”

Compared to what Bill had reportedly been up to, asking Douglas to intercept his mail seemed trivial.

“Besides,” Bill continued brightly, “it gives me an excuse to come and see you Friday mornings.”

"I guess," Douglas said, unsure why they couldn't see each other on Fridays without criminal intent.

"I can bring you the paper from the shop, we'll have a cuppa, catch up on the news of the week. Speaking of bikies, you hear about that bombing in Melbourne?"

Douglas grunted that he had. Seven dead in an explosion at one of the Comancheros' compounds. "Good riddance."

"Not a very charitable attitude, Jonesy," Bill said. "They were better to deal with than most of my politician clients."

"I'm sure they were on their best behaviour. You were keeping them out of jail."

"Which ones?" Bill said.

"Fair point."

"So what do you say?" Bill tapped the counter. "Can you get my mail for me?"

"But it's not exactly, you know, legally speaking, allowed, is it? I mean, as a lawyer, I would have thought you'd be quite anti that sort of thing."

"Jonesy, you're not going to get in any trouble. It's not like you're opening anyone's mail. You're just cutting out the middleman. You know how hopeless the Bangle postal service is." Bill tugged at the dark patch on the front of his running singlet.

With an almost pathological resistance to change, Douglas's typical reaction to deviations from his schedule was to oppose it. The fact it was also breaking the law more or less sealed the deal. "I can't, Bill. Besides, if anyone finds out I'm giving you your mail from here, I'll have the whole town lining up on Friday mornings."

"Nonsense," Bill said. He arched his back and pointed his chin skyward. "You can't do that. It's highly illegal."

"See? Illegal. I can't do it," Douglas said clenching his fists behind the counter. His shoulders sagged. "I'd be a terrible crook."

I'll get us both caught. I'll lose my job, then what am I going to do—go work in the mine? Please don't ask me to do this.”

But Bill just laughed and rolled his eyes. “Caught by who? You think Sergeant Philips give a shit about the mail? He's got enough to deal with. This is not the Kelly gang robbing stagecoaches here.”

Douglas sighed. In many ways, he was the ideal candidate to commit a crime: physically unremarkable in every way. Couldn't pick him out of a lineup, his dad would say.

“Sorry, Bill,” Douglas said. And he really was sorry. It was so rare to have anyone—let alone Bill—in his debt. His aversion to change and his desire to be needed sloshed around his insides like oil and water. “Wouldn't Australia Post have a system to track mail?”

Bill scoffed by blowing a raspberry, tiny droplets of spit catching the pale light and settling on the glass divider. Douglas made a mental note to get the Windex.

“You give them too much credit,” Bill said. “It's a system so antiquated it deserves to be exploited.”

Douglas was reminded of Bill's legal advice column in a rival paper that frequently encouraged readers to take advantage of poorly-defined laws. He saw drawing attention to loopholes as a noble cause. “Plus,” Bill said, pointing at the timber case on Douglas's desk, “you get the stamps without waiting for me.”

Douglas considered the box and its dwindling reserves of stamps.

“Speaking of which.” Bill searched a pocket in his running shorts. He pulled out three postage stamps cut out from their envelopes and slid them under the glass. A botanical illustration caught Douglas's eye.

FITZROY, VICTORIA, Bill had written per Douglas's request.

Douglas had always liked Bill's handwriting. Just like Bill, his slanted print had movement, character, charm, and confidence.

Douglas was fascinated by the distinguishing features of a person's handwriting—to his mind, a characteristic as individual as a fingerprint. If he hadn't been born into station mastery, he fancied he could have found work as a graphologist.

"This one's nice," he said, pointing to the floral design.

"Mm," Bill agreed, unenthusiastically.

Bill—like most—did not share Douglas's interest in stamps. All the more reason to be appreciative of Bill's dedication to bringing them to him.

"Must have a big fan in Fitzroy," Douglas said.

Bill checked his watch. "Why do you say that?" He lifted his shirt to wipe the sweat from his forehead, exposing a flat stomach Douglas had coveted ever since puberty had revealed their genetic disparity. Douglas instinctively sucked in his own paunch.

"You must have given me ten, fifteen stamps from Fitzroy the last few months." Douglas reached into the box he used for recycling and pulled out a handful of small rectangles. "See?"

The samples Douglas held were all the same cream-coloured paper, thicker than standard post office stationery, identically signed: *FITZROY, VICTORIA*.

Something shifted in Bill's eyes, something resembling panic, then he softened, smiling. He chuckled and said, "You'd make a good detective, Jonesy. That's a client. Extremely high-touch. Writes to me most weeks. Sometimes daily. Hates the phone. Insists on everything being in writing."

The two-way radio beeped and hissed. A voice heavy with disinterest groaned, "Mornin', Bangle. You there?"

Douglas swept across the office, his wheeled chair delivering him in one graceful motion to the radio. "Affirmative, control. Go ahead. Over."

"6:25 just leaving Colebrook now. Probably five, ten minutes late."

“Say again, control. Is it five or is it ten minutes delayed? Over.”

Soft static whispered for a few seconds before the voice returned with the tone of forced patience. “Unable to confirm the exact delay, Bangle. Suggest closer to ten.”

“Roger that. Over and out.”

Douglas pressed the broadcast button on the station’s PA system. “Attention platform one.”

Bill turned to the vacant station.

Douglas checked his watch and said, “The 6:25 Patterson Creek service is delayed by approximately ten minutes. We apologise for any inconvenience.”

He rolled back over to Bill at the window. “Always some sort of drama.”

“I’ll bet. Now, let’s talk fortieth birthday presents.”

“Forty,” Douglas said, shaking his head in disbelief. Douglas tried not to be fatalistic but there was something unsettling about approaching the age at which his dad had lost his battle with cancer. ‘Battle’. It wasn’t a battle; a battle suggested a contest. It had been a rout. “Not getting any younger, Billy. Let’s just hit the pub for a few beers. Pin the ears back like we used to.”

“We can do that any time. What do you want, Jonesy?” Bill clenched a fist and beat his chest. “Don’t think about it, just, say the first thing that jumps out of your heart.”

Douglas’s dream had been to drive trains, back when he and Bill were kids. When the trains that huffed and chuffed through Bangle were mighty steam engines. “I think I missed my chance to be a train driver.”

Bill gave him a sympathetic smile. “Aim for the moon—,” he gestured at the sandstone building Douglas had proudly manned for twenty years, “—land among the stars.”

“Truth be told,” Douglas said, wistfully. “I had hoped to win an art prize by now. Or even just held an exhibition.”

“Brilliant,” Bill said. “Let’s do it. You need space? You can use

the woolshed. I'll call some mates in the galleries down in Sydney, ship in some collectors—preferably single, wealthy women—and set you on your path to fame and fortune. What else do you need?”

“Talent,” Douglas said.

“Come on, mate. You're good! Let me do this for you. Tell me what you need.”

Douglas permitted a faint smile to appear. Bill had a knack for pumping up Douglas's tyres. He was so enthusiastic Douglas almost believed him.

“Fine,” Douglas said. “Some new brushes would be great.”

Bill rolled his eyes. “Brushes. Righto. Now: your fortieth.” He dangled the key to his Porsche at the window. It twinkled in the sunlight like a fishing lure.

“Road trip?” Douglas said. He loved riding in the low-slung bucket seat, feeling every ripple in the road surface, watching Bill work through the gears, heart in mouth as Bill braked late and flung the coupé around corners like a slot car. Except stepping out of Bill's Porsche always left Douglas feeling jaded. It made Dotty, his cantankerous fifteen-year-old Datsun, feel so...inferior.

Bill didn't say a word. His smile was white and symmetrical, so self-assured it verged on cruelty.

“What?” said Douglas.

Bill placed the key on the service counter and slid it under the window.

The tingling in Douglas's diaphragm spread down his limbs, and his voice cracked as he said, “I can drive?”

Bill laughed and Douglas was snared. His heart sank. Of course he couldn't drive Bill's '79 911 Turbo. Idiot. His excitement soured like old milk. Bill loved to tease, but he was never mean-spirited. This one hurt. Douglas hated that even at almost forty he could be so easily manipulated. He resented Bill's apparent

naïveté of his power over him.

Douglas forced a laugh. “I didn’t actually think—”

“Do what you like,” Bill said. “She’s yours now.”

Douglas was silent for some time. To him, it seemed like minutes before he could utter a sound. He wondered what time it was, if his bedside alarm was about to shatter this vivid illusion. Waking was as inevitable as the impending disappointment. It was a heartless design fault of the mind to dream of unfathomable happiness, only to wake empty-handed, grieving the thing you never really had.

2

THE COMPENSATION

“Are you okay, mate?” Bill said, his voice seeming so real.

Bill would laugh when Douglas told him he’d dreamed Bill asked him to steal his post from the mailbag in exchange for his Porsche.

Douglas sighed. “I just hope it’s not one of those dreams when you wet yourself, or have a stiffy. The boys at school never let me live that down.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Shh. Just let me pretend.”

“No pretending, mate. It’s yours.” Bill banged the glass.

Douglas started, blinked his eyes.

Bill said, “I know your birthday’s not until Wednesday, but you can’t celebrate a birthday on a Wednesday.”

“I’m, I’m...overwhelmed.”

“I know you love the car, and, well, let’s be honest: this job’s not going to put you in one. I’ve got a new one on order. I was

going to trade it in, but you really get nothing for them once you leave the lot. Anyway, that's not the point. The point is, I love you, mate. You are, without hyperbole, the most decent bloke I know. Much as we all love Dotty, you deserve something nicer to drive than a brown bomb. Now you have a car you don't have to physically assault to get it started."

"Prairie wind," Douglas said, absently.

"Say again?"

"It's not brown. Datsun calls it prairie wind."

Bill turned to the car park. "I think Porsche just calls this 'black'. We'll sort the rego and paperwork out when mine gets delivered, but consider her yours from today. Really. We'll have to get the plates changed over, too."

Bill's personalised number plates read: OBJCTN

"Though," Bill said, "objection does suit you in some ways."

"Sustained," Douglas said, still entranced by the key on his counter.

Bill laughed. "That's the way. Stamps and a Porsche. Not a bad deal, I reckon."

Douglas came back to Earth. The deal.

The key to the Porsche in the car park was real, it seemed, but another entity hung in the space between them: The Ledger of Good and Bad Fortune. "Yes," said Douglas. "The deal. If I collect your mail for you."

"It's not like that. The Porsche is yours regardless. It's just something that makes sense: I get to my clients a day or two early, the guys at the post office have less mail to sort, Rod has one less delivery, you get your stamps sooner. Everybody wins." Bill nudged the key closer to Douglas.

All upsides, Douglas thought, apprehensively. In his experience, the Ledger of Fortune demanded balance. The Christmas he broke his arm on his new bike; the model yacht he built with his dad that sank in the Carlisles' dam on its maiden voyage; and

the tragedy that cemented his belief that for every happiness there was an equal and opposite sadness. He was fourteen the year he'd stood spellbound in the cab of a steam engine. One month to the day after he and his dad stood with the engineer in a cacophony of hissing, clanging joy—the most terrifying display of power Douglas had ever witnessed—embracing his dad as steam and soot greased their faces, Douglas said goodbye to his mum. It should have been a routine appendectomy. A blood clot ended the life of the woman Douglas still called Mummy. A pebble jamming the engine of a train.

Every soaring high of his life had been shot out of the sky, plummeting to Earth with the same devastating speed it had made its ascent. If Douglas wins, ipso facto, Douglas must lose. It had always been the rule. He wondered what the Porsche would cost him.

“What’s happening with you?” Douglas said to change the subject. He was not accustomed to having an existential crisis so early on a Friday. “Back in town for a while?”

“I think so.” Bill leaned in, excitedly. “Ordered my new computer.”

“Oh?” Douglas cared as much for computers as Bill cared for stamps.

“Brand new Apple Macintosh. Seen the ad? ‘We shall prevail!’” Bill boomed. “Bit melodramatic if you ask me, but the machine’s bloody amazing. No more typewriting letters for me, Jonesy. I’ll be letting my clients know it’s word processing and fax only soon. Keep up or be left behind.”

Douglas looked at the fax machine in his office. On the day it was delivered, he didn’t know what it was. Until the IT guy had come to get it working, he’d feared it was a robot to replace him. After all, on the network, at smaller stations, speakers were being installed telling passengers the departure times at the press of a button. Stations were unstaffed outside peak hours,

signals and junction boxes run by computers—it had all been science fiction not so long ago.

More than just dragging him kicking and screaming into the current century, the fax machine had marked the end of his regular postal deliveries to the office and dried up his supply of stamps.

“So, no more stamps then?” Douglas said with nostalgic melancholy.

“I’m sure it’ll take a while to catch on. You know people.”

Oh, he knew people. Douglas was the people.

“How’s the column?” Douglas said.

“Fine, fine. Nothing much there. The usual property disputes, injury compensation any first-year solicitor could resolve”—the hint of mischief nudged at Bill’s mouth—“but there is one project I’m enjoying. I can’t say much but I think it could be one of the biggest cases of my career.” He pouted the smile away, swallowing down the thought of discussing it.

“Oh?” Douglas said, prodding. He couldn’t imagine enduring the stress of Bill’s life, but to live it vicariously was irresistible. The tiniest crumbs that dropped from Bill’s mouth were enough to sustain him.

“Love to, Jonesy. But you know it’s unethical to talk about a case.”

“Unethical?” Douglas huffed a cynical chuckle. “Did you not just ask me to commit mail theft for you?”

“I don’t recall, your honour.”

The men shared their friends-for-life smile; Bill ever the agitator, Douglas compliant, unable to mount any meaningful protest. “Righto,” Douglas said. He picked up the key to the Porsche, rubbed his thumb over the logo, and allowed its power to course through his veins. “I accept your ludicrous generosity. But let the record reflect my strongest possible objection.”

“You’re a good man, Jonesy,” Bill said. Then, pointing at the

embroidered kanji flag he'd brought back from Japan mounted on Douglas's wall, "I'm thinking about taking Caroline to Hokkaido in a few months. For our fortieths. You should come this time."

"Yeah? Maybe I will."

But they both knew Douglas would never leave work, the station, his cat, or even leave Bangle. While Bill followed whatever impulse took him at any given moment—to down tools and take an international holiday at a whim—Douglas found it nigh on impossible to veer even slightly from his plotted course.

Despite Bill's apartment in Manhattan, a London studio, the numerous properties making up his domestic real estate portfolio, and his chaotic business travel schedule, his home was here in Bangle. With his wife, Caroline, his law practice, and their magazine-cover homestead on the hill. Though Bill's tethers to Bangle appeared to be mere suggestions. Tremulous threads that might snap at any moment and Douglas would lose them both to the big wide world forever. There were times when he visited Bill and Caroline's home where he thought the walls would all fall down around him like set pieces at the local theatre—Dizzy and Wild Bill mere actors in a play, strangers he'd seen on stage so often he'd come to feel like he knew them. By comparison, Douglas's bonds to his routine were stiff and inflexible as hessian cord.

"How's Dizzy?" Douglas said, calling her by the nickname Bill had given her, spawned from both her surname—Turner—and her vertiginous zest for life.

"All fine on the Caroline front," Bill said, looking away. "What time's the train come through?" Bill checked his watch again.

Bill rarely called his wife Caroline unless there was strife. Douglas elected not to pry. "Train'll be here any moment."

Bill began to speak but Douglas silenced him with a raised

finger. His mouth opened into a knowing smile. Douglas could tell Bill heard nothing but the birds and the breeze, the white noise of early morning.

And then: the distant clang of the level crossing bells, and the blast of a horn.

3

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

Douglas pulled out his orange high-visibility safety vest from his locker. He adjusted how it draped over his chest so his name tag could be seen. He took his white flag from its holster, installed his cap, and emerged from the office to greet the delayed 6:25 from Colebrook.

Douglas tipped his hat to the driver as he brought the train to rest.

That morning, as with most trains, no passengers boarded or alighted at Bangle Station. Douglas marched the length of the train to complete his inspection, said good morning to the guard, and extended his hand to receive the mailbag.

“Oh,” the guard said. “Nearly forgot the mail!”

Douglas shook his head and checked his watch as the guard dove back inside the guard van. He wondered if this guard had been single-handedly responsible for the train’s eight-minute delay. At last, the guard tossed Douglas the canvas Australia

Post sack and tipped his hat in apology. Everyone knew the Bangle Stationmaster took his job very seriously.

Douglas nodded, made a final appraisal of the train and lifted his flag. He piped a brisk shriek of his whistle and the train belched black smoke as it heaved itself down the track.

Bill had a grin on his face as Douglas returned to the office with the mailbag.

The flags were tucked back in their holder, the whistle and cap hung on the hooks by the door, the neon orange vest returned to its hanger and secured in its locker. Douglas looked up, sensing he was being watched. "What?"

"You really love it, don't you?" Bill said. "All this."

"What do you mean?"

"The schedule, the routine. The predictability of it all."

Douglas sat down at his desk and straightened his planner. He took a ruler and drew a line through the entry he'd written for the 6:25 Colebrook. He noted its departure time, put the pen back in its place, then moved the jar a fraction to line it up with the corner of the planner. "I like to think of it as organised chaos," he said.

"Chaos? It's like clockwork in here."

It was a conversation they'd had countless times. Bill needling Douglas about his adherence to guidelines, structure, routine, following the rules. It was pointless to argue with him, but Bill's appetite for debate was as innate as Douglas's passivity. Douglas could feel his face burning. A pitiful response had barely formed in his mouth when a grumbling sound turned both the men's heads toward the street.

They watched as the chrome of a black Harley Davidson glinted through the straggly eucalyptus and dry grass growing on the car park fence line. Its thick-bearded rider wore a blue flannel shirt under a leather vest and no helmet on his shaved head. He slowed at the entrance to the car park, and turned to

face the station. He brought the bike to a stop, and dropped his square-toed boots to the ground. The rider lowered his sunglasses. He reached inside his vest and Bill straightened, edging toward the corner of the station as if seeking the protection of the sandstone building.

When the rider took his hand from his vest, he was only holding a small white square. He tugged at it, apparently removing a pen, jotted something down, then tucked it back inside his vest. The glasses were pushed back up his nose, and the bike crawled down the street, spluttering growls as it left.

It was Douglas who spoke at last. He knew Bill had started his law career representing anyone willing to pay his invoices. That included bikies. Early runs, and money in the bank was all he'd cared about. Although that would have been fifteen years ago. "One of your mates?"

Bill smiled but it was a forced one, its foundations rattled. "Friend of a friend. Shall we check the mail?" he said, tapping the counter.

Douglas opened the door to his office and looked about to ensure no one saw him breaking the staff-only protocol. He ushered Bill in and quickly shut the door behind him. His stomach churned and he felt himself losing his nerve. Bill must have sensed his accomplice's waning appetite for the mission and steadied Douglas with a pat on the back that only caused him to jump.

"Easy, Jonesy," Bill said.

"I don't know," Douglas said. "I hate this."

"Come on, mate. You're doing everyone a favour."

"I'm committing a crime is what I'm doing."

"A victimless crime."

With the Australia Post logo stamped on it, the bag had a foreboding aura of governmental authority. Douglas pointed at

the text across the bottom of the sack:

**THEFT OR MISUSE OF THIS BAG
IS A CRIMINAL OFFENCE.
PENALTIES APPLY.**

He tapped 'misuse'.

Bill huffed and said, "I'll bloody do it," reaching for the bag, but Douglas rolled his shoulder and blocked Bill's hand.

"No. It's fine. I'll do it. I am slightly more authorised than you."

Douglas took a deep breath and laid the bag on his desk. He lowered the blind of his window and took his seat. The bag was sealed with an intimidating arrangement of leather straps and buckles, finished off with a combination padlock that suggested tampering was beyond the capabilities of any available tools.

"Oh," said Bill. "I didn't think it would be so...secure."

It was disorienting to see Bill come up against an obstacle he was genuinely unprepared for. Douglas hesitated, perhaps sensing this was an out. He could simply say the bag was impenetrable and avoid this moral quandary altogether. But the opportunity to be helpful in some way towed him forward like a current. It was so rare to feel needed—to be necessary for an outcome benefiting people he cared about—that even this nefarious undertaking had an intoxicating sense of purpose to it. Here was an opportunity to prove he was capable of breaking the rules. He could be unpredictable under controlled circumstances.

Bill sighed, defeated. "I suppose cutting it open is out of the question."

Douglas weighed his options.

"You know, I asked Rod once," Douglas said, referring to Bangle's motorbike-borne postie. "What happens if someone forgets the combination to the lock? Or if the postmaster gets

hit by a bus?”

Bill's eyes widened with intrigue. “Go on.”

Douglas was so unfamiliar with wielding the power in their relationship, he wondered if Bill felt this night and day with everyone he encountered. Like standing on a step ladder and imagining it was how tall people saw the world. Douglas said, “He said that the padlock combination to all the mailbags is just the postcode of the local post office.”

Bill's handsome smile returned in full bloom. “The things that worry you,” he said, slowly shaking his head.

Douglas was a dexterous man with slight, nimble fingers, the steady hands of a surgeon, yet this operation had them trembling like featherless baby birds. His thumb slipped on the dials and he blew his fingers dry to get purchase. At last he aligned the numbers in their correct sequence. He let the bag sag in his grip. The point of no return.

Bill whispered, “You okay?”

“You'll represent me if this all goes to hell, right?”

“Pro bono. But no one is going to go to hell.”

He'd sensed it was coming, so Douglas was thankful Bill hadn't said, “Trust me”. His father had always said never trust anyone who says trust me. Douglas looked into Bill's eyes. “Ready?”

Bill nodded. Douglas tugged on the lock and it snapped open. The leather straps were unbuckled and he worked them loose enough to tip the contents of the bag onto the desk. He didn't want to put his hand inside in case there was a secondary security device such as an ink bomb or a bear trap.

A small bundle of envelopes bound with an elastic band landed with a thud among a dozen loose letters. Before Douglas had a chance to put the bag down, Bill swiped the bundle and thumbed through the envelopes.

“At least it'll be your fingerprints they find,” Douglas said. His

heart was racing and the bones in his legs had liquefied. He thought about the crooks in the movies, the bank robbers in the vault, surrounded by untold sums of money, waiting for the cops to bust them in the act. How did they keep their limbs in working order under such stress?

Bill flipped the stack around so Douglas could see the letters were all addressed to him. "There you go," he said. "Easy as that. No harm, no foul."

"Fan mail?"

"Some," he said, flicking through the pile. His eyes fell upon something that brought a smile to his face and he dug his thumb into an envelope, cream in colour, and noticeably thicker stock. He took out what looked like a postcard, as it had beautiful cursive handwriting on the back. Douglas was beginning to form an image of the writer in his mind when Bill flipped it around quickly, just long enough for Douglas to see the photograph was a naked woman.

"What is that?" Douglas said, eyes and mouth wide in delighted shock.

Bill studied the photo with inflated fascination. "Let's see. Why, Jonesy," he said, channelling Sherlock Holmes. "By Jove, I believe this is a woman. Look here. A breast, and, if I'm not mistaken, yet another. And what have we here, but a tuft of minge? Yes, there can be no denying the fact."

Douglas blushed. "Is that, you know, common?"

"Quite so. Lots of lonely women out there. And men, for that matter. For example—" Bill produced another envelope from the pile, and showed Douglas where the sender had ominously scribbled their name as:

THE REAPER.

Douglas frowned as he read the words, though it was the writing style more than the cryptic identity that intrigued him: all capitals apart from the lowercase Es giving it a juvenile

quality, pressed into the paper with thick marker, written in haste. A spiteful, angry scrawl.

Bill opened the letter and scanned the words with eyebrows pressed low. His brow lifted, he scoffed, and scrunched the page into a ball.

“I am a dead man, apparently.” If Bill was concerned, he showed little sign of it.

Douglas tilted his head. “You’re not worried?”

Bill winked and wagged the naked picture. “These illicit photographs have a way of lifting the spirits.”

“I’m serious, Bill. What if one of these crazies comes here?”

“There are two people in this world, Jonesy—”

“Here we go.”

“Heroes and victims. I refuse to be a victim.”

“Oh, good. As long as you refuse to be brutally murdered, then I guess you’ll be fine.”

Bill tossed the paper ball into the bin. “You’d be shocked by some of the terrible things people will say anonymously from the safety of their homes. It’s another reason why this little arrangement is a good idea. Caroline won’t see all the death threats.”

“Or the women?”

Bill laughed. “Yes, well. She’s not thrilled by those.”

“I don’t suppose you’re going to tell me what The Reaper was talking about?”

“Oh, just a misunderstanding. I did some work with a woman. We worked late one night, I took her out for a drink—strictly professional—”

“Oh, yes. I’m sure.”

“—and her boyfriend took exception. The jealous type. You know jealousy is one of the best ways to put yourself in an early grave. It’s something I tell Caroline all the time.”

“Her grave or yours?”

“Fair point.”

“And the others? You make it sound like you get all sorts of nasty mail. You give people free legal advice. Why would you be getting death threats?”

Bill laughed again, shaking his head. “Oh, Jonesy. I do love you,” he said. “And I envy you.”

“What?” Douglas said, wounded by Bill’s condescending tone.

Bill spread his arms theatrically. “How you perceive the world and the people in it. Firstly, it’s not free legal advice. The newspaper column is a bit of fun, sure, but I do have paying clients, you know. I’ve cost plenty of lawyers a lot of money. You can imagine they’re absolutely thrilled with me telling people how to represent themselves. Then, as a solicitor myself, consider that I’ve helped women leave abusive men and take them for everything; helped whistle-blowers take down corporations; freed and imprisoned bikies; sunk politicians—the kinds of things that can make some pretty powerful enemies. And then there’s the police...”

“The police?”

Despite knowing Bill for thirty years, it occurred to Douglas he knew almost nothing about the true nature of his work. If someone asked him what Bill did, Douglas would have said, “He’s a lawyer”. He doubted anybody in town knew about the bikies, the politicians, the abusive men and their women—the police for God’s sake?

“Did you say the police?” Douglas said again. But Bill had moved on to greener pastures, his eyes now darting across the back of the photograph. Though Bill’s fingers obscured the woman’s most pertinent attributes, Douglas saw enough to know she was totally at ease without a stitch of clothing. Bill made an exaggerated, scandalised face at Douglas then used the photo as a fan.

“Well, cops will never admit it’s them but it’s them,” Bill said,

tucking the photo back into its envelope. "It's not my fault they can't collect evidence worth a damn to secure a conviction."

"Oh, I see. You've got the police offside because you're defending criminals."

"Alleged, Jonesy. Alleged. Look—for every big case winner, there's got to be a big loser. And, let's face it, some people are bad losers."

Douglas pointed at the envelope with the photograph. "And who's that? Is she a winner or a loser?"

"Just an enthusiastic admirer of my professional services."

"What does it say?"

"I knew you were a read-the-articles type." Bill smirked and took the photo out again. He cleared his throat, and read: "Dear William—she always calls me William."

"William?"

"Shush, Jonesy. Dear William. Tell that friend of yours, Jonesy, to take a holiday. Tell him he must go overseas before he turns forty. Have an adventure. See Japan. See the cherry blossoms, visit the home of the mighty samurai, encounter the kami of the great forests, experience the divine at one of the Oiran—"

"What's that?"

"A brothel."

"Oh for God's sake, Bill. Go on, what has she said really?"

Bill slid the photo back into its envelope. "Nope. Sorry. If I shared my private correspondence with you, I would be severely reprimanded by my dear compatriots at The Law Society. And I wouldn't want to put you in harm's way."

Douglas's smile vanished. "Harm's way? What are you talking about?"

Bill waved his hand dismissively. "Legally, I mean."

Douglas only frowned.

"For God's sake, Jonesy. Relax." Bill patted Douglas on the arm and headed for the door.

Douglas coughed and rubbed his fingers together. "Ahem."

“Oh, your stamps,” Bill said. He scrunched up his mouth, tapped the letters on his palm. “How about I leave the stamps with Caroline later today, you can pick them up from the shop?”

Douglas sighed, a pang of betrayal tugged at his chest. He felt used. “Yeah, fine.”

Bill jogged on the spot, puffing, twisting his back in preparation for the run home. He put his sunglasses back on, and flashed his carefree smile. “It’s just this once. I’ll be more organised next time and you can do your stamp thing right away. I’ll catch you later, mate. Enjoy the car!”

Bill’s footsteps crunched in the car park gravel, diminishing in volume, stopped, then grew louder. An athlete’s silhouette materialised at Douglas’s window. The shadow knocked on the glass.

Douglas pulled the blinds back up. “Can I help you, sir?”

Bill fed the letters under the service window. “Drop them off at the shop when you’re done with the stamps. And whatever you do, don’t let Caroline see the smutty ones.”

“Of course,” Douglas said, with the reverence of having taken a solemn vow.

He watched Bill disappear down the path on a tireless stride that could have sent him to the Olympics, Douglas reckoned. It wasn’t fair that some people could be given such a disproportionate amount of good genes, talent, and luck. He couldn’t begrudge Bill Carlisle though. Despite his status as one of the country’s most renowned legal professional—Bill was frequently referred to as a celebrity lawyer, not only on account of his ostentatious clientele but of his own infamy—Douglas considered him to be his best mate. Today though, it was Douglas who was the wealthy one. He assembled his haul of stamps.

There were letters from suburbs all over Australia. Most of the stamps he had seen before, nothing of particular artistic value. But what Douglas had always been most interested in,

rather than the stamps, was the sender's handwriting. Each person's unique script conjured vivid images of their owners, and inspired the faces in the portraits he painted. Ordinarily, there was at least one writerly cursive that caught his attention, infusing his brush with a face to be released onto his miniature canvases. Today however, his muse was being summoned in a more lascivious fashion. There was no handwriting that could compare to the intrigue of the naked woman reclining in the cream envelope.

Douglas had endured a period of abstinence comparable to the severity of Bangle's drought. A dry spell of approximately two years. And, like some hardier species of desert flora and fauna, his libido had mellowed into a state of carnal dormancy. It was the condition Douglas assumed those in the religious orders who took vows of celibacy embraced, and who knew the best way to maintain their hibernating urges was quite simply to not wake them up.

He pushed all thoughts of the pornographic image aside by retrieving The Reaper's letter from the bin. He flattened it out, and saw words scratched into the paper by the same aggressive hand he'd seen on the envelope. The letter practically growled at him.

G'DAY DEAD MAN
I See YOU. GO ANYWHERE NEAR
HER AGAIN AND See WHAT HAPPENS.
FROM THE REAPER

Douglas pictured the cruel grimace on the man's face. Envisaged the grizzled stubble around thin lips as he licked the envelope with a grey, flickering serpentine tongue, sealed it, pressed the stamp haphazardly in place with a fist. The Reaper came to life through his distinctive scrawl and he was terrifying. Sweaty hands, his stomach stewing, Douglas screwed up the

letter again and tossed it back in the bin. The letter was so offensive to him he deemed it unfit even for recycling. It must be destroyed.

He envied Bill's ability to laugh off The Reaper's chilling note. Nausea sapped his strength and it hadn't even been addressed to him. Perhaps death threats were like spicy food: you built up a tolerance.

His stomach growled. He took two Danish butter cookies from the blue commemorative tin, remembered Bill's flat stomach, put one back, and placed it on a saucer while he made tea.

Douglas sent his thoughts down the track to where Bill was likely almost in town. It was no secret Bill had played around, enjoying the attention of many women, some of whom had been in various states of romantic attachment with other men. But that was before Bill and Caroline's extravagant wedding. He was married now. To Caroline Turner, no less. Heiress to the Turner shoelace empire. And despite, according to Bill, a large chunk of the Turner fortune being gobbled up by the footwear industry's sudden appetite for velcro, Douglas couldn't imagine Bill risking the fallout—or Caroline's incandescent temper—to have an affair. Maybe it was enough for Bill to know he could if he wanted to.

As hard as Douglas tried to avert his gaze, the unsealed envelope teased like a slit cave with the promise of forbidden treasure.

The kettle whistled and pulled his eyes from the temptation. Above the bubbling water, there was the drone of a blowfly. He looked for the little black dot darting about the office but found none. The drone grew louder. Then it changed gears.

Rod the postie on his bike.

The mail bag.

It sat limp on Douglas's desk, eviscerated, its innards spilled. As incriminating as any murder scene.