

# chapter one

The two Rolls-Royce engines buried in the bowels of the *Honey Bear* fired up with a deep-throated roar as the tangerine light of a late autumn sunset washed the castles lining the shores of Sydney's eastern suburbs. Inside these exquisitely coordinated temples of taste — in the art deco style, or the Gothic style, or the French fifties style, or the French provincial style, or the God knows what style, and even in one, for reasons that none of the other owners could possibly fathom, an attempt at an 'Australian' style, which included such items as a dining table that had once served in a shearers' mess together with a variety of farm implements scattered about the room, none of which were in fact Australian — women were shedding little tennis dresses in order to bathe before dining in some bistro that refused to take bookings, or explaining to friends on their B&O walkarounds why Charles was a wimp in every sense of the word, or rubbing their recently waxed thighs with special rose cream made in Portugal and only sold in one shop with no name, or screaming at their husbands who had arrived home early, for no reason,

## Geoffrey Cousins

with no presents, no plans for dinner and a paunch that, in the dim light of dusk, looked even more prominent than it had that morning.

On the *Honey Bear*, all was soft, golden, sweet as treacle in a crystal jar. Indeed, Macquarie James Biddulph, master and commander of all he surveyed — one hundred and eighty-three feet of throbbing Huon pine and celery-top pine and swamp mahogany, all staterooms lined in suede leather tanned from the hides of his own cattle, from the vast properties in the Kimberley where they measured them in millions of acres — Mac as he was known to friends, and Big Mac to the press and to those who would like to be friends but had no chance of stepping across the great social gangway onto the sacred decks of the *Honey Bear*, Mac held a glass of Cristal of another origin in his prize-fighter's mitt as he gazed benignly, patronisingly, at the gaggle of guests being piped aboard. Of course, there was no piper, although the thought had floated through the Big Mac mind more than once before it was dismissed as a touch ostentatious, though only a touch. But there was a bevy of immaculately turned-out crew members of both sexes in pristine white shirts and tailored navy shorts — tight-fitting shorts so the tight arses of the girls and the bulging quadriceps of the young men could welcome the guests with promises and glasses of vintage, and fresh peach juice for those who just drank peach.

Mac stood on the bridge, three decks and thirty feet above this assemblage of bronzed concupiscence, legs apart as if bracing against a rolling sea. The massive torso was bare and golden (waxed in the privacy of his own castle by a maiden who received a great deal more than the standard waxing fee and who would never reveal the secrets of the Big Mac chest). The Big Mac loins were covered only by a triangle of leopard-print silk, and the snowshoe feet with kangaroo skin sandals.

## The Butcherbird

Although Mac was only five feet eight inches in his sandals, the width across his shoulders appeared approximately equal to his height, producing the impression of a solid block of squareness where the sum equalled more than the parts — although ‘there’s nothing wrong with the parts’, as Mac was fond of saying. As if in confirmation, he glanced briefly at the apex of the leopard print, the bulge, the discrete (although not so discreet) mound straining at the Italian silk. Yes, it was there all right. You might not be able to see the Mac prick but you certainly knew it was there. It was a presence at the party and all the guests would sense it when they fronted up to pay homage — all packaged up like department-store boxes in their navy blazers and chinos and neat white shirts and tiny diamond bracelets, while he, Big Mac, a name they would never dare to speak on the *Honey Bear*, stood before them so full of juice, so full of torque, they would have to look away.

He gazed at them now as they came aboard. Talk about a motley crew. What was motley anyway? Whatever it was, this lot was it. God knows why he asked some of them. Because they were all usable in one way or another, he supposed. Look at that old ponce, Laurence Treadmore, tiptoeing across the gangway as if he was avoiding a dog turd — *Sir* Laurence for Christ’s sake. Picked up his knighthood before Australia abandoned all that crap for those little lapel buttons everyone clamoured for. The dried-up old prune was even wearing a tie. A tie, on the *Honey Bear*? Never before seen, not even when Prince Charles sailed aboard wearing some sort of cravat. But tie or not, Sir Laurence was the chairman of his board and useful, full of useful qualities. Namely that he loved money and would rationalise almost anything to get it. And a fair chunk of his money, a handsome pile of millions (stashed somewhere, probably up his benighted arse since he never seemed to use any of it, to enjoy any of it),

### Geoffrey Cousins

had been provided, directly or very indirectly, by Mac — or rather, if you wanted to be pedantic about it, by the shareholders of Mac's company.

And who was that behind the neat, prissy figure of Sir Laurence? Ah yes, one of the pigeons for the weekend: Jack Beaumont, the property developer. Well he at least seemed likely to enjoy the pleasures on offer. Good-looking fellow, though lacking the power, the charisma, the bulging triangle of a Big Mac, of course. He was only a baby pigeon in the great scheme of things, but nevertheless he had something to offer. And offer it he certainly would by the end of a weekend under the spell, the delicious warm embrace of the *Honey Bear* and all she had to offer. And here came some of that sweet, sweet candy.

God he loved to watch Bonny skip onto the boat. She seemed to skip, literally, she was so supple and full of life and youth and crushed fruit and mung beans or whatever the hell she ate. She was always stretching or bending or clenching her tight little buttocks to make them tighter still, though they couldn't be any firmer or rounder or more perfect, as he knew only too well. There wasn't a hair anywhere on her body except on her beautiful head, not one hair. He knew, he ought to know, since he paid for all those Brazilian jobs and facial mud cleansers and polishing and sluicing and colonic irrigation and everything else that went into keeping that perfect, smooth, taut body exactly the way he wanted it. And that was the point. He wanted it. Why not? Wouldn't any sixty-four-year-old man want a body like that sliding and rubbing and slipping and pulsing its way across his sculpted loins? It was a mystery to Mac why all men who could afford it didn't have a Bonny tucked away somewhere. Sure you had a wife, and kids if you must, but you had a Bonny to keep the juices running. She was his personal trainer in her official capacity, and a fine result she delivered.

## The Butcherbird

Look at him. How many men of his age had the biceps, the latissimus dorsi, the quadriceps, the sixpack — well maybe not quite the sixpack, but all the rest, all firm and hard and ready. The odd barnacle here and there, it was true. That's what Bonny called them, his 'barnacles', but that was an honest enough thing on a ship that had sailed more than a few miles. He was still seaworthy, that was the point. Seaworthy, shipshape, ready to voyage. And Bonny helped to keep the engines turning over.

Look at her little friends coming on board. They were all sanded and polished and varnished. Smooth, sweet, happy, grateful little honey pots. He loved every one of them. Which wasn't to say he didn't still love Edith. In his own way. But she was always asking him that: 'You still love me, Mac, don't you?' And he always gave the same answer: 'I'm here, aren't I?'

As for the contrast between these beautifully wrapped little bonbons and the amorphous lump of old political horseflesh following them, well it was almost enough to turn the stomach. Why didn't Harold Wilde do something about himself? Although what that might be Mac wasn't sure. There was no way any of Bonny's medicine ball throwing or shadow-boxing exercises (Mac loved to punch at her) or squats or anything could wear away the rolls of fat that were flopping around under that tent of a shirt. There must be a couple of kilos in the neck folds alone. Disgusting. The huge behind just sat itself on a soft Senate seat and dozed until it was lunchtime or dinner time or some meal time no one had ever heard of, and now it was waddling its way onto his boat behind his collection of sweetmeats, defiling the soft evening air, a great heaving mass of visual pollution. But useful, potentially useful. So feed him up, let him leer and sip and sup. One day, some day soon, it would pay back in spades. Mac gave him a cheery shout as he lurched his way aboard and the great bloated jellyfish almost slipped over as he looked up.

### Geoffrey Cousins

He would have slipped over if it hadn't been for the steady hand from behind that grabbed at some protuberance poking out from the tent. There was Shane O'Connell, where he always was, lurking just behind someone, ready to pick up any crumbs that fell from a corporate table or grease some grateful politician's way into a sinecure. He was another member of Mac's board, the company that was the great provider, the tree of plenty, the goose of goodness, the cream jar for all these sticky-fingered players and hangers-on and pigeons; the company he, Mac, Big Mac, had created, sired — yes, sired like a great stallion and then given birth to like a ... well anyway, sired like a great stallion. By sheer force of personality and guts he'd wrenched it into the world, and now it was the largest home-insurer in Australia, a name everyone knew, HOA, Homes of Australia — the name he'd given it, just as he'd given it life and form and air.

But you had to watch people like Shane O'Connell. They were not always unquestioning in their allegiance to Mac, to HOA. They failed to understand that the two were indivisible, that HOA was nothing without Mac and that Mac was — he jerked back from that thought as if slapped with a wet fish. Sure, all his vast, complex, interlocking, tangled fishnet of private companies and Swiss bank accounts and hedge fund investments and trust funds and God knew what else (well he hoped God knew because Mac could never understand it all), sure this stuck-spaghetti mix all lived on the sauce of HOA, but there was no reason ever to assume that sauce would cease to flow. Maybe now and again Mac woke in the night, in the room he'd moved to across the hall from Edith, or in the apartment, with Bonny breathing softly, evenly beside him, the magnolia scent of her breath mingling with the musk of her mounds and clefts. Yes, he woke sometimes despite his oft-repeated boast, 'I always sleep like a baby'. (Babies woke, didn't they?) But not often. And not

## The Butcherbird

for long. If there was a problem, and lately there'd been one or two icebergs in the water, he attacked ferociously and sank them, or whatever you did to icebergs.

But you had to watch the doubters. Shane O'Connell was easy to handle once you knew where he was headed. But he was deceitful and shifty and on the take. At least Sir Laurence's arrangements were all in the open — well, in the open with Mac. There was no need for others to be concerned with them. O'Connell was one of those lawyers who didn't really practise law and was only on his board because he represented the interests of the biggest foreign shareholder in HOA. Just how he'd brown-nosed his way into that job Mac had never discovered. Anyway, it wasn't O'Connell who had been waking him up in the black hours lately. It was that damn idiot Buckley, a creature of his own making. The man had been a run-of-the-mill accountant before Mac promoted him to chief financial officer and then, only a year and a half ago, to chief executive. And now he'd found religion or something and was scampering around mouthing off about 'corporate governance' and 'transparency' and 'triple bottom line'. There was only one bottom line in HOA and that was the line Mac drew in the sand, the auditors audited, the shareholders knelt before. As they all had and did in the regular, steady rhythm of corporate communion. So why this idiot Buckley was digging around in corners among contracts and 'conflicts' that didn't concern him and hadn't concerned anyone else — because they didn't know about them, because they didn't need to know about them — Mac was at a loss to understand. He was well paid, obscenely well paid. He just failed to understand what he was paid for. Why did he need to know the detail of every consultancy fee? What business of his was it when reserves were released to profits? The actuaries were responsible for working that out, not the CEO. Or, more accurately, Mac decided

### Geoffrey Cousins

what was needed and the actuaries signed off on it. It had always been that way. For Christ's sake, he'd hired all these people, and they hadn't been easy to find; flexibility of thinking was required and not many people had it.

Apparently not Buckley. Well, he'd have to go. But in the quiet transition the market appreciated. Which meant a replacement who looked better. Which was what was keeping him awake at night. Still, as his father used to say, 'Macquarie, the solution to any problem is usually in front of your eyes — you just look through them.'

Enough of this navel gazing (though he took one last peek down at the Big Mac chest and stomach and thighs before they had to be lightly covered to greet the guests). The last of them was aboard now and it was time to descend and dazzle them with all his force and power and the trappings of this floating castle. The one he'd really blow away was this last figure, coming aboard in a jacket that looked like tweed — tweed, on a twenty-degree evening — probably with patches on the elbows, and carrying a duffel bag that reminded him of something you found in an army disposal store. Archie Speyne might be the director of the Sydney Museum of Modern Art, he might be used to sauntering around halls jammed with masterpieces (half of them jammed with crap from what Mac could see), but he'd be bowled over when he took the art tour on the *Honey Bear*. Yes, they'd start with that today. He'd been planning to start with the toy tour, all the boats and gadgets and playthings, but this was better. Straight into the art. He couldn't wait to see the look on that pumped-up little know-it-all's face when he saw Mac's Whiteley, better than anything the gallery had, and the Moore sculpture — a small one, admittedly, but on a boat and who the hell expects to see a Henry Moore on a boat in Sydney Harbour? Well, he'd be blown away, and would soon forget

## The Butcherbird

about plaguing Mac for whatever it was he'd been manoeuvring for over the past few months. Mac had invited him for sport, so let's have some sport.

Wisps of early-morning fog were burning off the gunmetal Hawkesbury, flocked here and there with shafts of sun filtering through the impasto of clouds and mist. The river was still, tide turning, windless, birdless, fishless, boatless — except for the sleeping *Honey Bear*, resting at anchor in an angophora-lined cove. Its gold standard hung limply at the pole. The deep navy of the hull with amber rails and beading curved elegantly into the sheet-glass water. A fish jumped. The ripples spread out gently from the point of entry and reflected in the eight coats of marine varnish. As the haze swept up off the river, the peeling pink bark of the angophoras was lit with klieg lights and the colours danced and dazzled in a blotchy palette. The great river turned blue in unison with the sky and the world was suddenly awake. A pelican flew overhead, peered down at the floating blue log like a bewigged judge assessing a miscreant, lowered its undercarriage and set down in a foamy wash.

Jack Beaumont's bare feet edged their way onto the deck, stepping quietly, carefully, even though there was no one for the feet to wake. The other guests were three decks above and Mac slept in a separate apartment at the stern that was the size of the average Hawkesbury cruiser. The movement of the feet was almost furtive, as if their owner was afraid to be seen, to be discovered emerging here as early a riser as the mist. The feet arrived at the rail and Jack looked down at the pelican. He knew this river so well, ever since he'd first paddled fifty miles of it in a Canadian canoe as a boy, all the way from Windsor to Lion Island, letting the canoe run when the tide was flowing out and paddling

### Geoffrey Cousins

steadily into the incoming stream. He knew it better than the pelican, because the huge bird wouldn't fly into the upper reaches where the grass ran down in a smooth edge to the casuarina roots disappearing into the water. He knew it as it was now, at peace, and he knew it when the storms whipped waves over the sandbars and the outgoing tide was a flood you'd never swim against. He knew the wide mouth into Pittwater and Broken Bay. He'd slept on Lion Island, which was infested with snakes baking on burning sandstone in the furnace of the summer midday, and woken with tiny penguins in their dinner jackets sniffing inquiringly at his swag on the beach at midnight. He remembered blue swimmer crabs boiling in a pot over an open fire and his father poking in the ashes for potatoes in their charred jackets. He'd felt the first stirrings of rising sap in an old Halvorsen on this river, as his fourteen-year-old hands ran over the nearly there breasts of Bobbi Ruwald and the Everly Brothers sang nasally about tearing down goalposts.

But now he felt a vague queasiness, bile in the mouth from a cocktail of guilt, remorse and champagne. Why should he? It was all well and good for the pelican to cast judgement with that great nodding bill of supposed wisdom. What did he know of copper-coloured loins thrusting and sliding in a marble spa? No one was hurt. No one knew. She seemed to demand orgasms for her reward, nothing more. Anyway, girls were like that now. They didn't need love and promises anymore, just orgasms. And Louise wasn't here. She was at a literary retreat, discussing the early novels of Jane Austen, or Tolstoy as a misogynist, or something. The kids were in camp. So who was he hurting? After all, he was still Jack-the-lad to the boys in the group, so now and again you had to play the part. Besides he was bored, life was too easy, business was too easy, money came too easily. You had to look over the edge now and again. But still his mouth was a stale lemon.

## The Butcherbird

The pelican drifted almost to the hull as if to check the alignment of its bill in the mirrored wood, looked up at Jack briefly, then slowly turned and paddled off into the gentle eddies. Jack followed its dignified exit up the river. Minutes ticked away. Nothing moved except the great bird and the sliding clouds.

Crack. Suddenly an explosive sound, a gunshot, a weapon of some sort wrecked the peace and a missile fell into the water not far from the pelican. Jack was shocked into action. There it was again. Crack, and then a thump into the water, closer to the bird this time. Jack was running now, bare feet thudding on the immaculate decks, any thoughts of disturbing sleepers cast aside, running to the stern where someone — who? — was shooting at the pelican. A pelican, for Christ's sake. Who could ever shoot at any bird, let alone a pelican, the most majestic of all birds? Jack had always loved watching them landing like 747s in the bays of Pittwater and waddling onto Snapperman Beach to take the chips he threw from the greasy paper, the hard bits that were left from the fish and chips his mum bought from across Barrenjoey Road. He loved to watch the span of their wings as they rode the uplifts along the cliffs between Whale Beach and Palm Beach above the wilderness of rockpools where he went to search for shells, or tiny, brightly coloured fish that looked like they belonged on the Barrier Reef, or octopus that sometimes leapt frighteningly from crevasses. He always poked around with a stick in the pools for the octopus but secretly he hoped never to find them.

Now someone, on this boat, where he was a guest, complicit in a way in this barbarous act, was shooting at a pelican. There it was for a third time — another crack, another missile into the water. It was originating from somewhere above him. He looked up. There was a figure holding a rifle. He called out, 'Hey!'

### Geoffrey Cousins

The figure turned in surprise. 'Hey yourself. Didn't know anyone was up and about. Come up and have a whack. I hear you're pretty good at this.'

Jack squinted into the sun, panting from his dash down the deck, confused by his panic for the bird. The voice was unmistakably that of his host, but what was that he was holding? As Jack scaled the gleaming ladder he could see it wasn't a rifle the man was swinging, but a stick of some kind.

'This is the new Taylor Made. Big bastard, isn't it? Had it flown in from the States, just arrived yesterday. Pretty good weapon.'

Jack peered at the golf club held out to him, still slightly out of breath, unsure how to respond.

'Here, have a crack. You need to warm up for later. We'll have the longest drive competition after breakfast, so might as well get a head start on the others. Not that I think the rest of them amount to much. But you're pretty hot I gather. Single-figure handicap, hey? Anyway, we'll see. Have a couple of swings.'

Again the club was pushed at him. Jack took it, looking around. There was a rack of golf clubs like a billiard cue rack standing nearby and a huge plastic tub of new golf balls, individually boxed, into which Mac was dipping his sizeable mitt. 'Were you ... were you ...' Jack began hesitantly. 'Were you aiming at the pelican?'

Mac started. 'Good God no. That'd be worse than killing an albatross at sea and they reckon that's the worst luck around. Who was that bloke?'

'Ah, the Ancient Mariner I think.'

'Never read it, but heard about it. I don't read stuff like that. No time. I don't read anything, to tell the truth, unless it can be put on one page. Winston Churchill was like that — put it on one page or forget it.'

## The Butcherbird

‘But I saw your magnificent library on the lower deck.’

Mac chuckled. ‘People like books, I have books. People like pictures, I have the best. But you needn’t worry about guns; there’s no shooting anything on this boat, all fish are tagged and released, all foods organic, all juices fresh — especially mine.’ The last comment was delivered with a cross between a wink and a leer that should have been repulsive but, for some, was strangely endearing. ‘The only time any of my shots goes near anything is purely accidental, but I hit them a bloody long way and on a river that’s what counts. No greens, no fairways to hit, just whack it as far as you can. Have a go.’ Jack took the proffered club and swung it easily in the smooth arc of a gifted player. ‘Nice swing. I see you’ll be a problem. Still, there’s no run out here for your top spin, it’s all carry. Mac’s the reigning champion and not about to give up the belt without a fight, so let’s see your form.’

Jack removed the ball from the box, placed it on the artificial grass pad with a built-in plastic tee and, in one easy motion, swept the missile fifty yards past where the last explosions had landed and fifty yards to the right of the pelican. Mac drew his breath in through his nostrils.

‘Hmm. That’ll do you. No more practice. You don’t want to tire yourself out? Come and have breakfast.’

He led Jack by the elbow in a direction the younger man’s nose was already following. ‘Jack, this is Ernest, the best omelette-maker in the world. Aren’t you, Ernest? Of course you are. He gets them almost crisp on the outside but still fluffy and moist inside. Unbelievable. I sound like a damn ad or something, but you’ve got to have one, Jack. What are you going to make for Mr Beaumont, hey Ernest? Spanish, mushroom — what’s your poison, Jack?’

When they were finally seated after a seemingly endless inquisition on number of eggs, whether crisp bacon should be

### Geoffrey Cousins

served on the side, whether guava juice should be added to the fresh orange, whether sourdough toast was better than jam and black bread, Mac gazed appreciatively at Jack's full plate.

'It's great to see someone enjoy their tucker. Know what I mean? Enjoy life, really. People who don't eat don't really enjoy anything much I reckon. But you seem to have a bit of fun.'

Jack looked up quickly to see whether this was an oblique reference to his indiscretion of the previous evening, but Mac was concentrating with great intensity on the slicing of a kangaroo sausage, 'killed on the old place'. He felt the need to respond to his host's enthusiasm for breakfast, sport, life, toast, kangaroos, all that lived and breathed and was cooked.

'Well, I've always loved sport and activity and a good feed afterwards, although I don't often eat a breakfast like this.'

'Nor do I. You wouldn't believe the stuff Bonny gets into me. Fruits you've never heard of all blended up with wheat germ and soya beans and curdled goat's milk or whatever. It feels like she pours it down me with a spout. No enemas needed in this household, I can tell you.'

Jack laughed uncertainly. 'Yes, we go the healthy organic route most of the time.' He paused for another mouthful of his four-egg omelette with three types of mushrooms and chorizo sausage on the side. 'Incidentally, you mentioned I had a low golf handicap, how do you know that?'

Mac looked up with a half-smile. 'I like to know about my guests, know what they like, what to avoid. Just common courtesy, hey?'

There was silence and serious eating. Finally, Mac pushed away his plate and it was instantly whisked from the table. 'So, you've had a great run in property, I hear?'

'Yes, the last few years have been remarkable. We've sold just about everything off the plan, which is unheard of.'

## The Butcherbird

Mac poured coffee from the plunger. 'Do you have a formula? The one-sheet-of-paper idea?'

'Pretty much. Always a harbour view or waterfront, always big rooms, huge bathroom somewhere, usually a fireplace, a home cinema, a concierge in the building, forget the gym and the swimming pool since no one ever uses them, always an enormous price. And we never bargain. It seems to work.'

Mac laughed. 'They made you chairman of the Property Council and you were on the shortlist for Businessman of the Year. It seems to work all right. And you love it, do you? It still gets the adrenalin running? You've got to have that, haven't you?'

Jack eased back and looked out across the rail to the river of his youth. He played with his sugar spoon, tapped it on the cup, placed it carefully in the saucer. 'Well, to tell you the truth, it has lost an edge for me lately.' He paused. He barely knew this man and he hadn't spoken of his feelings to anyone, not even Louise. But no one else had asked, and Mac was leaning forward, genuinely interested in him and his life, and he was sated with the warmth of coddled cholesterol and New Guinea Highlands coffee and the memory of ... what was her name? He would have to find out discreetly before she came up for breakfast. Mac said nothing. He knew the art of a good listener.

'I like what I do and I guess I'm good at it, judging by the results. I suppose this sounds incredibly arrogant, but it's just become too easy. We design those things, I dream up some absurd price, jack it up another twenty per cent and they generally snap them up before they're even built. In a way, I enjoyed it more when we had to struggle.'

'Who's we? You have partners?' Mac's voice was quiet now. The staff had slid away, they needed no signal.

'No, I'm a lone wolf, I guess. Louise, my wife, used to be my

### Geoffrey Cousins

partner. She's still my partner, but not in the business. We have two kids so that's pretty full time.'

'You like it that way?' Jack looked up. 'Being your own boss?'

Mac poured more coffee into both cups. The pelican flew quietly away as the boat eased up on the anchor chain. The tide was turning and the Pacific Ocean was running in to meet the fresh waters of the Nepean and the Colo and the Hawkesbury, running down from the Blue Mountains and the Southern Highlands. With the salt water came the schools of red bream and taylor, flathead, sometimes black fish, and the predators that followed — the Port Jackson sharks, the hammerheads, the ferocious bull sharks. The sharks were all saltwater creatures and yet they'd been found more than thirty miles upstream, way into fresh water, and once, when Jack was only about eighteen, a waterskier had been taken at Sackville, which was thought to be impossible. He had hoped all the waterskiers would be frightened off this river. He'd hated their destruction of the tranquillity even when he was a boy.

He chewed at the question. Did he like it that way? Being his own boss, working with the same circle, half-circle, of colleagues and contractors, lunching regularly with the group, using the same ideas he'd lived on for twenty years, dining out on the same stories he'd told for too long. He hated it when Louise said, 'I think we might have heard that one, Jack', but it was always true.

But something made him hold back from opening his cloak to this man. 'I do. I like running my own race.'

Mac gave him the knowing smile of an old python. 'So do I.' He rose from the table. 'Come on, I'll show you a few of the other little toys we have on offer. God knows when the rest of these lazy bastards'll climb out of their pits.'

The two men walked slowly away together, both satisfied with their conversation. Not too much was to be given; understanding

## The Butcherbird

would come from what was unsaid. As far as Mac could see, which was further than most, Jack wanted nothing from him except a bit of fun. If so, he was the only person on this boat with such modest desires. And Mac wanted very little from Jack. Sure, he would touch him up for a discount on that penthouse for Bonny and get it, but that was just pigeon shooting. He liked the bloke.

From behind, as they strolled the length of the boat, the contrast in the silhouettes was comic. The one short, square, bandy. The other tall, lean, lithe. The sun was high now above the bridge. The *Honey Bear* was ready for another day.

## chapter two

The door to number thirty-two Alice Street, Woollahra was a solid block of stainless steel without blemish or keyhole. Set into the facade of a late 1890s terrace in a conservative, manicured street of immaculate ‘restoration’, it seemed to be either thumbing its nose at history or promising relief, depending on your point of view. The minuscule front garden was a sea of river stones rather than the ferns and mondo grass or camellias and azaleas of neighbouring terraces. Apart from these two aberrations, number thirty-two faced the world with wrought-iron and Victorian modesty, just like all the other widows in the row.

Jack climbed somewhat more stiffly than usual from the leather seat of his Aston Martin, stretched, looked up and down the street as if checking for observers, and clicked the remote. A dull thump emanated from the stainless steel and he made his way into the house. He still experienced a frisson of pleasure every time he entered. It was his finest work as an architect, from the days when he really practised his design skills. That was the part of property that lifted his soul. And Louise had used all her