

COLIN PALMER

Vivienne

JUST AN ORDINARY SUBURBAN
HOUSEWIFE... NO MORE



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suburban housewife... no more**

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=25199740

ISBN 9785448556586

Аннотация

Vivienne was a just a normal housewife from a little suburb on Australia's Gold Coast until a near disastrous accident uncovered some latent powers that she'd never known was within her. The Police can't catch her so they invite a living legend from The United States Federal Bureau of Investigation to help. Unfortunately, a serial killer also learns about her and wants Vivienne and her power. Everybody wants her. What does Vivienne want? Just to be normal again...

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ISBN 978-5-4485-5658-6

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Chapter One. “Welcome Shoppers!”

She would have changed things if she'd had any idea of what was going to happen... done it differently in an attempt to change her fate, her future. Or maybe she wouldn't have altered anything – she didn't know, was confused. It had started only a day ago but felt like a year or two even. So much water under the bridge, so much pain and suffering, so much change and so little time for all those things to have occurred. Yet they had. The sound of the loud hailer assaulted her ears again.

“Mrs Curtis, Vivienne, please! This is your last warning. If you do not come out in the next sixty seconds we will be forcibly entering the building. Please come out with your hands above your head and lay face down on the footpath. Vivienne? Your minute starts now Vivienne.”

Why do they tell you the exact time they're gonna be busting through the front door, she thought to herself? She lay behind substantial open top freezers in the cold food section of Franklins (the soon to go bust Franklins chain, this particular store replaced by a Woolworths). There were six freezers in all and she had rearranged them so to have any chance of getting to her, they would have to blow them out of the way, or spend considerable time getting forklifts to move them. And while the dumb overly

considerate constabulary stuffed around with that, she was simply going to slip out through the fridge section behind her. What they obviously didn't know was that in the capacious area behind the fridges, the bulk cold stock was stored. There was also a vent opening large enough for a horse to slip into. From there it led to the ceiling space. The ceiling space gave access to the entire western side of the shopping centre, not just the supermarket – she'd be swanning out of the front door of some little boutique safely out of sight while they still thought she was behind those freezers.

They wouldn't have time to check engineering plans and the like to discover this little escape route, nor the time to find out that she had worked part time in this very supermarket right up until last Christmas. Dumb bastards! Because they were up against a woman they were being nice. Nice! Does a person, a woman, have to kill and maim to get serious attention out there? But it wasn't the attention she was seeking. It wasn't anything like that at all. She just wanted her life back. Anonymity. Her husband. Her daughter. Her home.

But oh, the strength, the power she felt. It was addictive, and she loved it. If only it had started differently. Tricia. My dear sweet beautiful daughter Tricia, she thought.

Chapter Two. “Blind Faith”

Two days had passed since the supermarket confrontation and it was just as she had imagined it would be, as easy as that. They had fired their gas pellets or stun grenades or whatever it was the Police used under those circumstances, but only after giving her all the warnings in the world. About the only gentlemanly thing they hadn't done was to provide a police escort away from the damn place!

Vivienne figured that if she had been a man, armed or unarmed, they would have come in through every entry point possible, and they would not have been as nice about it as they had been with her. Sure, a man or any armed person would have been more risky for them, or at least that's the way they were still thinking. They knew she was smart, intelligent that is, but street smart she wasn't. They continually failed to comprehend that she was dangerous, more so than any man with or without a weapon. Until they realise that, she understood it simply wasn't possible to be taken seriously. They saw her as just an unarmed woman, an unarmed married woman with a little girl, a husband and a home in the suburbs. She was an unarmed woman that the entire State Police Force in South East Queensland had, so far, been unable to catch.

“I bet they are still standing around in Franklins scratching their heads, and their balls, trying to work out how I piled those freezers up together so quickly,” she whispered to herself, and giggled.

Vivienne Elizabeth Curtis, nee Barnes, twenty-eight years of age. She turned twenty-nine in about a month. She sat on the floor of a little caravan not even one kilometre from that very same Franklins supermarket. She was on the floor so that nobody in the van park could walk past and spy her, inside what should have been a vacant van. And because it was cool. Since this had all begun, she was always hot. Not sweating, goodness no, women don't sweat! She didn't feel sick like when she'd been running a fever or anything either, but she knew her body temperature was as high, if not higher than those very periods of illness. It was early May, almost winter, and even though the day time temps were still warm, at night it was beginning to get decidedly chilly. Not that Viv felt it, the cold that is. It was like she was impervious to any temperature change. She even thought about how pleasant the temperature of the Franklins cold rooms had been.

She stood about five foot four inches tall in the old scale, and weighed about fifty-two kilograms ringing wet in the new. Her husband Brett was in his forties and he still used imperial measurements for a persons' height, metric for just about anything else. Go figure! She wondered how he would measure

her body temperature at the moment? Taken orally, he would probably measure it in Fahrenheit, just so that she'd request a reading in the centigrade scale she could understand. Then he would make veiled suggestions that he would have to take a reading from 'elsewhere' if she wanted it in metric. She knew they didn't own a rectal thermometer, that's for sure!

His sexual innuendo was constant and that's what he would be suggesting, the dirty old bugger! She would tease him about it for another year or so but she knew if he persisted she would give in eventually. Besides, the thought of some taboo little sex act excited her but it was the anticipation more than the actual act itself that kept her going. This was one anticipatory event that she was going to string him along for as long as she could.

"Who am I kidding?" she whispered to herself. "When they finally catch me I'll be dead or locked away for the next twenty years anyway. Only sex I can look forward to will be as one of the girls in striped prison issues," she laughed softly.

She stretched out her legs and thought of her daughter Tricia, the beautiful little tyke. Just over a week ago she was taking Tricia shopping, and that's when it had started. Viv closed her eyes and pulled out her mental photo album, her mind flipping the pages as she revelled in the discovery of some new frames that had developed since the last time.

Maybe she could eventually work out just what was happening to her, and if she couldn't fix it herself, then at least convince the very pissed off authorities that she was worth saving. She saw that bright May morning again, Tricia in the stroller near the front door as her Mom, she, Vivienne, went through the garage to back out the car.

It was much easier getting Tricia into her car seat outside of the narrow single garage, and then a simple matter of sliding the stroller along the back floor, or into the boot. Their house was slightly elevated from the road and Viv recalled her shock at seeing the stroller and its precious cargo, rolling slowly down across the lawn toward the street. She remembered leaping from the car and charging down the drive, sobbing hysterically but knowing she was going to catch it in time as long as she didn't slip or fall. She thanked God there were no cars coming. She slapped her hands around the stroller handles and swivelled it around, grabbing out her beautiful baby and crushing her to Mommy's heaving bosom.

The stroller began to roll again, and Vivienne heard and saw its movement from the corner of her tear filled eyes. She put her foot under the rear wheel and it propped. She didn't know how long she stood there in the sun soaked front driveway, but when she next looked up she saw the stroller resting against the gutter

on the other side of the road.

She looked down to her foot and nearly swooned – the rear bumper of her little hatch back was resting against her leg. The outside of her foot lay against the rear tyre, her leg bowed like a string of spaghetti, yet she felt no pain. But she was so hot! She concentrated but could not even feel the car against her leg.

Tricia slept soundly against her chest as Vivienne looked around wildly but as usual for a weekday, saw none of her neighbours. She let one arm drop to the back of the car, paranoid that at any second its weight would become all too much and complete the order of gravity by rolling back, crushing her and her baby.

Viv wouldn't let that happen, she would lob Tricia onto the lawn hopefully out of harms way, or twist so that the car could continue its journey by just running over her legs, Tricia safely in her arms. No, too risky, it would have to be the lob onto the lawn she knew.

The car moved. She looked at it. Her hand was resting against the boot and she gave it another imperceptible push. Maybe the boot had not been closed properly she thought. But when she pushed, the car moved off her leg, the bow decreased and the tyre no longer rested against her foot. She pushed more and her

car moved a little further. Uphill. She continued to push until the car was on the level floor of the garage.

She ducked her head through the open drivers' window, careful not to nudge her precious sleeping bundle, pulled on the hand brake and nudged the gear stick forward into first. Viv walked out to the front of the garage and looked down the driveway. She walked as if in a trance, down the driveway and across the road, retrieving the runaway stroller and dragged it slowly back to the house. She lay her beautiful sleeping Tricia back into her cot, before again, zombie like, she returned to the top of the driveway.

Turning, she looked at her car. She shook her head, it hadn't happened – she'd just dreamed it all. She walked along the side of the car and saw the drivers' window down, hand brake on, the car in first gear. Yes, she had done that. Returning to the rear of the car, she rested both hands against the boot lid, her head drooped between her arms and saw the unmistakable rubber mark on the outside of her left shoe and a crease in the skin across her upper calf where the bumper must have rested. She pushed against the boot with her hands and saw the panel indenting, felt the car resisting. No, not feeling, knowing the car was resisting now that it was in gear and the brake was engaged – knowing that if she pushed harder, her hands would either dent or go through the panel. Or the car would move.

She walked around to the driver's door and retrieved the keys from the ignition. The hand brake was on, the car in gear she noted again. She opened the rear hatch. She could feel the heat emanating from her body again but it wasn't uncomfortable. She grasped the lower lip of the boot with her hands, aware it was infinitely stronger than the hatch door she had been pushing on. And push she did. She waited to feel the resistance again, any resistance, but when she didn't feel any at all she pushed harder. All four tyres squealed quickly and at the sound of a crash she stopped, leaned back, eyes wide open, heart pounding, and the heat, the heat. Startled, she saw the cracks in the rear brick wall of the garage – another foot and the car would have gone through the wall and into the back yard. She stepped to the side and saw the two skid marks ending where the tyres currently rested. They were three feet long. She couldn't recall taking even one step but would have taken at least three or four to push the car that far.

“What the hell am I thinking?” she flashed loudly around the garage. “I shouldn't be able to push the car at all!”

At that moment she felt the heat around her, in her, dissipating, and she slumped to the floor gasping. Not from exhaustion, but from fear and desolation. She knew it wouldn't work anymore. She struggled up and pushed against the B pillar of the car. It didn't budge an inch, and she wasn't surprised.

Chapter Three. “Dr Chung”

“I’m not sure I understand Doc?”

“It very easy Mista Curtis. Vivienne very ill. She need treatment very soon.”

“But what is it Doc? That’s what I’m not clear about. YOU didn’t see her break the door, YOU didn’t see her...”

“Yes Mista Curtis, yes. Your wife she do things that amaze you, that scare you. Take very much strength no for her to do those things? Make you very scared of her.”

“No, no, I not, I mean I’m not scared of her, of what she did. She’s my wife, I know her better than anybody else in the world and she wouldn’t hurt a fly. She certainly wouldn’t hurt me or Tricia.”

“Maybe true Mista Curtis, very true, but already she kill one person and already she injure ten other person, and yesterday, you think your wife do those very things yesterday?”

Brett Curtis thought about that. What he had witnessed and what he heard reported, seen on the TV news even, were

astounding things. They were things you would have talked about at work the next day with your colleagues, and then forgotten about. But these were things *his* wife had done, he had seen her do them, some of them, and still he could not believe it was possible. He would never forget them for the rest of his life.

This Dr Chung had been the first to make some sense but now he was becoming more annoying than helpful. Every time Chung called him by name, Brett would cringe. It was if Chung was proud that he could say ‘very’ in correct English, instead of pronouncing it ‘velly’, because he would make sure he said it in almost every sentence that came out his mouth. Brett Curtis was getting tired of it.

His wife Vivienne was in trouble and he needed to help her. So far the Police, the media, his neighbours, and even Dr Chung were frustrating him. But most of all, most of all he was frustrated by Vivienne herself. Vivienne, who had stormed out of the house after calling him to come home from work yesterday. Vivienne, who had regaled him with this incredible, unbelievable story after driving the car through the garage and into the back wall. Vivienne, who got upset and snapped off the front door, as a demonstration that her story was the truth.

Brett now understood what she’d told him *WAS* the truth but this realisation hadn’t happened when she’d ripped off the front

door, oh no, he of the logical mind still thought she had set that up as well, to go with her story of pushing the damn car through the garage wall and saving Tricia from being run over. But then he saw her storm out of the house, stomping across the front lawn to the house over the road and she, she pushed a car over, yes, push a car over she did. Right in front of a velly, velly surprised neighbour as well, who was standing at his front window no doubt listening to their late morning argument over the road.

He could imagine the insurance claim form now ... "Domestic dispute. Upset housewife lifted my car and turned it over onto its roof while it was parked in my driveway. Brett shook his head. This was getting ridiculous.

He needed to find Vivienne and help her as quickly as he could. She hadn't meant to hurt anybody. It was unfortunate about that guy, the cop being killed. He could see how impossible it must be for her, knowing what she could do yet not knowing. Or the actual effects of what she did to herself or anybody else. It had been the old domino affect that had got the guy killed. It wasn't as if Vivienne had gone up and knocked his block off or anything. Brett no longer doubted that she could have if she'd wanted but they were holding her responsible they were. The Police, and even Dr Chung said she had killed him.

"She didn't kill anybody Doc, and you know it."

“Maybe so Mista Curtis, she didn’t kill him but she responsible for killing him, you understand?”

“No, no I don’t. If the Police had been doing their job properly and taken the situation seriously from the first, then the guy would still be alive. Do YOU understand THAT? And another thing, Vivienne wouldn’t have known that anybody got killed until it was being reported all over the radio and TV pinning the guys’ death directly onto her. Do YOU understand how she would feel hearing it like THAT Mista Chung? I’ve heard enough, I’m outta here. I’ve got a daughter to look after and a wife to find.”

Chapter Four. “Zoom Zoom”

The digital speedometer read 108. He would never get used to kilometres per hour he thought to himself. 108. That was more than the ton from where he came from. In an era where highway travel faster than about sixty miles an hour was becoming increasingly frowned upon by the great majority of law abiding citizens, 108 just seemed, well, flagrant. He almost wished he could lower the window and stick his finger up at the world and yell at the top of his voice ‘hey look at me doin’ a hunnard and eight’! Phil, his old buddy from the academy would appreciate it, even if nobody else did, Phil would.

The sadness swept across him like a huge tsunami, no, hang on, what did they call them here in ‘down under’? Yeah, right, tidal waves. What a joke! Tsunami sounded impressive, but tidal wave? Tidal wave sounded like a tired scientist had run out of intelligent ways to describe a particularly violent act of nature. Something akin to reporting a mass murder as a minor domestic dispute.

“You okay boss?”

The voice came from the driver of the big rig who was looking at him with those immense bushy eyes and the craggiest face he’d

ever set eyes on outside of a morgue. He hadn't laughed when someone had told him in Sydney that Peter Gallagher had a face you could only describe as a chocolate cake somebody had put a fist into, but now he could see the similarity was uncanny.

"Yeah I'm fine Pete. Why do you call me that?"

"What's that boss?"

"Boss?"

"I call everybody boss. Besides, that's who you are."

"I'm not your boss."

"Are".

"Not really. I've only been seconded here for this investigation and if you asked me at this very minute what to do or even where we were, I wouldn't be able to tell you. What sort of a boss does that make me?"

"Ah, an honest one."

"That I am Pete, that I am. Anyway, you're in charge of this here ginormous high tech piece of equipment and as far as I'm

concerned, that makes you the boss.”

“Okay then,” Pete grinned. “In that case, I say we stop at Macksville for lunch.”

“Okay”.

“You like Australia so far boss?”

“The 200 miles of it I’ve seen? Yeah, yeah I do. And I’m not your boss.”

“Sure boss.”

Chapter Five. “Let Down”

Vivienne cast her eyes to the lounge room carpet. The words had hurt her and she was desperately trying to control the rising heat again. She tried to block her ears as he continued.

“... not possible Viv and all you have to do is be honest with me instead of coming up with this cock and bull story...”

She swished around and strode two paces to the front door, which he'd closed as soon as he realised they were arguing loudly. She grasped the doorknob and with seemingly no effort, crushed it in her hand and yanked the locks inner workings through the thin timber veneer. The bolt ripped through the doorframe as well and she let the whole mechanism clatter to the floor. Her body had concealed what she'd had done from him but as soon as the metal lockset crashed against the tiles, he stopped talking. Viv reached her fingers through the hole created by the vacant lock and with a small twist of her petite body, all three hinge sets were torn from the frame. She held the door in one hand and turned slightly to place it carefully, and dramatically, against the wall.

She glimpsed his wide eye stare and wished she could think of something, anything that would convince her husband that

what was happening to her was real. Very, very real, and utterly astounding. Her own brain was still coming to terms with her ability. But it was the warmth, the heat, and the overall feeling of invulnerability that made her all the more excited, and terrified.

Another glance at his eyes and she could still see his doubt. Through the recently vacated entryway she spied the nosy old farts' car in the driveway over the road. Viv strode purposefully out the door, down her front lawn again, crossed the road without looking, secretly hoping a car would come along which she would push out of the way like she knew could.

The nosy old fart himself was standing just inside the shadows of his open front door and had obviously been listening to their arguments only moments before. She was gonna really give him something to listen too now, and perhaps kill two birds with the one stone by convincing Brett that every thing she had told him was the truth – the complete and total truth.

Vivienne was not an experienced car lifter per se, but knew she could do it. One more glance back to make sure Brett was looking, she deliberately placed one hand under the sill of the car (granted an old Toyota Corolla and not a heavy beast of a thing but still a car) at about what she determined would be the centre line. She bent her knees slightly and held her right hand above her

head so that Brett, and the old fart, could see she was only using the one hand. She straightened her legs and lifted at the same time and even Vivienne was surprised at the ease with which that Corolla flipped onto its side. A small push just as dramatically with one finger as it teetered and it went over gently onto its roof.

Vivienne put her hands on her hips and faced Brett, who stood in the middle of the road. His countenance was truly one to behold. Vivienne thought his jaw was about to drop and hit the roadway, and his eyes bulged so much she thought they might pop out of his head, *like the Mask character Jim Carey plays in the movie* she giggled to herself.

Heaving a huge sigh, Vivienne flashed her husband an “I told you so’ look, then as much as she disliked the nosy old fart, went around to the other side of the Corolla. Within seconds, it was back on its wheels in the driveway with only a few small dents and scratches to show for its short off road foray. “What’s his name, Mister Nosy Old Fart Wallace, that’s it! Come out now and complain you old barstard’ she thought.”

Chapter Six. “They Want You – Down Under”

The Buick was a nice enough car but being pushed the way it was, screeching tyres, screaming engine and smoking brakes was far beyond its design brief. He sawed at the wheel as an oncoming car appeared around the tight bend, missing by inches and testimony to luck not skill on the part of both drivers. He rounded the bend, ignoring the screeching tyres, more concerned about the temperature gauge. The little white needle had been stuck in the red zone for some minutes now, telltale wisps of steam whipped out around the edges of the bonnet.

“Stop you son of a bitch” he gritted out, and when the Buick began to hesitate, then slow, he pumped the accelerator and smacked the steering wheel with his open hands at the same time. “No, no, not you you bitch of a thing... Goddammit.”

He nursed the now stalled vehicle into a lay-by and off the winding mountain road. Steam and smoke poured out from around the bonnet, the front wheel wells, and even through the grill. He smashed his fists into the steering wheel and jerked on the handbrake, hoping the sound of it snapping might alleviate some frustration. No luck there as it held solidly and

condensation began to steam up the windscreen. He wrenched open the door, leapt out and slammed it shut, kicking at the dirt. As a final gesture, he slapped the suction mounted flashing strobe from its position on the roof, where he'd managed to plant it only ten minutes earlier. It dangled down and swung lazily on its cord, the red light flashing along the side of the Buick. He placed his head slowly down onto his arms on the roof and rested as he heard the sound of sirens coming up the road behind him.

He went to the side of the road and waved past the first couple of black and whites, then a matching Buick to his own came screeching around the corner, only just managing a screeching halt when the driver saw him. His immediate thought was the cornering composure and speed of even a lowly black and white was far better than their 'environmentally friendly' Buicks. Somebody saved a few Government dollars by purchasing compact sedans but just pushed this investigation into a financial loss amounting to a sum that would have bought ten bloody Buicks, he thought scornfully.

"How far?" the driver enquired.

"Too far, unless we can get a chopper over him in the next minute or two. I reckon he'd have disappeared down some little by road and lay low under some cover after that. Damn, damn it to hell, I could have had him, I was right on his tail," and he

slapped the roof of the newly arrived Buick.

“C’mon, we’ll go for a cruise, see if we can catch the local yokels. You never know, one of them might have some brains and radioed ahead for a roadblock or something.”

“Yeah, yeah, alright, hang on.”

He dawdled back to his now slowly steaming Buick, grabbed his bag from the back seat and popped it into the boot. He switched off the strobe and dropped it onto the dash and closed all the windows before finally using the key to activate the central locking. He kicked some more dirt at it, then went back to its twin and jumped into the passenger seat. The driver floored the accelerator that slammed his new passengers’ door closed and his back into the seat. He reached for his seatbelt as the driver activated the siren again.

“Don’t think we need to hurry. Told you, he’s long gone. A regular Houdini this one.”

“How long you been chasing him now?”

“Off and on, about four years. Trouble is that he’s smart, real smart. He only surfaces just before budget time. He knows we won’t have the cash to make a serious effort at catching him.

As soon as the budget is approved and the money comes in, he disappears.”

“This is close as you got?”

“Yeah, yeah it is. I saw him, I saw him face to face. I’d dreamed of that day but in my dream I was slapping cuffs on him.”

“Witnesses back there say he drew a gun on you. They said you had every right to shoot. Why didn’t you?”

“He knows, he knows I don’t want to kill him, he knows that. And now I know too, I know he doesn’t want to kill me. He likes me chasing him, that’s his game. It’s a new game now that we’ve been face to face.”

“You, you ever shot anyone, you know, had to shoot someone before?”

He looked at the driver. He saw a young man, maybe mid-twenties, dark suit, black tie, light coloured shirt. A small bulge under his right armpit showed he was wearing a shoulder holster, and was left handed. He’d bet good money the kid also had a back up in an ankle holster. He didn’t look down – didn’t need to. He was good with people. No, that was totally inaccurate. He was

good about people, he wasn't good at all *with* them.

“Son, even if I had, I wouldn't go bragging about it to anybody. Killing is not a trophy, it's a travesty. I don't expect you to understand that but there is better ways than shooting someone.”

The kid sneered. “Yeah right, that's good coming from you.”

He glanced again at the kid, okay, so he knew about Waco Texas, that didn't matter – the whole world knew what a disaster Waco had been.

“Well they probably taught you about that one at the Academy didn't they son? But I'll bet they taught you during the lessons about What Not To Do. And I never shot anyone there at Waco either, didn't have to.”

“Ain't you Foster Barnes, the biggest baddest dude to come out of the FBI since the gangland days of the thirties? Ain't you the active Agent with the most kills ever recorded since then? Ain't you the one that shot all them..?”

“That's enough kid.”

He used the voice of authority, the one with a little tremor

of menace he knew would get through. It worked perfectly, the kid's mouth plopped closed as if he'd reached over and whacked him under the chin. The kid even looked surprised at his own impulsive reaction, and was a little sheepish at letting his boyish enthusiasm override professional courtesy.

"Son, let's try this again and I don't mind you tellin' anybody that I told you this. It's in the official reports – I never shot no one, what you heard was wrong. Ah, told you he'd get away."

They'd rounded another tight bend and were confronted with the black and whites parked diagonally across the road, one behind and one in front of the carefully parked Camaro in the centre of the road.

"They got him, they got him!" The kid yelled exuberantly as he braked to a halt but Barnes knew better as soon as he saw the scene.

"There's no damage kid. He's gone, long gone."

Foster Barnes followed eventually. He watched from the passenger seat, first as the kid almost sprinted to where the uniforms were peering over the cliff face. He could almost hear the explanations before they told him, rounding the corner to find their quarry had disappeared, but not before leaving his vehicle in a precarious position for traffic coming in both directions. Foster Barnes slid across to the drivers' seat and shut down the

siren. He backed the Bureau Buick up about forty yards so that oncoming traffic would have some warning of the blocked road. The red strobe would earn its keep here for a little while until he could get a black and white to replace it. He strode up to the expectant kid and two uniformed cops. One of the other two was inspecting the Camaro, the other remained in his black and white on the radio.

“He’s gone. They think he jumped over in a hang glider or something.”

Foster nodded. He already knew. He turned at the sound of his name.

“Special Agent Barnes? Special Agent Barnes? You? You’re Foster Barnes?”

“Yes Officer?”

“There’s a patch through, on the radio. DC wants to talk to you. They said you should get into the present and carry one of them there mobile phones. I told ‘em they don’t work up here never how, even ifs ya do have one.”

He proffered the microphone from his vehicle and Barnes walked over. The cop seemed like he wanted to hang around, so

Barnes narrowed his gaze and stared at the officer until he took the obvious hint and returned to his buddies standing with the kid at the cliff edge.

“He’s a mite touchy. He’s *THE* Foster Barnes huh boy? Don’t look like much to me. Uhuh, here he comes, that was quick.”

They watched as the small man in the dark suit strode toward them from the Police Car. Even allowing for parallax, Barnes appeared to grow as he approached them, though he only had to move some twenty yards. His slight frame and average height no longer seemed so obvious as he strode purposefully toward them. When he stopped, legs slightly apart, arms swinging restlessly at his side like a gunslinger from the old west, he didn’t appear surprised as they gawped up at him.

“Kid, we gotta go now. Looks like I’ve gotta catch a flight to Australia.”

Chapter Seven. “Feeding Time”

It had been almost three days since she'd eaten. Out of sheer habit she was hungry. There had been no hunger pangs, no desire for food but she knew she had to supply herself with sustenance and not depend on this newfound euphoria encompassing her, the heat she felt had been her buddy and her only companion. She knew instinctively it was wrong to rely on something so heavily when she had little or no cognisance of its limits or abilities. She also knew she couldn't stay in this little caravan forever, completely silent and unmoving lest she be discovered. But mostly she was frightened at what her actions might be should some innocent party stumble across her. She had no desire to hurt anybody. In fact she abhorred violence and the events of the last few days had sorely tested her moral values. The continuing internal battle she fought with herself would be sorely tested again as her days of freedom mounted.

She got up from the floor of the van. Her body clock told her it was around 1a.m., about the same time every night when Tricia would call for her. Without the slightest doubt, she knew Brett would be at Tricias' cot right at this very moment. Brett was a great Dad and was slowly growing to become a fabulous one. Like most new fathers he had started off slow, if only because he didn't know what to do. But as the months went by, she realised

he had accepted more and more responsibility for his daughter – and for his wife. For his family. He began to take over some of the night time feeding schedules, using the expressed milk and warming it like she'd shown him, and he was much readier to take Tricia with him when he disappeared down the shops to grab a paper or some milk. A mother knows how important those precious few moments of peace are. Very few fathers do.

She desperately wanted to go home and see them both.

Vivienne walked out of the van park and wandered in the direction of the beach, almost three kilometres away she knew. About half way was a small shopping centre, much smaller than the one over the road where she'd been cornered in Franklins. There were a number of small takeaway cafes, and a convenience store. She was certain she could access them without risk. She walked in the shadow of buildings and tree lines where available, and straight along the footpath under the streetlights as quickly as possible when there was no cover. There was little to no traffic, she had already recognised that from previous evenings listening from the floor in the little van. Tonight proved no different.

She prised off the back door from a small Asian restaurant after first screening the café through the front shop window. There was no evidence of motion detectors or wiring to door contact switches so she opined straight away that there was no

burglar alarm installed. This was no liquor shop or newsagent, and a twenty-four hour convenience store was just around the corner so she thought the risk was minimal. The door swung open quietly and Viv jumped inside and closed it immediately, jamming it at the bottom with the handle of a conveniently placed wok. Anybody, a security patrol or police driving or walking past would see only the closed door, normal as they would see it on any other night. They would get a surprise if they tested their weight against this particular door.

She found several left over dishes, a surprising amount of fresh fruit and vegetables and plenty of raw, cooked and steamed meats in the fridges. To keep noise to a minimum, she ate everything cold as it came from the fridge. Once she began she was insatiable, even consuming a large tureen of some kind of curry, something she'd avoided since impending motherhood and Tricia's subsequent birth.

She sat on the cool vinyl over concrete flooring, her back against the coolness of the stainless steel fridges. She munched on the last remaining item, a stick of celery. She looked at the leafy stem and spied some canned goods piled along a shelf above the workbenches opposite. She absently tossed the stem over her shoulder. There was a large bench mounted can opener, and it was so easy to use Viv thought she had to get one for her own kitchen. The assorted cans of fruit lay scattered and empty

across the workbench, and she realised she had eaten absolutely everything there was to eat. Except the raw meat – she'd spared herself that exercise. She put her hands on her tummy, and apart from the unnatural warmth she was now used to, her belly felt normal. She wasn't full to bursting as she felt she ought to be. She glanced around the kitchen. A now empty twenty kilogram carrot bag became her garbage bag, and she piled the crushed and empty cans on top of the orange and lemon rinds, carrot tops, lettuce, cabbage and celery leaves, and the single onion she had accidentally bitten into during her haste at the smorgasbord. She munched absently on some prawn crackers as she wandered from the kitchen to the restaurant, dragging her garbage bag with her. She spied the glass front fridge and drank two of the 1 litre cartons of milk, the crushed containers also placed into the bag before heading back to the kitchen.

On the little table immediately beside the kitchen door, was the local newspaper. Yesterdays' headlines leapt out and knocked her squarely between the eyes.

Killer Mum Remains at Large

Vivienne sunk into the chair staring at the paper. She finally snatched it up and took it with her before realising she couldn't read the smaller type in the almost darkness. She abandoned the carrot bag of rubbish in a large dumpster at the rear of the shops,

and clutching the newspaper and almost empty bag of prawn crackers, stole under the streetlight at the corner of the building. She began to read.

“This is bullshit,” she muttered.

Chapter Eight. “Welcome to the Gold Coast”

Foster Barnes was frustrated. He hated frustration. He hated bureaucracy, his most common cause of frustration. He sat in the sleeper section of the huge black rig, wondering why he had even bothered coming to this wretched place.

Forty-eight hours ago he had been in the sunny warm climate of an Hawaiian winter, albeit chasing one of his career challengers, the one that had escaped him in the Camaro. Now he wished he were back there again. The promise of what awaited him in Australia seemed to have disappeared off the face of the earth.

A bank of radios to his left squawked and fluttered continuously. Their flashing LEDs' advised him of the constant radio traffic from airport, marine and police, as well as all forms of public access frequencies. Computers monitored the chatter, continually searching bands of the spectrum and zeroing in on conversations, eliciting single words that may indicate his prey had been located. Positive responses were recorded on computer to be replayed and analysed at his leisure. Identification of multiple words of interest from a single conversation would

automatically and immediately be amplified through his headset, until he manually rejected them. There had been nothing for almost two days. Not a single word except lazy conversations between patrolmen commenting on the case, or users of citizen band radios across the country gossiping about his quarry – and the astonishing things she had done.

Foster Barnes was frustrated. Frustrated and excited too, as this was the one thing, the one person he had waited his career, his life, to discover. He heard the tap of the security code, and the hum as the retina scanner operated before the pedestrian door shooshed open, and the craggy faced features of Peter entered the truck. Barnes eyed him off, knowing that even though Pete had come from the night outside, his vision inside the giant pantech would be limited by the fact that apart from a squillion tiny, flashing LEDs, it was in pitch black darkness.

“You here Boss?”

Foster thought he may stay silent – he could already tell Pete had nothing good to pass onto him. But he liked this man, really had enjoyed their ten hour jaunt up the highway with him. It was certainly not Petes’ fault the investigation had gone nowhere.

“Here Pete.”

“I’ve got good news and I’ve got bad news. Which would you like first.”

Pete walked unerringly toward him, even though Barnes remained invisible in the darkness. He stopped about a metre away and looked him squarely in the eyes.

“You knew I was here.”

“Wasn’t hard boss. You ain’t moved in near twenty-four hours. Get any sleep at all?”

“Nope. Tell me the bad news.”

“After piss fartin’ around with the state cops yesterday, it looks like we’ll finally get cooperation from them.”

“That’s the bad news? That’s good.”

“Not really. The cooperation will be limited to passing on any reports. And if they pass on reports near as efficiently as they found us a parking bay, I reckon we’ll hear about anything of interest, oh, about New Year if ya get my drift.”

“That isn’t so bad.” Foster slid a lever and a soft red light bathed the two of them, enough to see clearly but not enough

to disturb their night vision. He waved at the surrounding technology. "I'll find out as they do anyway."

"Yeah, yeah. No doubt."

"The good news then?"

"They've got us a permanent parking space, permanent until this is over one way or t'other anyway."

Fosters eyes did brighten. It was good news. They had arrived at the Broadbeach Police Headquarters early yesterday, very early, and the greeting had been less than cordial. They were now parked outside the little Federal Police building at Robina, a few kilometres inland. It was located in a fairly new area, however the truck was not secure. The building itself was almost completely surrounded by ongoing excavations and construction that interfered with the reliability of the equipment and made discretion impossible. A huge black pantech behind an equally big black prime mover was obvious enough, but being parked behind a Federal Police building, with the automatic aerials, antenna, and receiver displays activated on the roof made the vehicle as conspicuous as a cat at a rodents only party.

Exacerbating this was a large sign in front of the nondescript building announcing it to all and sundry as the Australian

Federal Police. In the immediate proximity were a major shopping centre, high school, and combined railway station and bus terminal ringing the building, and therefore the truck as conveniently as a sporting stadium. And the truck was the home team everyone would want to see play.

“Excellent! Where?”

Peter dropped his very large head. Foster realised he'd already heard the good news. The words that followed confirmed his worst fear.

“Right here Boss.”

Foster ripped off his head set and tossed it against the wall cursing loudly. He stood up and brushed past Pete and stalked up and down the centre of the pantech swearing loudly at bureaucracy, Australia, Police Forces, koala bears and anything else remotely related to his current location and predicament. On his second lap, the overhead speakers squawked longer than usual, automatically activated by the removal of his headset and the provision of enough key words to be retransmitted directly. Barnes stopped dead and cocked his head. He held one finger up to Pete to be quiet.

“Playback,” he commanded.

There was a moments pause then a short conversation followed – two Police Officers in a brief radio exchange.

“Yeah, can’t wait to get off. Hey did you hear the woman Vivienne rang in?”

“You’re kidding?”

“No way, I was in the Operators Room when she called.”

“What did she say?”

“It was pretty short. She asked for the FBI guy, Foster Barnes, and hung up when she was told he wasn’t there.”

“Fuck hey, just like that? What about the Broncos game this...”

“Save,” Barnes commanded and looked at Pete. “Can we get a car or do we have to take the rig back in there?”

“It’s the middle of the night boss. The office is closed here, there’s no cars.”

Foster Barnes began another tirade.

Chapter Nine. “The Phone Call”

Vivienne read and reread the article in disgust, finally flinging the paper away as anger consumed her. She was shocked to find out that a Policeman had died, and more horrified that his death was pinned on her. The incident replayed over and over in her mind, and on every occasion she recalled her relief at seeing the Policeman moving, well and truly alive, the disgust on his face at the embarrassing position he'd found himself.

After the confrontation with Brett, Vivienne had driven off, shouldering him out of the way as effectively as a front row forward. She realised now the only reason he had been that close was because she had gone toward him. He looked too frightened to have approached her. She had to cool down and the decision to leave was impulsive but based only on the desire to keep her daughter and her husband safe. Safe from her.

Her intention had always been to return, go back after she'd cooled down. Only five minutes down the road a Police Car coming in the opposite direction screeched to a smoking halt, slewed across the grass divider and set off after her, leaving a heavy blue smoke haze as the spinning tyres converged from grass to bitumen. Her first thought was that Brett had called them, her own husband had called the Police he had been that

frightened. She knew instantly that regardless of what she may have done, Brett would never do that. It had to have been the nosy barstard over the road, Wallace.

“I should have crushed his bleedin’ car,” she thought.

Vivienne squeezed between a number of cars putting them between her and the chasing Police. She rounded a fast but blind corner, saw the traffic lights change to orange and drove straight through, satisfied her pursuer would be slowed even more. She watched in the rear view mirror as the traffic appeared, slowing for the lights, then the contrasting speed of the Police Car that took to the verge in either an attempt to avoid collision, or as a calculated risk in continuing pursuit. Whichever, the result was the same as the surrounding cars became aware of the flashing lights and screaming siren and took avoidance action. Unfortunately (“fortunate for me,” she thought), the very last vehicle clipped the tail of the Police Car and sent it spinning off down a grass verge, before safely coming to a mud splattered and steaming halt in the adjacent paddock.

She’d driven on, collected more traffic around her and heard another siren a minute or so down the road. She accelerated around a few cars after spying the chasing motorcycle and arrived in front of Harbour Town Shopping Centre – and a major lights controlled intersection. Two lines of stationary traffic lay in front

of her and Vivienne realised too late that she wasn't going to stop in time. Her little Hyundai mounted the concrete lane divider, all wheels locked up, and somehow avoided rolling or jumping off into oncoming traffic. Her motorcycle cop fared worse though, laying his bike down and sliding between the stationary cars. Viv jumped from her stalled car, bellied on the concrete divider with all four tyres inches clear of the road. Ten metres down the road, she saw the cop rise groggily to his feet between the vehicles and lean on the bonnet of a convenient Lexus. He looked around, searching for her, but apparently embarrassed also at his predicament if his sheepish looks to the surrounding drivers were any indication. Viv had run into the shopping centre where her escape from the Franklins Supermarket had occurred.

It was the image of that policeman alive and well, groggy maybe, bruised definitely, but alive that was most vivid. Viv picked up the paper again and smoothed the pages, her eye catching a line she'd glossed over the first time.

“... Federal Bureau of Investigation expert Special Agent Foster Barnes arrived in Australia early this morning to assist the authorities in the speedy apprehension of Vivienne...”

She had been livid at that line when she'd read it the first and all subsequent times. The entire article referred to her as Vivienne, as if they knew her as an intimate friend, yet the inference throughout labelled her a murderer. Even the damn

headline called her Killer Mum. She stalked to a payphone and dialled triple zero, the operator took her name and the “nature of the emergency” and put her through to the Police.

“This is Mrs Curtis, Vivienne Curtis. I want to speak to Special Agent Barnes.”

“Who?”

“The FBI guy, Foster Barnes.”

“No, your name Maam. Who did you say you were?”

“I’m Vivienne.”

“Yeah sure. Now Maam we are very busy and prank calls...”

She dropped the handset back into the cradle, slumped to the cool concrete floor and sobbed, for the first time in three days she cried.

Chapter Ten.

“International Diplomacy”

“I don’t give a fuck if it’s four o’clock in the morning, my boss wants to speak to your boss and he wants him right now.”

It had taken them almost an hour to down pack the pantech. Even then it had been a rush job, risky to sensitive equipment but Foster Barnes considered the risk worthwhile. Just like almost forty-eight hours previously, their arrival at the Broadbeach Police Station, the Police Headquarters on Queensland’s Gold Coast, had been less than cordial. The Constable on the front desk proved reluctant to provide any assistance. Up until this point, Peter Gallagher had been extremely mild mannered. He’d coped with the ten hour drive from Sydney, the lack of parking for the rig, the poor reception on arrival, their shunting out to the Federal Police building, and now again the total lack of cooperation from this junior pup. Peter Gallagher had not slept in nearly two days. He was no longer the easy going, laid back offsider. He was the craggy faced hairy human dynamo who was not going to let the lack of courtesy or the time of day affect what he required right now. The Constable let his hand edge toward the phone, his hesitation drawing a further tirade.

“Pick it up and dial the number sonny boy, or I’ll have the whole Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet wanting your name in less than hour. And an hour after that you’ll be looking for a new career. Do it!”

“Um, er, who shall I say is calling sir.”

“I’m not a fucking sir, I’m a Federal Police Officer, and you know who this is so stop wasting time and ring that number.”

Foster Barnes looked at Pete appreciably and not a little surprised. He’d even had to suppress a chuckle when Pete waved an arm at him during mid tirade. He had turned to look at Foster and winked. Barnes turned away and composed himself, looking suitably professional, and a tad sorry for the young Constable. He nodded at the boy when he too had glanced at him. The telephone was proffered to Pete who before taking it cocked his head to one side. The Constable finally realised what he was waiting for.

“It’s ah, it’s Superintendent Bailey sir, um, sir.”

It was the Constables’ turn to look surprised as Peter returned to his normal laid back charm when he took the receiver. The voice changed as he spoke into the phone.

“Why thankyou Constable, you have been most helpful. Hey

Rob you old bastard, sorry to get you up mate, yeah, long time no see.” Peter covered the receiver with his hand and whispered to Barnes, “an old mate, we went to school together, only found out he was in charge here couple of hours ago meself,” and then back into the phone, “uhuh, yeah look ol’ mate, I’ve brought this here septic up, yeah that one, no, no he’s okay for one of them, yeah, seems like this Vivienne Curtis may have called triple 0 and asked for Barnes by name but she hung up before anyone had a chance to talk to her. No more than two hours ago. That’s okay with you? Excellent! Uhuh. Yep. You got it mate, okay, see you later, what was that? Yeah same to you ya old fuck. Here Constable, he wants to talk to you.”

Peter turned and stood beside Foster Barnes, both of them laughing hysterically yet managing not to let a snicker to pass their blank facades as they watched the humiliation of the Constable.

“Yes sir, of course sir, no sir, yes sir, yes sir.” Finally he put the phone down and both men saw him gulp before lifting his head to look at them. “Sir, sirs, if you’ll please go to that door and I’ll buzz you in.” Even his arm trembled as he pointed.

“Thankyou Constable.” Pete lobbed a set of keys before entering the door. “And park the rig for us will you? We had to double park out front.”

Chapter Eleven. “Lost and Alone”

Vivienne seethed. She felt like shouting, screaming at the top of her lungs “I am no murderer.” The cop had been fine. Nobody had been hurt. He hadn’t been hurt – she didn’t kill anybody. Anybody, I didn’t kill anybody she wanted to yell so the world knew she was innocent. She was just a mother with a baby daughter and a loving husband at home in the suburbs. Normal like everyone else – like everybody. Except for this heat. She looked at her arms, a fine sheen of perspiration making them shine like an oiled body on the beach. The beach. She looked at the surf as it crashed into the sand, and at first didn’t recognise it, wondering how the beach could be this far inland. Shocked, she realised that she was almost at Surfers Paradise. She had walked nearly five miles, power walked she guessed by her arms, and in less than half an hour judging by her watch. It said four-thirty, not too long before the light of dawn hit the horizon and bringing with it sunshine. Sunshine, the warmth of the sun – and people. Her picture had been spread across the newspapers and she was the talk of the town. She was labelled a killer and here she was in the centre of the waking tourist population, waiting for someone to walk past during their morning constitutional, or on their way home from a nightclub, and recognise her. She dashed across the road and saw a blue phone outside of a newsagency. The owner was disappearing into the doorway with a bundle

of papers dangling from both hands. She hoped briefly that her picture wasn't on the front of those too. Her trembling fingers pushed triple 0 again.

“Police. I’m Vivienne Curtis.”

Chapter Twelve. “First Contact”

Staffing was minimal at this time of night but suddenly Barnes and Gallagher were being feted, celebrated, patronised. Foster Barnes knew if he'd requested a lobster salad or a bottle of Bollinger, every effort would have been made to procure them. He knew the contrast was only because of Peters' school buddy.

“If you'd done your homework correctly you would have known this friend of yours was in charge here beforehand,” he chided. “Might have saved us a lot of work.”

“Sorry boss, I thought I had. I was misinformed,” Pete grinned back. “Rob was in Townsville last I knew, but the old boy net failed me as badly as the formal staff lists forwarded three days ago.”

Foster Barnes knew Pete had not reacted to his gentle chiding and was only repeating the facts. Seems like professional courtesies were the same the world over, not what you know, but who. The young constable returned with the current working file on Vivienne, and pot of coffee as Barnes had requested. The file was very thin, surprising Barnes, but it was the coffee the Constable was most apologetic about.

“It was, is, it’s the best I could do sir, don’t, we don’t normally make ‘em by the pot.”

“It’s fine son – this is the only file?”

“Ah, yes sir, everything is on floppy, most things. I’ll log you on to the computer so you can open it.”

They were in a small cubicle of an almost deserted open plan office that Barnes knew would turn into a hive of activity in a few short hours. He wished to be well clear by then and nodded at the Constable to proceed. He looked over the short partition and wished he could hear into the operator’s room adjacent – there was something gentle and soothing about the flashing lights of their computer switchboard. He would read the reports first, then take a seat in that room with the suitably dim lighting and continuously flashing banks of switches and panels. In there he would think – and wait.

He firstly read the complaint levelled by Dudley William Wallace about his noisy neighbours across the road, Mr and Mrs Curtis. Wallace had thought the domestic dispute had risen to a level that required Police intervention. There had been no action recommended on the complaint as Wallace had reported the same neighbour on three previous occasions in the past year, the first two discredited after local patrols from the northern

Police Station at Coomera carried out limited investigations. More importantly was the reference in the report to many other complaints Wallace had made in the last six years about almost every single one of his neighbours – they were cross referenced so that Barnes could access them if he wished, but he did not. He knew he would find nothing but the spurious ramblings of a serial whinger, and that if he bothered to check Wallace's previous address, that local Police station would have many more.

Barnes read on, the report of the initial Police pursuit of Mrs Curtis after Wallace had rung in again and reported the damage inflicted to his car by Mrs Curtis. He grinned when he noticed the description Wallace provided of the vehicle Vivienne had driven away in. After further shouting in the street between her and her husband, she had left in a green 1994 Hyundai four door. Wallace even knew the complete registration number. Barnes knew Wallace probably had the make, model and registration number of every vehicle in his street, for those people that had come to his attention anyway.

The first Police pursuit had ended innocently enough with the pursuing car involved in an MVA, no injuries. Dispatch then advised an APB on Mrs Curtis, picked up almost immediately by a motorcycle cop who gave chase, the report citing a further MVA by both of them at a crowded intersection. Vivienne had run from the scene chased by the motorcycle cop on foot. The

reports then cited several eyewitness accounts. Barnes glossed over the identity of the witnesses, as they all agreed that Mrs Curtis had pushed a stationary vehicle out of her way and disappeared into the large adjacent shopping centre car park. Unfortunately for the chasing cop, Mrs Curtis had pushed the car into the far left lane, the only moving traffic lane, and the ensuing havoc of vehicles taking evasive action saw several of them plough into the stationary lanes of cars waiting at the lights.

The preceding accident that left Vivienne's car on the centre traffic island and the abandoned Police motorcycle between the lanes meant many cars were sitting unattended, engines still running or the drivers having placed them into neutral as they looked around at what was happening. The car striking the end vehicle began a massive domino effect as cars concertinaed into each other. The motorcycle cop had just moved in front of one car, looking up in time to see firstly, Vivienne disappearing into the car park, and then turning his head as the cars began their long nose to tail crashing. He made his one fatal decision – he stopped. Seconds later he was crushed by the bullbar of the small 4wd he stopped in front of, then impaled on the pushbike rack mounted on the tow ball of the car in front. Energy dissipated, the car with the pushbike rack only moved a couple of feet before gently kissing the bumper of the car in front of it. The impaled body of the cop dropped to a bloody mass on the road. His helmet had done its job and his face was unscathed, except for the silent

scream of terror and pain permanently etched onto its features.

“She didn’t kill the cop,” he whispered to Pete. “She’s out there terrified thinking she’s a cop killer, and she didn’t do it,” he added more to himself, with not a little relief. “We’ve got to find her soon.”

Before Pete could answer, they both turned as the sound of knocking on a window drew their excited attention. The operator behind the glass mouthed something unintelligible. They recognised the gesture that there was a phone call – the call from the only person that would come through the triple 0 operator for them. Barnes ran into the room and was handed a headset, the operator nodding at him.

“It’s her,” he said unnecessarily. He pushed a button on the console and the sound of the ocean came through the headsets.

“Mrs Curtis, are you there?”

“Yes. Who are you? I asked for a specific person, who are you?”

“This is Foster Barnes speaking Maam, I’m a Special Agent of the FBI. Mrs Curtis, we need to meet, I need to talk to you.”

“You don’t sound like an American, much. How do I know you really are this Foster Barnes guy?”

“Mrs Curtis, you didn’t kill that Policeman...”

“I know I didn’t. I haven’t killed anyone. What I don’t know is who you are – you could be anybody pretending to be this Foster Barnes.”

“Mrs Curtis, how are you handling it, the heat I mean, the heat I know you’re feeling inside, the heat that makes you feel invincible doesn’t it? But Mrs Curtis, I want to, need to warn you, whatever you do, do not... Mrs Curtis? Mrs Curtis, are you there? Vivienne? Damn it, she’s gone. What the hell happened?”

Pete was standing beside the operator who nodded at him.

“She hung up boss.”

Chapter Thirteen. “Hidden Treasure”

Vivienne recalled the words – they still echoed around her head. “...how are you handling it, the heat I mean, the heat I know you’re feeling inside, the heat that makes you feel invincible...?” There was no doubt in her mind that it had been Foster Barnes she had spoken to. But how did he know? How could he know what she felt? She still held the receiver in her hand, and replaced it slowly, noticing the false dawn and knowing she needed to find another hidey-hole for the day. She remembered the council van park further down the esplanade. She would find something there, somewhere cool and out of sight. She began to run, ignoring the looks of the pre-dawn risers walking the dog or the more enthusiastic surfers changing into wetsuits. One of them even wolf whistled at her as she sprinted past, dress caught up around her upper thighs and hair sailing in the breeze of her making.

She ran and ran, and only slowed as she neared the van park itself as she thought about where the entry gates were. To her amazement she found herself jumping the two-metre high chain mail fence and then and only then did she stop, from surprise. She glanced around quickly, recalling that van parks were notorious for early risers, but remembering this was a council park and there should be no permanents. It was not holiday season –

there wasn't a soul in sight. She located a small cabin with attached ensuite, the cabins on either side and opposite all looked unoccupied. The door opened easily after she softly knocked a few times, and she closed and applied the safety hook once inside. She sunk to the floor of the little cabin, a floor thankfully of linoleum over cool concrete, and heard those words again in her head.

“... how are you handling it, the heat I mean, the heat I know you're feeling inside, the heat that makes you feel invincible ...?”

“How could he know?” she whispered.

Chapter Fourteen. “Closing In”

“What was all that about boss?”

“A stab in the dark Pete, just a stab in the dark.”

“I hope it wasn’t a fatal one.”

“No, I think I may have surprised her is all, shocked her maybe. Did we get a trace?”

Pete glanced again at the operator who responded.

“Yes sir, she was at a public phone on the Esplanade at Surfers.”

“Do we want to go there boss?”

Foster Barnes considered this for a moment. “How far is it?”

“No more than seven or eight minutes tops at this time of morning.”

“No, she’ll be miles away by then. Can we have a map, a tourist type map not just a road map?”

“Yeah sure, any of the service stations should have one. I’ll get the Constable to get us one.”

“Service station?”

“Yeah, roadhouse.”

“Oh, uhuh, yeah that’d be great – no hurry.”

“You don’t think we can catch up with her?”

“I don’t think she’s mobile, you know, she wouldn’t be using public transport for fear of being recognised. She doesn’t have her car anymore, and what, she’s moved less than five or six miles in three days? And finally, her husband and her daughter are still only just up the road, close enough to run home to, turn to if she gets desperate enough. She’s scared, scared about what’s happening to her and scared at what’s happening around her – and she’s scared for her husband and baby. That’s the reason she ran, not because she got uppity with a neighbour.”

“What did you mean about the heat, what you said to her about that?”

“You’re persistent Pete! Like I said, just a stab in the dark –

we'll have to wait and see. When does this school chum of yours arrive? We need to ask him a really big favour."

"Said he should be in by seven-thirty, about two hours from now."

"We got a place to kip, beside the truck I mean?"

Pete looked at Barnes with surprise. "You actually want to sleep? I've been waiting to see if you did or not. Unless you slept on the plane over, I ain't seen you put your head down yet."

"Not for me, for you. Go on, rustle up that map and find yourself a place to lie down for a while. I'll need you rested tonight understand?"

"Don't need to understand boss, if that's what you say that's fine by me. What you gonna do then?"

"As you say, I'm gonna study the file and that map when it gets here, send out a few enquiries and see what turns up."

Peter screwed up his already screwed up face. "You know something, you know where she is don't you?"

"No, no, I wish I did, but I'll have a better idea by tonight so

go on, stop wasting time and go grab a kip.”

“Okay, you’re the boss, boss.”

Barnes pored over the report again, memorising every little detail and ignoring the increasing bustle around him. The breaking morning brought Policemen in from patrols and their replacements ready for another day. He knew they’d be looking at him as word spread he was now based with them, not to mention the big black rig blocking most of their car parks. They probably knew nothing about him other than he was an FBI Agent, and that made him a curiosity. All manner of local, interstate and commonwealth authorities had tread the boards here at one time or another, but an actual Special Agent of the FBI was a rarity indeed. He recalled Vivien’s voice and frowned.

“She ain’t scared anymore, confused is all, and a mite angry too,” he muttered.

“Sir?”

It was the young constable from the front desk. Barnes looked up at him.

“Nothing. What is it son.”

“Sir, the Super is here asking for you and Mr Gallagher.”

“Where, where is Pete?”

“Ah, he’s in the truck sir, it’s parked out back in the compound.”

“Don’t disturb him.” Barnes stood up. “Can I leave these...”

“Yes, they’ll be right there sir, I’ll look after them. This way.”

Chapter Fifteen. “Rise and Shine”

Barnes punched in the door code and pressed his eye to the scanner. He and Gallagher were the only ones programmed to be accepted by the retina scanner and it was a good backup for the security-coded door. He stepped quietly into the pantech and noted the subdued lights. Most of the equipment was either shut down or in low power mode awaiting their call to action again. The sleeper cab could be accessed from the pantech but he could see the little hatchway was closed and secure so he strove to remain as silent as possible.

Two steps from his work station at the front of the pantech, he froze as the hatchway sprung open and a blaze of light struck him in the eyes.

“Morning boss.”

Barnes immediately saw Petes’ craggy smile when he switched off the torch, and lowered the Browning 9mm pistol he held in the other hand.

“It’s afternoon.”

Pete looked surprised. “I was tired. Didn’t hear nothing until

you came through that door. First time I slept in this damn thing and it was worth waiting for.”

“If it was beauty sleep you were hoping for I hate to tell you it didn’t work.”

“It’d take more than sleep to fix this cranium of mine boss. Don’t I know it. So what’s the go, what’s happening?” Pete levered himself through the hatch and took the proffered coffee out of Barnes hand. “Weren’t testing me now were you?”

Barnes ignored the latter. Of course he had been. He unfolded the tourist map and placed it down onto his cluttered work desk, pointing at a small red X.

“That’s where she called us from.” He pointed at another red mark, a circle. “That’s where I thought she’d gone to ground.”

“A caravan park?”

“Inside,” he gestured at the police station “they tell me that the entire area is full of holiday apartments and high rises, predominantly empty this time of year. So she could be anywhere. She could be almost next door to us and we wouldn’t have a clue.”

“But ...?”

Barnes pulled another larger map from his jacket and overlaid it on the desk. There were two red Xs and three red circles on this map. He pointed to the Xs first.

“This is her house at Helensvale. This is the shopping centre she disappeared from three days ago. I sent out requests asking for any unusual reports of break-ins in the area immediately around the shopping centre, and after sifting through them, Barnes rolled his eyes, I came up with these three possibilities. First, a council trailer park at Southport, a Chinese Takeout in Biggera Waters, and the trailer park here almost beside the shopping centre. I dismissed reports if things had been stolen or damaged, not the MO of our girl.”

“And ...?”

“And we are jumping into a car and going to check them out now, before dark.”

“Before dark?”

“Yeah, it’s nearly three, you slept a full eight hours sleeping beauty!”

“You, you met Rob then?”

“Yep, and a good thing too, but c’mon, we’ll talk in the car – you’re driving. I don’t think I’m up to this driving on the wrong side of the road yet.”

Pete drove straight up the highway through the Surfers Paradise tourist strip and into Southport, a pretty if less than developed calm water area, as distinct from the more popular beach suburbs immediately south and along the remainder of the Coast. Barnes told him that if this were mainland USA the houses and high-rise apartments would have been overlapping the water. He filled him in on the discussions with Superintendent Bailey, and passed on the message that he would catch up with Pete tomorrow, on his return from a meeting at the State Police Headquarters in Brisbane. Meanwhile, the search and overt activity for Vivienne would be scaled down to support for themselves only, as requested. This had been an excellent response and Barnes had appreciated the lateral thinking of Peter’s friend.

They arrived at the Council Van Park on the edge of the water. It was a stunning setting as the sun low in the sky behind them making the calm estuary sparkle. The Manager showed them several vans that had been broken into and vandalised in the past week, and Barnes shook his hand and thank him profusely,

promising action by local Police as he hurried back to the car. Pete gave him a quizzical look as he closed the door on the still ranting Manager.

“Not our girl?”

“No.”

“You wanna tell me why boss?”

“The Chinese Takeout, they’re waiting for us.” He looked at Pete and grinned. “I told them not to touch anything until we got there, and that was eleven o’clock this morning. They might be getting a mite touchy by now.”

“Takeaway.”

“What?”

“Takeaway, we call them takeaways not takeouts. Now tell me why this wasn’t our girl?”

“She wouldn’t have vandalised anything Pete, perhaps breaking a lock to get in would be all, but she doesn’t want anyone to know where she is. So why would she draw attention to herself by damaging her hideout? Besides, the vandalism began before

she came onto the scene.”

“She could have done it to make it look like the vandals.”

“No. She’s smarter than even she thinks she is. If she’d seen the damage she wouldn’t have felt safe enough to stay here in the first place – she would have moved on.”

“Ah, the other caravan park you circled on the other map?”

“Yep. There, the Asian takeout, takeaway,” he pointed. “Damn it, they didn’t wait.”

Pete parked in front of the little restaurant and Barnes raced inside. Happily he noticed the boxes of supplies piled on tables in the restaurant. He apologised profusely to the little man waiting in the kitchen doorway, the small face of a child peering around his legs. The owner confirmed what he reported on the phone this morning. Someone had broken in through the back door, and after stealing or consuming almost every morsel of food, had cleaned up afterward. The only food left were the top leaves of a celery stalk sitting beside the fridges, the teeth marks evident on the stalk. Barnes deposited the celery into a small plastic bag. He apologised again and walked out the front door, trailed by Pete who had remained totally silent during the five minutes in the shop.

“You’re excited boss. You think it was her?”

Barnes ignored him and walked around to the rear of the shops. He walked over to the dumpsters. Underneath a bag of garbage, he found yesterday’s newspaper on top of a carrot bag full of crushed cans, food remains and two flattened milk cartons. He extracted an onion with a single bite mark and left the remainder. The onion followed the celery stalk into its own little plastic bag.

“What are we doing boss.”

“She was here Pete, she was here. She found the newspaper here too with the headline article about her, and that’s what made her ring last night looking for me. I had them trace this mornings phone call but I forgot to ask about the one last night. I bet it came from around here somewhere.”

“How can you know that? It looks to me like someone just stocked their pantry, larder.”

“They didn’t, she didn’t, she ate it all on the spot. Look at the onion man, how famished must she have been to bite into that?”

“Still doesn’t mean it was her.”

“No matter, c’mon, let’s get to the next trailer park.”

“Van park, caravan park we call ‘em.”

The Manager of this park was a nonchalant fellow, and drawled in an accent that Barnes could almost equate to the mid-west back home. The major difference was Barnes could have understood someone from the mid-west. He gathered enough of the gist from the man’s painfully slow observations to recognise that it had to be Vivienne. His excitement grew by the minute with each new discovery. The Manager stood aside after showing them the van in question, a broken lock the only visible damage.

“Okay, now I’m beginning to see the connection. She’s neat, like a good housewife would be expected to be. She even made the bed. And you see over the vacant lot there,” Pete pointed, “is the Franklins store she escaped from.”

“She never slept in the bed,” Barnes stated matter of factly, and he knew without looking where the shopping centre was. He’d already made a mental note from the map back in the pantech at Police Headquarters, dismissing it at the time. He was certain the Police search would have included such an obvious location, even though it was not documented in the report. “She

slept on the floor.”

Pete looked at him sceptically. “I know you know that boss, but why would she do it when there’s a perfectly good bed to sleep on right beside her, and how can you be so goddammed sure that’s what she did?”

“I just know Pete, trust me, I know. Drive me past the other trailer park on the way back to the truck will you? I want to see if it fits her comfort zone. Then I need to do some analysis on the food from the takeout.”

“You gonna make veggie soup with it? I’m famished. You eaten?”

“You, we can grab a burger on the way back to the truck. Or you’ll have plenty of time afterward – before the stakeout.”

Chapter Sixteen. “Nightmare”

The brightly lit ceiling flared and made it difficult to see. The smell was antiseptic, strong antiseptic, and it too hurt her eyes. She squinted and tried to turn her head. She now felt and recognised motion from features that passed by against similarly brightly lit walls. Glistening stainless steel water fountains, lowset sinks, blindingly white uniforms, lots of voices, close, talking low, the almost constant orders barked from overhead speakers, the chirp as the p.a. system cut in and off, and the swing of IV lines.

“I’m not sick,” she yelled but couldn’t hear her own voice except as screams inside her head. She strained to look at her body, the swelling of her small breasts inside the green hospital smock, almost the same size before she’d had Tricia. She closed her eyes but the bright light remained painful even behind screwed up eyelids. When she opened them again, her breasts were like mountains tinged by sunset. A light seemed to emanate from her torso. It radiated and enriched everything it touched with a soft glow that was much more preferable to the loud hallway fluorescents. An IV line swung into sight. The clear tube suffused with the bright rainbow colours from her torso, then it swung away again to blandness. It came into view again and she lifted her arm to see where it entered, to ensure it was

the rainbow she absorbed, not the bland. Her arm wouldn't move more than a few inches and she frowned, trying again to lift her head to see why.

A voice, distinct finally, came from in front of her, above her. A voice that was piloting the gurney on which she lay, the voice of control, not the p.a. voice, not one of the creeping minions of voices that suffused across the abhorrently bright corridor. It was the voice in charge.

“Lay still Mrs Curtis. The Doctors are waiting. Everything is going to be alright.”

Vivienne screamed the scream where no sound passed her lips, her arms and legs immovable, restrained, her head almost as secure. The gurney bowled along the never-ending hallway of bright light and unsourced voices. In panic she managed to bend her knees slightly and raise her torso, her neck straining the bond across her forehead as she strove to see her surrounds. The pent up scream finally escaped her enraged mouth in a long and intense howl that shattered the lighting for twenty feet. The scream failed, dying with her breath, followed by a golden silence that was reverent, as supernatural in its suddenness as the hallway had been long and severe in its illumination.

She sat up on the now stationary gurney, alone. The golden

glow continued to emanate like diffused torch light from her lower belly, painting everything in its reach with the flecked sparkle of firelight. There were no restraints, no straps, no marks on her wrists or ankles, no IV bottles or tubes, no needles in her arms. Yet the hallway stretched off into an infinite darkness in front and behind her.

The glow from her belly strengthened, stretching her smock like an instant pregnancy, then burst, ruptured from her belly in a torrent of flaming red and yellow flares. Her second unrelenting scream and pain filled writhing shattered the silence and brought her instantly back to consciousness.

And reality. Vivienne was on the floor of the cabin, which remained intact, except all the light fittings lay shattered around her, globes impotent. She had carefully closed all the curtains, but outside street lighting seeped in around the edges and refracted gaily off the shards of glass peppering every surface. Her hands cupped her belly. The housedress she had driven off in days ago insulted her senses with its accumulated perspiration and grime. She felt the warmth in her belly and lifted the front of her dress, expecting to see a cauterised hole from where the heat had escaped in her dream. Her nightmare.

She twisted the dress in her hands and stretched her arms to the floor, covering the cotton knickers she had exposed and

had also been wearing for days. She screwed her nose up, and in spite of herself and ongoing predicament, she smiled.

“Bloody nightmares,” she told herself. “I only have them after I’ve eaten too much.”

She got up slowly and stepped carefully through the glass. After a quick peek, she opened the cabin door and walked to the adjacent ensuite. Surprisingly the door was unlocked, and she speedily relieved herself, then stripped her stained and soiled garments. She put her underwear into hot soapy water in the hand basin, and took her dress into the little fibreglass shower unit of the compact bathroom. She hoped the lateness of the hour would render the little noise she made as insignificant as the waves she could vaguely hear lapping at the beach over the road. She scrubbed at her dress, and stood for a time allowing the water to cascade through her hair and down her body. The thought crossed her mind that she would soon run out of hot water. She reached out to turn off the hot water – it wouldn’t move. But the water flow totally ceased when she turned off the cold tap. She stood still, feeling the warm droplets sliding down her body and dripping to the cold tiles beneath her feet, then placed her palms against her own bare belly. The warmth immediately transferred itself through her hands and up her arms and shoulders. She shook her head, her hair almost totally dry. She wrung out her dress and was sure there were steam vapours

rising from the fabric, but couldn't be certain in the darkness. She slipped the nearly dry garment over her head and ran her fingers through her hair. She was no longer surprised that it was dry.

"More efficient than a clothes and hair dryer combined," she whispered to herself, and again in spite of everything she giggled.

She rinsed her under garments a number of times and squeezed them dry, holding both to her belly before slipping her legs into warm and dry knickers, tucking her bra into a dress pocket. The sudden cessation of feeding Tricia had a noticeable effect. Her breasts were already too small for the bra. A brief vision from the nightmare returned. She cupped her breasts and slumped to the cool concrete floor. She missed her baby so much, and she sobbed. She knew Brett would be coping with Tricia but theirs had been such a total partnership. Their whole lives revolved around the other, but what she didn't know was how he was coping without her.

She felt the heat again rising in her belly, and sprung up from the floor. The desire to see her husband and her baby, or at the very least contact them and make sure they were alright became paramount. She opened the door of the ensuite and stepped out, mind focussed totally on finding a public phone. A shadow moved on her left. The shuffling of shoes on concrete alerted her to danger. She swept her arm in the direction of the sound

and movement, connecting with a solid lump that seemed to leap backward and crash bodily into the (empty) cabin beside hers before sliding prone onto the grass and laying still.

“Mrs Curtis, please, I’m here to help. I’m Foster Barnes.”

Chapter Seventeen. “Gotcha”

“I asked your friend Rob if he could mount extra patrols tonight around where the last phone call came from.”

“You really think she’ll go back there?”

“She might. Three days now since she’s seen home and hearth.”

“You think she might go home?”

“At the very least try and contact them. She must be missing them terribly and she’ll want to express her innocence to the one person in the world that might listen to her. And her daughter is very young. As a new mother, I don’t think we can begin to understand how Vivienne must feel about leaving her daughter for so long.”

“Her husband?”

“Right, she badly needs to know by now that her daughter is okay and that he is handling everything. But most of all, most of all I think she’ll want to know that he believes in her still. Her home phone is tapped so one way or the other we are going

to find out how much she misses them both.”

“There’s the other caravan park you wanted to drive by boss.”

“Excellent, slow down.”

“You want me to go in?”

“No, keep going, just slowly. Can we circle around it?”

The two-metre high chain mail fence appeared incongruous in the neighbourhood of multi-million dollar apartments and penthouses, as did the conglomeration of cabins and caravans behind the fence framed by the soaring high rises.

“Enough?”

“Yeah, thanks Pete, now back to the truck; I’ve got some testing to do.”

“The veggie soup?”

“Yeah right, okay, you can go grab something while I’m working. Get testy when you’re hungry don’t you big boy?”

“Me ol’ Mum used to say the same thing boss.”

“That was just before you ate her right, for being late with your dinner one night?”

“Not my Mum, she’d “ave been too tough even for me.”

They returned to the pantech, Pete slipped off to grab dinner and Barnes opened a section of cabinets containing a mini laboratory. The testing equipment connected to the huge computer system self contained within the pantech. As he worked, Barnes listened to the continuing Police chatter from the overhead speakers. He placed the final test fluids into the computer for analysis and unconsciously registered the sound of the door code and scanner. The results flashed onto a computer monitor and overlaid his base graph, the colours and densities melding almost perfectly. He grunted in satisfaction and Pete entered the pantech to see a rare grin from his foreign colleague.

“Looking good then?”

“Better than good Pete, better than good.”

Pete took the comment as an understatement, judging from the look of self-satisfaction on Barnes’ face. It was the first time he had seen Barnes almost happy in the two days since

they'd arrived. He was almost sorry to have to ruin it. In forty-eight hours Barnes had impressed Pete with a rare combination of ability and judgement, backed up with an inane knowledge of his subject that Pete found almost supernatural.

Barnes was also the first person in two years to understand the workings of the multimillion-dollar pantech the Federal Police held in secret storage. Apart from routine service technicians cleared to appropriate levels of National Security, Peter was the sole custodian of the entire rig, and the only person permitted to enter the pantech area of the vehicle. He was smug about finally seeing it in operation, and immensely proud that so far it had not disappointed. He was about to disappoint Barnes though.

“Eh, Foster?”

“What is it?”

It was the first time that Pete had used Barnes' Christian name when addressing him. Barnes knew it must be important. He also knew it couldn't be good.

“Eh, well, we don't have any backup, for later. Tonight.” Foster Barnes kept studying his lab findings and Pete assumed it was his way of controlling his temper. “Yeah, um Rob, the Super, is spitting chips. He apologises, but with people off sick,

on leave, they're already running a skeleton crew.”

“That’s okay.”

“He said he was really sorry. He even tried to get some guys down from Brisbane for you... what did you say?”

Foster looked up at Pete. “I said it’s okay, we won’t need it. Come and have a look at this.”

Pete shook his shaggy head and stepped forward to look at the chart on the screen Barnes had been studying. He had no idea what it meant, and glanced at Barnes.

“We’re not going tonight then, to the caravan park I mean?”

Barnes didn’t look at him, but Pete saw the frown. “Yes, yes, but look at the readings will you.” Barnes was excited. Pete was confused.

“I’m looking boss, but I don’t know what it means. We are going tonight or we aren’t?”

Foster stood upright and finally looked at Pete. “We’re having two conversations here, so, to clear the first, yes, we are going tonight, backup or no backup. Now, look at the chart. See the red

line?” The chart comprised every colour of the rainbow in almost every hue imaginable. It stretched across two thirds of the screen, but the highest point was a thin red line. “Yes, the tallest line I’m talking about. This is the chemical analysis from the celery and onion from the takeout. Ostensibly, it’s Vivienne’s DNA.”

“That’s if it was Vivienne.”

“It was her alright. I don’t need to tell you that DNA is unique, even more than fingerprints are.”

“Yes, but how do you know what her DNA is in the first place? We haven’t collected any hair or clothing or sample of anything from her before?”

“We don’t have to. I mean if we did, I’d bet next year’s wage that it matched this one.”

“How can you be so sure it’s hers?”

“The red line Pete, that little thin red line.”

Chapter 18. “New Discovery”

“Go to bed.”

“Aw, but Mum?”

“It’s late, get into bed now young man.”

“But you said I could wait up for Dad?”

“I’ll make sure he comes up and tucks you in as soon as he’s through the door.”

“Aw, Mum.”

“Foster! Go to bed now. I mean it.”

“Yes Mum.”

He was about to shut off his computer when he heard the electric garage door activate. Excited, he left the screen on and jumped into bed, pulling the covers up as the car engine died. The garage door ran again, then the car door. Heavy footsteps into the house. Some murmuring. Silence. He peeked out from one eye and saw his bedroom door slowly opening. He clenched

his eyes closed. Soft padding steps toward the bed. The hoarse whisper close to his ear.

“I know you’re awake. Your Mother told me.” Foster laughed and sat up into the bear hug waiting for him. “Sorry I was late son.”

“That’s okay Dad. Look. Look at the computer. I got it!”

Big brown eyes looked at him proudly. “Did you now? Well done, congratulations. But it’s late. We’ll look at it in the morning.”

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