

ONE

He shouldn't have come back. Gil's hands tightened on the steering wheel as he approached the bend in the road where everything had fallen apart, half a lifetime ago.

For an instant he took his foot off the accelerator and considered turning around, driving through the night and the rain to get back to Sydney and far, far away from his past. He should have taken it as a bad sign when the direct route to Dungirri was closed due to flooding. He'd had to take a long detour, looping an extra two hours' drive through Birraga to come into Dungirri from the west, passing the place where one set of nightmares had ended, and another begun.

The tall gum trees bordered the road, ghostly white trunks catching the headlights, twisted branches like fingers reaching out as menacingly as the memories.

He gritted his teeth. He would not let memories affect him now. He'd just go to Dungirri, do what he'd set out to do, and leave again.

He took the bend slower, cautiously, exhaling a pent-up breath when the road proved clear. No kangaroo this time. In the shadows just off the road, he could barely see the eerie shape of the tree, but his mind's eye filled with the vivid image of another time. The tree standing immovable, a vehicle wrapped around it, the drooping branches scraping over the roof and the strobing lights of emergency vehicles surreal in the once-peaceful darkness. His gut clenched tight, and the recollection of the sharp, nauseating scents of blood, petrol, eucalyptus and alcohol came to him again, the mix permanently scarred into his nostrils.

He stared ahead, determined to keep his brain as focused on the road as his eyes were. Twenty kilometres to go. Fifteen minutes at most, as long as the rain didn't get heavy again.

The shadow of Ghost Hill rose to his left, as ethereal in the lightning and rain as its name, and the road curved around to nestle into its base. As the road straightened out, a vehicle parked ahead began to flash blue and red lights. He glanced down at the speedometer and swore. Just his damned luck – seven kilometres over the speed limit, and the Dungirri cops were ready with a welcoming party, especially for him. If he'd needed any confirmation that coming back was one hell of a mistake, he'd just got it.

The cop, swathed in reflective wet-weather gear, stood in the middle of the road with a torch and signalled him to pull over. He wound down the window but kept his eyes forward, telling himself not to respond to the triumphant look on the old sergeant's face when he recognised him.

He jerked his head around when a female voice said, ‘Sorry to pull you over, sir. I was hoping you were of the locals. Were you by any chance planning to stop in Dungirri?’

‘Yes,’ he replied slowly, searching for the sarcasm in her voice. After flicking the light quickly around the interior, she turned the torch sideways, so that it didn’t shine in his face, yet provided some light for both of them. Under the dripping brim of her hat he caught a glimpse of lively blue eyes and a few wisps of red hair around her face. Not a face he knew, which shouldn’t have surprised him, given he’d been away so long.

‘Oh, good. Would you mind doing me a favour? Could you get someone to phone my constable and tell him the patrol car’s bogged out here? Just ask anyone – they all know him.’

He stared at her, trying to make sense of her unexpected request. ‘You can use my mobile, if you like.’

She grinned an open, friendly smile that he wasn’t used to seeing from a police officer. ‘If it works out here then your phone company performs miracles. It’s a notorious dead spot; Ghost Hill’s between us and the towers, and blocks the phones and the police radio. Which is why I flagged you down.’

He glanced at his phone in its holder on the dashboard. Sure enough, no signal.

‘I could give you a lift into town.’ Hell, had those words come from his mouth? He’d avoided police as much as possible all his life, and for good reason.

She smiled again, shook her head. ‘Thanks, but I’ll be fine. If you could just make sure the message gets to Adam – Constable Donahue – I’ll wait here until he comes.’

Despite the perfectly reasonable logic, her refusal gouged across the old internal scars that he hadn't realised he still carried. Yeah, well, what did you expect, his inner voice taunted him.

'No offence intended,' she added quickly, as if he'd frowned.

Something about the way she smiled at him, like an equal, kicked logic back in again. No sane woman would get into a car with a strange man, far from anywhere, even if she were a police officer with a gun on her belt. He knew he looked like someone you'd definitely avoid in a dark alley, and he'd been in enough dark alleys in his life to know he lived up to that impression. In his black T-shirt and well-worn leather jacket, he certainly didn't fit the image of a safe, respectable citizen – more like the type that most cops itched to arrest, without bothering to ask questions first.

He understood her refusal, yet the idea of leaving her here, alone in the dark and out of radio contact, didn't sit comfortably on his conscience.

'Maybe I could help you get your car out?'

'Thanks for the offer, but it'll need the four-wheel drive and a winch. It's in a ditch, and the entire left side is axle-deep in mud.' She gave a rueful shake of her head. 'You'd think that after years in the bush I wouldn't be stupid enough to swerve to avoid a kangaroo on a wet night, but I did. At least I didn't hit a tree.'

He turned away quickly before he betrayed his shock. The parallels brought the other memories crowding back, halting his breath in his throat.

Yeah, coming back to Dungirri had definitely been a bad idea.

Kris caught the instant of bleakness in his shadowed eyes. So, the granite-faced man had some emotions, after all.

Already off-kilter from the shock of running into the ditch, the thought of waiting out here in the dark and rain another hour or so longer didn't appeal. She didn't dare sit in the patrol car; it felt too unstable, as if it were on the verge of tipping over into the mud. So, stand alone in the darkness and rain on jelly legs for fifty minutes or more, or risk going in a car with a guy who made James Dean look like a choirboy?

A flash of lightning above heralded a smashing of thunder that made her duck her head instinctively. Just her luck that she'd skidded the car into a ditch on the one night thunderstorms were interrupting the drought.

The man yanked the keys out of the ignition and thrust them at her through the window.

'Take my car. I'll wait here till you get back.'

Maybe the thunder had befuddled her brain, because she couldn't for a moment work out what he meant, but realisation came as he opened the door and got out of the car.

In the torchlight he looked tall and dark and potentially dangerous, six-foot of muscle, with an unsmiling face that had seen more than a fist or two over the years. Even a knife, if she read the scar on the side of his cheek right. Eyes dark in more than just colour met hers, and his scowl suggested one really bad mood. Not a man to mess with, and sure as heck not the average guardian angel.

Yet, in some bizarre way, she trusted him. He stood a non-threatening metre from her, shoulders hunched against the

rain, water already dripping from his black hair onto his leather jacket.

‘I can’t do that.’

‘Yeah, well I’m not going to leave a woman out here alone without radio or phone, cop or no cop. So take my damned car.’

Light exploded nearby, with an instantaneous crash of thunder so loud it jarred every bone and muscle in her body and pounded her eardrums. A tree a hundred metres down the road flared a brief light before smoking in the heavy rain.

‘You all right?’ He reached a hand out, touched her on the arm. At least she wasn’t the only one shaking. That crack of lightning had been way too close for comfort.

She gave a nervous laugh. ‘I will be, when my heart starts again. Okay, you can give me a lift into town. I don’t plan on becoming a human lightning rod. Have you got room in the back for a couple of boxes? The senior sergeant at Birraga will kill me if the new computer gets drowned in mud.’

The two computer boxes were on the near side of the patrol car, held in place by less precious boxes of stationery, so she didn’t have to wade into the muddy ditch to retrieve them. The guy took the heavier one from her and stowed it in the boot of his car while she carried the smaller box.

Wherever he was going, he was travelling light, her observant cop eye noticed as she slid off her wet jacket, shook it out and folded it so it wouldn’t drip water everywhere. A slightly battered kit bag lay on the back seat, a laptop case on the floor, and that was it. No maps, no fast-food containers, no CDs, no general bits and pieces that might accumulate on a trip

or in daily use. Probably seven or eight years old, the car was clean – not sparkling rental-car clean, more not-used-often-at-all sort of clean.

She scrambled into the passenger seat, out of the rain, putting her jacket onto the floor at her feet. He shucked off his leather jacket, too, before he got in, tossing it over onto the back seat. He wasn't fussy about a bit of water on his seat, then.

'Thank you, Mr . . . ?'

The interior light was still on, and she saw something wary flicker in his eyes.

'Just call me Gil.'

Oh, yes, she knew an evasion when she heard one. So why would a man offer her his car, but avoid giving a surname? He could have just driven off when she'd first asked him to contact Adam, and she wouldn't have even taken his registration number.

'Thanks . . . Gil.' She emphasised his name enough to let him know she hadn't missed the evasion. 'I'm Kris Matthews.'

He pulled his door shut properly. The interior light flicked off so that she could no longer see him clearly. Only a profile silhouette, stark and sharp.

'Buckle up, Sergeant Matthews,' was all he said in response to her introduction, and he clicked his own seatbelt into its clasp before he twisted the key in the ignition.

So, Mr Cool and Distant had recognised the sergeant's stripes on her uniform shirt after she'd taken her jacket off. Sharp of him. And Mr Cool and Distant wasn't overly fond of police, it seemed, for all that he'd offered to wait in the rain while she took his car.

Too bad for him. He was heading into her town, and these days she was pretty damn protective of it.

‘You’re not from around here?’ she asked.

He put the car into gear, pulled out on to the road before he answered. ‘Not any more.’

One of those who’d left over the years, then. Dungirri had been bleeding its population for decades, dying the slow death of many rural communities. The closing of the timber mill, and the long drought, meant there were few jobs left, and now only three hundred or so residents, most struggling to make a decent living. Tragedies in the past two years had torn the town apart even further, and on bad days Kris had her doubts that it would ever recover. On good days, she hoped the recently formed Dungirri Progress Association might have some success in rebuilding the community. Good days didn’t happen too often.

‘Have you come back for the ball on Saturday?’

An eyebrow rose. ‘The ball?’

‘The Dungirri Spring Ball.’

No, he’d obviously not heard of it and, come to think of it, she really couldn’t imagine this man in the Memorial Hall, mixing with Dungirri’s citizens. It would be like throwing a panther in with a cage full of chickens.

‘No. I’m just here to see someone on . . . business.’

He didn’t explain further – another evasion. He’d lived in these parts, knew that everyone knew everyone else, but he mentioned no names, gave no hint of his business, as a local would have.

Not a good sign.

They came out of the shadow of Ghost Hill, and within two minutes his mobile phone beeped in its holder. Perhaps because of her presence, he grabbed the headset draped on the phone with one hand and slid it on before punching the answer button.

‘What’s up, Liam?’ He listened for a moment. ‘Fuck.’ Definitely bad news, by the harshness of the word and the way his jaw clenched tight. Another pause. ‘She’s all right?’ A gruff note touched his voice, a hint of real concern.

Kris tried not to watch him, to give him a semblance of privacy, but in the silence as he listened, she saw out of the corner of her eye his fingers gripping tight on the steering wheel, and although he didn’t stop driving, he slowed a little.

‘Look, take Deb away with you for a few days’ break, okay?’ he said. ‘To that eco-lodge she wanted to check out, or somewhere like that. Tell her it’s a surprise bonus from me for the two of you. Charge everything to the business account.’ Another pause, and his tone hardened again. ‘I’ve already dealt with Marci. You look after Deb. Might be best if you get her away from there tonight. I’ll call you tomorrow.’

He ended the call, muttering another curse under his breath as he dragged the earpiece off.

‘Bad news?’ she enquired. She couldn’t pretend she hadn’t heard his side of the conversation.

She counted to four before he eventually said, ‘One of my employees was attacked by an intruder at her home.’

She had the distinct impression that while that might be the truth, it wasn’t the whole truth.

‘Is she hurt?’

‘Only shaken. She has a black belt in karate.’

‘So the attacker came off worst?’

In the dim light from the dashboard she saw the corner of his mouth twitch, a suggestion of a grin, for just an instant. ‘Yeah. Something like that.’ But his mouth firmed again straight away, and he stared ahead, tapping a finger on the steering wheel, his expression tense and shuttered.

And although she wondered, she didn’t ask why a man would send two of his staff away for an all-expenses-paid break just because one of them was shaken up. Or what sort of business he ran that was profitable enough to give generous bonuses, and that had brought him back to Dungirri for a meeting. Or what the rest of the bad news was, news that had made his mood even darker than when she’d met him a few minutes before.

She didn’t ask because she suddenly had a strong suspicion that she might not like the answers.

She let her head fall back on the headrest, closing her eyes in weariness. They were almost at Dungirri, and if the guy had dastardly intentions towards her he would have acted on them by now. Her trust that he’d get her there safely seemed well enough placed.

But then again, that proved nothing. She’d been neighbours with a murderer for years and never twigged. ‘Just-call-me-Gil’ could be a dark angel straight from hell, for all that she felt safe, just now.

If he planned on staying around, she’d have to damn well ask those questions and find out, one way or another.

She just hoped he didn’t plan on staying around. ‘Safe’ wasn’t a word that was likely to stick to him, long term, and Dungirri had had more than its share of visits from hell already.



Gil silently worked through every single swear word he knew, and made up a few more when they ran out.

There had to be something about this damned road. The last time he'd been on it, his plans for a new life had been smashed to smithereens and now, tonight – almost eighteen years later, and the first day of what was supposed to have been another new start – Liam's news had brought that all crashing down.

Damn Vincenzo Russo for getting himself shot in the chest last night. It was lousy timing for Vince's personal security to fail him, as far as Gil was concerned. With Vince on life support, his son Tony would waste no time in moving to take control of the Russo family operations – and Tony had neither reason nor inclination to honour the agreement that had kept Vince out of Gil's affairs for years. Gil's plans of being long gone from Sydney by the time Tony eventually took over had just been screwed, well and truly.

The sergeant had gone quiet, stopped asking her questions. With her head back, eyes closed, a hint of vulnerability underlay the confident cop persona she'd shown earlier. Wayward curls of red hair framed her face, and a few wet ends curled against the pale skin of her neck, just above her shirt collar. For some reason, that sight gave him a sharp, hot kick in the guts.

He turned his eyes back to the road. Oh yeah, lusting after a *cop*, in *Dungirri* of all places – that was truly the definition of stupidity.

Christ, he hadn't even given her his surname, because even if she hadn't heard of him, she'd have made the connection

between his name and that of his old man, and those blue eyes would have turned cold, lumping him with the same label as his mad bastard of a father.

And if the locals had told her about him, or if she'd heard the other end of that phone call . . . well, she'd sure be doubting the wisdom of getting into a car with him.

And what did it all matter, anyway? In just a few minutes he'd drop her off at the cop station, and he'd never see her and her lively blue eyes again. He'd go and call on Jeanie, do what he'd come to do, and then leave Dungirri. He'd get back on the road to try to sort out the god-awful mess his life had just become, before Tony Russo took his vendetta out on people who didn't deserve it, like Liam and Deb.

The dim lights of Dungirri appeared, and he shifted down a gear as he came to the first scattered houses. Another landslide of bad memories tumbled out thick and fast from the dark places in his mind, catching him unawares, jumbling on top of his current worries and making his gut coil tight.

Damn his memories. Damn this town. Damn that stupid compulsion that pushed him back here to finish once and for all with his past before he moved on. Dungirri held nothing for him but bitterness and nightmares.

As he drove into town along the deserted, mostly dark main street, a line from something he'd once read suddenly came into his mind like some bleak premonition and drummed again and again in his head: *The wheel has come full circle; I am here.*

Well, he might be here, but he wouldn't be for long.

The old police station hadn't changed much. A new keypad security system, a phone link to connect straight through to

Birraga for when the local cops were out, and a coat of paint were about the only differences Gil could discern as he walked up to the steps. When the sergeant opened up the station and he carried the larger of the computer boxes in for her, he saw that the 1950s wooden chairs in the small reception area had been replaced by 1970s orange plastic chairs. So much for progress.

She pushed open the door to the interview room. 'In here thanks, Gil. I have to make space in the office first before I can set it up in there.'

Hell, it would have to be the interview room. Definitely a place he had no desire to revisit. He slid the box onto the table in the small room and made for the door again, without checking whether it was the same wooden table he'd had his face smashed into.

On the veranda, he sucked in a breath of fresh, damp air.

'Are you staying at the hotel?' the sergeant asked from behind him. 'Can I shout you a drink later, to thank you for your help?'

He turned to face her, and the light from the porch illuminated her in the doorway. Not a classically beautiful face, yet attractive in her own way, and small lines around her eyes revealed that under the aura of relaxed competence she carried tension and concerns. Well, if she'd been in town longer than a year or so, she'd have had more than enough stress and worry. Two abducted kids and several murders couldn't have been easy for any cop to deal with, let alone one who seemed to have a whole lot more soul than the old sergeant had ever had.

Kris Matthews. A woman with a name and a history, not just ‘the sergeant’ as he’d called her in his mind – since there could be no point in thinking about her as a real person.

‘I’m not staying,’ he told her.

She stepped out, directly under the light, so that it glinted in the red–gold of her hair, but cast her face into shadow.

‘Oh. Well, thank you for the lift. I do appreciate it. And drive safely, wherever you’re going.’

He raised a hand in acknowledgement, took the three steps down from the porch in one pace, and strode to his car.

He drove back down the main street, past the empty shops and the few businesses still struggling to survive, past the council depot and the pub, and pulled into the empty parking area of the Truck Stop Café. It was only eight o’clock and lights spilled from the café, but other than a couple of teenage kids laughing at the counter, he could see no-one inside. Jeanie might well be in the kitchen, or in the residence upstairs.

He pushed the door open, and both kids watched him enter. The girl, maybe sixteen or so, wore a blue ‘Truck Stop’ apron over a black goth-style skirt and top. The lad, sweeping up behind the till where customers paid for petrol, might have been a year or two older. So, Jeanie was still giving employment to Dungirri’s youth.

The girl smiled. ‘Hi, there. I’m afraid the kitchen’s closed, if you were after a meal, but I can still do coffees and there’s pies and sausage rolls left.’

The mention of food made his gut do an uneasy somersault. It had been a while since he’d eaten, but his appetite had disappeared somewhere on the road to Dungirri.

‘No, that’s okay. I was looking for Jeanie Menotti, actually. Is she around?’

‘I’m sorry, she’s out tonight. There’s a meeting to finalise the ball arrangements. She won’t be back until late.’

Of course – the ball the sergeant had mentioned. As incongruous as a ball in Dungirri sounded, if there was going to be one then Jeanie would be involved in running it.

It just put a massive spanner in his plans to be out of here tonight. For a brief moment, he contemplated leaving an envelope for her with these kids, but he ditched the idea straight away. Jeanie would be more than hurt if he went without seeing her, and Jeanie, of all people, didn’t deserve that sort of shoddy treatment.

‘What time does she open in the morning, these days?’ he asked the kids.

‘Six-thirty. I’m opening up for her tomorrow, but she’ll be around not long after that,’ the girl answered, and something about the way she smiled struck him with a vague sense of familiarity. Probably the daughter of someone he’d once known. Although, in his day, Dungirri kids hadn’t worn multiple studs in their ears and nose. A touch of the city, out here in the outback.

‘Thanks. I’ll call in tomorrow, then.’

Out in his car again, he thumped the steering wheel in frustration. He’d be spending the night in Dungirri. He could sleep in the car, out on one of the tracks that spider-webbed through the scrub east of town . . . no, not a good idea. All day in the car had been more than enough for a tall body more

used to standing than sitting, and he had the return journey to make tomorrow.

He reversed out and swung around to park in the side street beside the hotel, away from the half-dozen other vehicles parked randomly around the front.

Harsh weather and neglect had worn away at the century-old hotel. The external timberwork cried out for a coat of paint, and the wrought-iron railings around the upstairs veranda were more rust-coloured than anything else. The 'For Sale' sign tied crookedly to a post had faded in the weather, too, adding another forlorn voice to the visible tale of lost glory.

He yanked his bag and his laptop from the back of the car and went in through the side door, purposely avoiding the front bar. The back bar was dark and empty, as was the office. He tapped on the servery window into the front bar, keeping out of the line of sight of the customers. He had no desire to meet up with any familiar faces from his past.

A bloke in his early twenties in a work shirt and jeans finished pulling a beer for someone and strolled over to him. Not anyone he recognised.

'Have you got a room for the night?' Gil asked.

'Sure, mate.' He reached into a drawer, passed a key and a registration book across the counter. 'Room three, upstairs. Just sign here. You wanna pay in the morning, or fix it up now?'

Gil paid cash, signed the book with an unreadable scrawl the guy didn't bother looking at, and headed up the stairs. The room was basic, as he'd expected, relatively clean but with worn-out furnishings that had seen a few decades of use already.

He dropped his bag on the floor, lay flat on his back on the bed and stared up at the old pressed-metal ceiling. A few creaking springs warned him that it wouldn't be the most comfortable of nights. He'd coped with far worse.

Staring at the ceiling only let his brain wander to places he didn't want to contemplate, and his body clock wouldn't be ready for sleep until at least his usual time of two or three in the morning. He swung his legs back over the edge of the bed, hauled out his laptop and set it up on the small, scratched wooden table in the corner, draping the cord over the bed to get to the single power point. The room had no phone line or wireless network – the twenty-first century hadn't made it to Dungirri, yet, it seemed – but he connected his laptop to his mobile phone and went online.

For an hour he worked, tidying up the loose ends of the inner-city pub he'd just sold, checking and sending email, making payments to creditors, transferring funds between accounts. And all the time, the half of his brain that wasn't dealing with facts and figures tussled with other questions – like who the hell might have had the balls and opportunity to shoot Vince, and what the response of his various rivals would be.

Maybe Tony would be too caught up in fighting for power to pursue his long-desired vengeance on Gil. Gil dismissed that hope as quickly as he thought of it. Tony would view getting even with him as a sign of his new authority, and a message to anyone who might stand in his way.

Somewhere around nine-thirty, the single light bulb in the room pinged and went out. A light still burned outside on the veranda. Just his bulb blowing then, not a loss of power.

Reluctantly, he headed downstairs to ask for a replacement. In the corridor behind the bar, an older guy swung out of the gents' just as Gil passed, almost knocking him with the door.

The bloke turned around to apologise, and Gil stifled a groan as they recognised each other. His bad luck was still holding strong. Of all the people in Dungirri to come face to face with.

The man's face whitened. 'You . . .' He seemed to struggle for control, pain and rage contorting his face, then lost it. He raised a fist, took a step towards Gil and roared, 'You murdering bastard.'