

'G'DAY, where are you heading?'
'Euroa turnoff.'

'No worries, hop in.'

'Thanks. Hang on, I've dropped my scarf.' I walked back a few paces, bent down and noted his numberplate. As I climbed into the passenger seat, he was wiping his sunglasses.

'Right, are you?'

'Yes, thanks.'

He checked his rearvision and side mirror and took off with a small spray of gravel. By the time he settled into a steady one hundred and ten ks an hour, I'd managed to write his numberplate details in permanent ink under the bandage encircling my left wrist. He glanced down at the bandage.

'Done yourself some damage?'

'Just a slight sprain.' I forced a smile and tried to relax a little, not too much.

'Squash? Tennis?'

'No, I just tripped on the backstep. Fell on it.'

'Ah.' He nodded sagely. 'My Mum did that a couple of years ago. 'Course, at her age, she broke it, didn't she?'

I made a sympathetic noise and turned slightly sideways in my seat to get a better view of him. He was my fourth ride this afternoon, and he was definitely a possibility. Right kind of car, right age. My heart rate sped up a little and I took a deep breath. Stay calm. I wondered how much talking he'd do.

'You a student, are you?'

'No, a teacher. Highschool.'

'Uh huh. Thought you looked a bit past being a uni student. Not that I'm saying you're old ...' He laughed, a funny coughing bark, and his face went pink. 'Not at all. Just that most hitchhikers these days are either uni students or from overseas, you know, German or Dutch, whatever.'

'Do you pick a lot of them up?'

'Mmm, depends. Usually only if they're on their own, like you. Can't be too careful, eh?' He grinned again, trying to be friendly.

'Travel this road a fair bit, do you?' I tried to sound casual. It was a normal question, but it was important to me.

'Yeah, at least once a fortnight. I'm a sales rep. We get around all over the place.'

Bingo! I turned away and stared out the side window, trying to keep my face expressionless. This one was matching up on all the key points. I stroked the daypack on my lap.

He peered out of his own window and frowned. 'Looks like that rain's coming right across. It'll be dark soon. Where did you say you were going?'

'Euroa, just to the turnoff.'

'Got family there, have you?'

I hadn't been able to decide if I should be honest about my answers or not, but there didn't seem much point lying about things I could be caught out on. I didn't lie about being a teacher either, even if pressed about what subject I taught. PE, I said, specialising in gymnastics. I didn't mention, though, how I tried to instil confidence and determination in all my students, to convince them that those were the key ingredients to success. Attention to detail and follow through, that got you what you wanted.

'Yes, my parents live there. I visit on the odd weekend.'

'Don't you get a bit nervous about hitching on your own?' He glanced at me curiously. 'Like I said, I see a lot of people on this highway, mostly in pairs. The loners are usually male.'

That was the crux of it though, wasn't it? Who picks up a single female? Why?

I shrugged. 'It doesn't bother me. I just don't accept lifts in cars with more than one male in them.'

He nodded. 'Thought you were checking me out. I suppose it's the only way.'

He lapsed into silence while negotiating his way past several slower cars and a caravan. He was a competent driver, didn't stamp on the accelerator or pull at the wheel. I frowned and called up the list in my head again. *Blue Holden new. Sales forty-fifty. Finger.* That was it. That was all Melanie had left us to go on, scribbled in the last page of her diary. The final word was almost unintelligible but the police experts had finally decided it was Finger. What could have been a vital bit of description was unfinished. I'd written down every permutation of finger or fingernail I could think of, but it hadn't gone anywhere. This guy matched the other details but I looked at his hands again, balanced on the steering-wheel, and sighed inwardly. Plain, ordinary fingers, no bitten nails, nothing unusual. It didn't look like it was him.

'Your parents expecting you?'

My scalp prickled and my grip on the pack tightened. 'I'm not sure,' I said, keeping my voice light. 'It'll probably be a bit of a surprise. I hadn't made firm plans.'

'That'll be nice then. When you turn up, I mean.'

'Yes.' I wanted to look at him, check the expression on his face but my head wouldn't turn. This was part of my plan, to say I wasn't really expected. The problem was, it was true. And it left me wide open. Somehow no matter how much I'd planned to cover all the angles, the reality still knocked me cold.

'No, I reckon you're pretty game really.' He shifted in his seat as if his trousers were becoming uncomfortable. 'I mean, look at that a girl a few months ago. That was right on this stretch of highway. You're older and wiser of course, but still ...' His voice meandered away and I sat like a block of concrete.

In the encroaching dusk, the huge gums along the side of the road grew pockets of blackness between them. He switched his headlights on with a sharp click that made my nerves leap and quiver.

'Just along here, it was.'

'What?' My head jerked towards him and I saw a thoughtful look on his face.

'Where they found the body of that girl.'

'Yes, I know.' How did he know?

'Real shame. She was only twenty.'

'Nineteen. Still at uni.'

'Yeah.' He made a little pursing motion with his mouth as if remembering something. I waited. 'Long dark hair, blue sweatshirt, jeans and white runners. And a black bag, mostly books in it.'

I froze in my seat but my brain and mouth worked slowly in a reflex motion, getting it right. 'It was a green sweatshirt and her hair was tied back.'

'Was it? I thought they said blue.' His head whipped around and he stared at me sharply. 'You're not some kind of undercover cop, are you? Trying to set me up for it? Because if you are, you can bloody well get out right now.' He jabbed at the brakes and the car pulled to the left.

I tried to swallow the red hot lump of fear in my throat. God, how I wished I *was* a cop, wired up with backup following down the road. 'No, I'm not a cop.' I laughed feebly and my hands

flapped around. 'I just, you know, followed the case pretty closely. Being a fellow hitchhiker and all.'

'Oh yeah.' He needed more convincing.

'I actually knew her a bit. Small town, Euroa.'

'Ah, personal interest then.' He seemed to relax a little. A road sign flashed past me. *Euroa 17*. Tears burned my eyes and I thought, *Thank God, it's nearly over*, then the memory of Melanie's grey face with the bruises around her neck and the dried blood in her hair jumped up to haunt me yet again. I couldn't give it up. She wouldn't let me. I searched instead for more subtle questions. I had to know if he was the one.

'How come you know so much about it?' I asked. 'All that description.'

He shrugged. 'It was in the papers. Couldn't miss it.'

What about what wasn't in the papers, I thought. The reconstruction the police had created of her last hour. That she must have guessed she'd got in a car with someone dangerous, that she'd managed to somehow make last desperate notes to help us, knowing she was heading for rape, or even death. That she'd fought, fought with every last ounce of strength and it hadn't been enough. Despite the Friday night road checks, the investigating, the endless questions, they'd never caught him. And five months later, when the case was still open but dwindling in priority, here I was, trying to do what the police couldn't.

What did I hope to achieve, apart from maybe ending up like Melanie? I groped again with both hands for the comforting shape in my pack, a solid metal pipe with a wrist strap on one end. I forced myself to take one hand at least off the pack and drop it down beside my leg in an effort to seem relaxed. My fingers found a small rectangle of card on the seat and closed around it in reflex.

'They haven't caught the guy, have they?' There was an odd little note in his voice that I couldn't pick.

'Not yet,' I snapped.

'Not likely now, is it?'

'You never know. They don't give up.' I could feel the bitter rage I'd been carrying all this time begin to boil inside me. This guy sounded almost happy the bastard had got away with it. *Euroa 5* whizzed past.

'No, they reckon if a case isn't cracked in the first week, it likely never will be.'

I didn't dare answer. Searing anger consumed me—if I opened my mouth it would spill out like a torrent of acid. My fingers ached to pull out the steel pipe and smash his brains in. Melanie was my sister. I'd find her killer if it was the last thing I did. I closed my eyes and tried to breathe deeply, get control, and gradually became aware that the car was slowing to a stop. I grabbed the handle and shoved my door open, my feet already out and touching the ground. The solid feeling under my soles steadied me, then I heard him behind me calling, 'You take care now.' That strange note had slid into his voice again and I turned, wanting to catch it in his face, but he just smiled. I muttered, 'Thanks for the lift,' and closed the door, watching as he drove off.

The lights from the highway sign glowed just bright enough for me to be able to peel the business card off my sweating palm, turn it over and read it.

'Blazer's Meat Products,' it said. 'Joseph Fingher, Sales Representative.'

