

Jack Be Nimble

Chapter 1

Hi, I'm Jack. I'm 35 years old and more than a few people think I'm the best hacker on the east coast. I've been working at my trade since high school. I started out as a gamer and was soon introduced to the joys of hacking and then quickly discovered that there was money to be made sneaking in to school systems and adjusting results and attendance registers for students willing to part with a couple of fifties. I continued my craft in university, where I'd studied IT and helped quite a few people get the marks needed to snare tasty, post-graduate and high profile research positions.

My girlfriend is Jill. That's her in the lounge bar, talking to one of our clients. She does the face to face stuff - apparently she is less intimidating than me; she is definitely better to look at. We met in our second year at uni while she was studying graphic art and I helped her out with an assignment she was finding a little tricky. Over the remaining year and a half of study, we found that we had complementary skills, among other things and our relationship developed. Life progressed, the business grew and so here we are, a happy couple doing the work we love and helping people out.

We meet our clients two ways – word-of-mouth, directly to us, not my favourite method and secondly through a dating website. We are a blonde single mum looking for a meaningful relationship, with a longer term view to marriage. Clients find us through recommendations and are pointed to the website, where they make contact with us. I like this method because I instantly have a starting point, their email address, to begin security checks before we even exchange phone numbers.

We have four core clients. They have all been with us for about the last five years. Our other clients are usually only around for a single job; most just wanting a quick fix or a removal. I like them, they pay well, they are really appreciative and we don't have to keep sucking up to them. Jill likes the money they bring in, but she's not happy with the security of the quickies. She likes me to do strong research on our clients before producing the goods.

The guy she's currently talking to is one of our main clients. His name is Serge and he's the master-at-arms, or some such title, of the local outlaw motorcycle club, The Reapers.

It's pretty simple work for them – they give us a list of motorcycles or motorcycle parts they want, I hack the Main Roads Vehicle Registration site and collect details relating to the bikes on his list. I record, make, year of manufacture and address of

the owner. I then check out the owner's insurance policies to look for extras, like aftermarket vehicle alarms etc, check their household policy, also looking for alarm systems, then put the lot together in a tidy spreadsheet and pass it to Serge, via Jill of course. Serge is looking pretty happy with the list Jill just passed to him, so I'll check our bank account in a couple of minutes and then SMS an OK message to Jill, letting her know the payment is made.

While we wait, let me tell you about our other three big clients: there's Leo the restaurateur, Yolanda the seamstress and Vincent the Gold Coast Mafioso. Together the four clients keep me and Jill in a nice little unit on the riverfront of Noosa River – the Gold Coast has too many criminal elements for my liking. Anyway the details go like this.

Leo likes to think of himself as a fancy restaurateur, he actually owns a chain of about six reasonable, take-away/eat-in restaurants, specialising in Italian cuisine; pastas, pizzas, sauces and a small line of Ice creams. He approached us originally, wanting us to arrange a clean Health Department record for his restaurants. It took a while to produce the goods, but eventually Jill was able to provide Leo with an official Health Department Inspection Certificate for each of his restaurants and I was able to clear up a couple of minor blemishes on his electronic record. We continue to maintain a close relationship with Leo, he occasionally wants some sort of certificate or award that he can hang in his restaurants and he is always appreciative of the advance warning we give of Health Department 'snap inspections'. I like Leo, he's not really hurting anybody, although I would never eat in one of his places, he pays on time and he keeps quiet about us.

So next we have Yolanda. She is one tough young lady. She tells us she came here 10 years ago after fleeing religious persecution in China, I think she was probably fleeing police arrest, but that is just my opinion and if it's true I really don't care anyway. She is a great regular customer and her orders are usually big and expensive. She runs a couple of retail clothing outlets down here on the Gold Coast. I think she would like to move up to Noosa with us, but competition is pretty fierce in such a small resort town. So what does she do that requires our special skills you ask? – Well, Yolanda makes 'knock-offs'. Copies of everything from Lorna Jane to Gucci and resort-wear brands I'd never heard of before meeting her. I think I told you earlier that Jill and I met at uni – me doing IT and she doing Graphic Art? Well, together we can pinch a logo, replicate it and produce a certificate of authenticity. We get our cloth logos manufactured by a mate who had a really bad motorcycle accident a while back and decided that he needed to supplement his disability pension. He's bought a couple of sewing and embroidery machines, hires cheap backpack labourers to work them and hey presto we get a bunch of nice little 'Roxy' logos, or whatever the order was for. We have also produced a number of different licences allowing Yolanda to stock and sell a huge range of different clothing labels. She's a good reliable client and she's very polite too.

Then there's Vincent. If anybody is going to either kill someone or be killed, Vincent is the most likely. He scares the shit out of me. He says he is the main man for the Gold Coast Mafia, and I believe him. He's not a really big guy, not as big as the two guys that always hang about him anyway, but his personality is huge. I'm not sure if it is total respect or fear that he generates from almost from the moment you meet him. Whatever it is, it demands attention. We do fake ID's for him. All types – everyday shit like 'Over Eighteen' cards he sells to kids, to unusual and interesting stuff requiring a little more effort and sometimes even a challenge to my hacking skills; like the pass we did that got some sort of mechanical engineer into a government research facility, so he could steal diagrams for a new battery. That took some time and a lot of back door attempts to bust through some pretty elaborate firewalls. We did it though. Yeah, interesting stuff, but I'm always on edge when we're working for Vincent. I don't like to think about the consequences of failing. Jill says she can handle him though and he pays really well, so I guess we will just have to keep watching our backs. Keep on our toes. Be prepared. Remain nimble – all that shit.

Firing up the iPad, I checked our account balance and saw the payment. I thumbed a quick text to Jill and a minute or so later Serge stood, leant over the small table and kissed Jill on the cheek. She smiled, picked up her bag and headed for the Ladies. I watched Serge finish his beer and walk out before sending another text to meet in the car.

In the car park I watched her approach – no wonder she has them on strings – she is gorgeous. Gliding into the passenger seat she smiled and kissed me.

"Let's do lunch at the 'Broadbeach'. She said quietly.

It was our usual thing and there was really no need to say it, but I liked hearing her anyway. We ate calamari and chips and drank a beer each. Over lunch we spoke casually about how good the month had been, and how maybe we should expand our business. There was this guy Serge had recommended who wanted some foreign banking stuff done. It sounded a lot bigger and way more risky than what we were used to and although I was a little timid with the idea, Jill thought we could make it work. "This could get us into the big time Babe"; and she had me.

Chapter 2

We had a quick catch up with Leo before we headed home. That is, Jill gave him a shiny new *'Best Rissotto on the East Coast'* award to hang on his walls, he transferred the money and generously gave Jill two kilos of pasta carbonara. These little gifts had been getting more and more extravagant lately, which would be worrying except that Jill can take care of herself, and also, for some reason, she's always preferred me to slightly greasy Italian restaurant owners. It doesn't really bother me that all our male clients turn gooey over Jill (who wouldn't?), but I think it bothers her a little bit, because lately she's been telling me Yolanda's got her eye on me, which is ridiculous, but oddly sweet of her.

Jill gave me a little smile as she swung the plastic bags laden with take-away into the car and slipped in beside me.

"You know," I said as I started the engine, "If that stuff was fit for humans, we'd save loads on groceries,"

"True," she said, flicking out her hair and repositioning her sunnies, "But there's no way we could eat that for a month without breaking the bathroom scales,"

We both eyed the steaming plastic bags, and came to the same conclusion we always did. The bags went into the first bin we saw that was out of Leo's neighbourhood. We'd recently considered giving Leo's offerings to a homeless shelter, but decided the homeless could do without food poisoning. We were cruising along companionably, singing the odd bit of some song on the radio, when I sort of got an uneasy feeling.

Like I said, I've been a gamer since way back, and even though most people wouldn't believe you if you told them, gaming does hone certain skills. The skills I'm meaning in this instance have to do with noticing things, because as I drove, my uneasy feeling grew and clarified, and I realised that I'd been noticing a particular car for a while now. I wasn't sure, but I thought I might have even caught a glimpse of it in the car park after we tied things up with Serge.

I did some unnecessary lane changing, and thought that I must have got it wrong because the black land rover stayed where it was. I wasn't convinced though. I took an exit at random, and watched as it crossed three lanes of traffic to take the same exit.

We were being followed.

By this time, Jill had stopped saying "What's up, babe?" and had whipped a tiny notebook out of her handbag and was writing down the numberplate and doing a quick but detailed sketch of the land rover from what she could see in the mirrors.

That whole thing about being more than just a pretty face was definitely true of Jill. Gorgeous, but quick on the uptake. And a whizz with a pencil.

Anyway, we wended about through the suburbs, doubled back, went around, and Jill took photos of any houses with 'For Sale' signs out the front of them in the vague hope that our tail wouldn't realised we were on to him (or her).

We did lose the blighter eventually, but conversation was strained for the rest of the trip, and when we got home we scoured the car for bugs. We didn't find any, and Jill laughed and said I was just paranoid and poured me something strong and soothing and sat me down on the sofa.

"You're so cautious, Jack. It's probably just that friend of Serge's, checking us out,"

"He shouldn't even know who we are though. This is not ok, Jill!"

Jill laughed and ruffled my hair condescendingly. It's an annoying trick she's got when she thinks I'm being cowardly and in need of bucking up. Two things here: first, the woman must have nerves of steel if she can be tailed all over the Gold Coast and up past Moreton Bay and laugh it off; and second, I'm not convinced she understands the risk. She's guilty of a little graphic design, and hobnobbing with petty criminals. Well, ok, Vincent isn't petty, he's more scary as heck. But Jill does have the gorgeous thing going for her, and if you've ever seen her pull the dumb blonde routine, you wouldn't suspect she had two brain cells to rub together. If you asked a jury whether they thought her capable of any criminal act, my bet is they'd clear her of all charges and recommend an adult education course to improve her literacy.

I, on the other hand, am a hacker. I'm a very good hacker, and I cover my tracks so I'm untraceable and that's *why* I'm the best hacker on the east coast. I have to be cautious. The really unfortunate thing is that I look like a computer hacker. I've got the messy hair, the jeans and t-shirt, the whiter than white skin and the caffeine addiction. It's no use telling me that I live at Noosa and should go expose my tender flesh to the sun; I burn like the blazes if I'm not slathered from head to toe in extra strength zinc. And except for that one time when I shaved my head and ended up looking like a hacker with cancer, the hair cannot be tamed. I don't have the flab though; I'm a runner and I have to say it's good to be able to break the stereotype in at least *one* way. But the fact remains, any jury would convict me of hacking on sight. That's another reason why Jill does all the face to face stuff.

There's no point in explaining any of this to Jill though, because I tried once, and we just had a massive argument and nothing was helpfully resolved. So instead, when she's feeling overly cocky and condescending, I bite my tongue and play violent videogames until the annoyance wears off, because I know it's just one of those things, you know, personality clash or whatever. Besides, if there had been

bugs in the car, she would have been the first to say it was a good thing I'm so damn cautious.

So anyway, I was working off a bit of pent up energy slaughtering nazi zombies, when Jill came in looking thoughtful, and holding out her phone like it maybe had recently developed fangs.

"Babe?"

I was not particularly in the mood, so I tactfully ignored her and continued massacring uniformed zombies to the sound of electronic machine gun fire.

"Babe? I know you're busy doing... well, whatever it is you're doing, but I think maybe you were right,"

This is a thing everyone likes to hear, so although I was right in the middle of a good killing spree, I paused the game and looked up at her.

"You found a bug?"

"No-o-o," she said slowly, "But Serge said his friend would contact us via the dating profile, so I thought I better check that before calling him up and giving him an earful about letting his friend tail us all over the place ... Jack, does this look weird to you?"

She held out the poisonous phone and went to sit on the edge of my desk. I whisked my extremely expensive, extremely fast gaming mouse out of the way of her shapely behind.

"Oh sorry," she said distractedly, "But you see what I mean?"

Her phone screen had gone blank because she'd been holding it there too long, so I pulled up the dating site on one of my screens and scanned through the message.

It was... not odd, which was the problem. Usually, when clients contact us through the website, they're trying to be sneaky, so they send us messages with awkwardly veiled hints about what they're after. You know the kind of thing, they mention they've heard we've got 'special skills' and ask how we feel about bikes (computers and subtlety are not things Serge excels in). This is one of the reasons why a dating site is the perfect cover- it's full of people asking euphemistic questions and talking about 'special skills'. This message wasn't like that though- just a nice-ish sort of greeting and self-introduction- new to the website, feeling sheepish about online dating, noticed we both have kids around the same age, yadda yadda.

My annoyance with Jill vanished completely, because if she was worried about this, it meant that she had been taking my concerns about the tail seriously. On an ordinary day, this was the kind of thing I would notice, and she would laugh off.

“I’ll check it out,” I said, clicking my way onto the trail of this single dad of two. I glanced up at her and saw she was still looking worried, so I pulled her down onto my lap and kissed her cheek, and she smiled and rolled her eyes at me. “Could actually be a single dad just looking for a date,” I said, “It’s possible... otherwise, why mention the kids...?”

The doorbell rang, and Jill slipped off my lap to go and answer it. I tracked this bloke round a few loop-de-loops and was starting to think that maybe he was that friend of Serge’s when I came across his LinkedIn account.

“Jack?” Jill’s voice had a little bit of something ominous in it, and given what I’d just found...

“Jill?” I strode out trying to look casual and nearly ran smash into her standing in the living room surrounded by a mountain of fake Gucci luggage.

Yolanda beamed at me. Dressed entirely in her own excellent knockoffs, and positively dripping with fake Tiffany’s jewellery, she teetered towards me on spectacular fake Jimmy Choos.

“Jack!” she said, “You very hard people to find!” she wagged a gleaming red talon at me in the manner of a cheerful school teacher telling off a slightly naughty child.

“Yolanda...” I said, flicking a desperate glance of enquiry at Jill as Yolanda wrapped me in a Dior scented embrace. Jill raised an amused eyebrow at me and mouthed ‘I told you so’.

“Yolanda has come for a visit,” she explained, even though that part at least was obvious from all the bags.

“Yes, yes, I am here to visit my friends!” said Yolanda beaming again, and launching into an effortless stream of explanations and exclamations, making it impossible for Jill and me to get a word in edgewise. As Yolanda clicked about waving her arms at the beauty of our unit and the views of the river, I whipped out my phone and sent Jill a quick text.

Single dad of two is a single dad of two... but he’s also a cop.

Jill pulled a face. Things were definitely about to get hairy.

Chapter 3

'Damn, Damn, Damn'.

How did Yolanda find us? We don't give anyone our address, we don't have a landline, we only use our mobiles, and, our web usage is on wireless internet with all the windows facing out over the Noosa River to the National Park, so no real hope of snooping electronically. Not even an email address on G-mail or Hotmail or Live, none of which require identification or addresses anyway. We're anonymous.

Perhaps Yolanda was the Land Rover.

'Yolanda, how did you get here, was that you following us in the Land Rover?'

'What', she replied groggily from her supine position on our couch, having got over her joy at seeing us and now flaked out with eyes closed, repeating ad nauseum 'I'm scared, I'm scared, I'm scared', while Jill got her a cup of soothing chamomile tea. 'No, I came in a limousine' Pause, then witheringly: 'Of course'.

I should have known, driving was the least of Yolanda's skills, and she abhors cabs with their unintelligible drivers, so she only used top quality hire cars, with their discrete chauffeurs. So, that also explains how she got her large array of ports up the lift: the chauffeur helped her.

'But how did you find out where we lived?'

'Darling, yesterday I gave Jill that Dolce & Gabbana number she was dotting on to wear to the Melbourne Cup Day function. But, as always, just so there's no comeback on me, and to keep things legal in the shop, I always ask the names and addresses of the clients. I can then advise them when I get a new shipment of their favourite styles'.

Well, that solves that issue, and blows our anonymity out of the water, but what the fuck was the Land Rover. I don't usually swear, but this is an exceptional circumstance. And it wasn't just any Land Rover; it was a brand new Discovery V8, top of the line, with fully blacked-out side windows.

It must have been the cop, working undercover. But the LinkedIn profile could be wrong. Mine says I'm a taxi driver, which I haven't been since uni days, when I was trying to get a bit of extra cash together. Upgrading that would only blow my cover, so mine remains the same. So, if he **is** police, why would he say police on his LinkedIn account, if he's really chasing internet crime or something larger.

Or maybe he **is** genuine; and looking for a new partner for his kids, and has just stumbled across our website in his search for something other than the usual run-of-the-mill contenders.

And if he's not genuinely seeking companionship, who or what is he? Or is it a he? Maybe it's a Task Force from whichever law enforcement agency has decided to follow us up.

And which of our clients were they following us up on anyway?

Possibly Yolanda herself. We really don't know anything about her. Probably a Chinese background, but definitely importing knock-off designer clothing. Perhaps the Triads are after her. Maybe she has removed the skilfully hidden drugs from her shipments and is flogging them herself. She couldn't be making that much money from her badly made clothing with our fake designer labels. Could she?

That Land Rover would make sense then. She was followed here. No, that Land Rover was following **us** before we lost them. But why would they only have one car? There would have been a different car following Yolanda, not the Land Rover. The Triads would have Yolanda stake out fully, and could have been using any vehicle, and Yolanda wouldn't have noticed.

Damn, Damn, Damn. Where do we go from here?

While trying to relax to see if this made sense, I recalled our visit to Leo's. He also seemed to be living beyond his means. He couldn't be making much out of his scattered 'restaurants', could he? Greasy spoons in the traditional sense of the phrase. Perhaps he was a master distribution point for ice, ecstasy and the newer exotic, but still illegal, party drugs. How easy would it be for him to be supplying to dealers from his take-away food places in the less salubrious suburbs of the greater Brisbane area.

So, then the people following us from Leo's were possibly from a Customs Task Force, following up on a recent shipment. They would definitely have a latest vehicle, and one which could go anywhere to chase a suspect: that is - us!

Damn, Damn, Damn, again, with a Fuck thrown in. Where the hell do we go from here?

But, hang on, there's also Serge. He's the standover merchant from the Reapers. Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs are definitely flavour of the month with the popular press at the moment since these new laws were passed in Queensland. You may not like their wide sweep, but they have certainly stirred up the heavy guys running the illegal trades out of their bikie clubrooms. Many of their members may be somewhat innocent of major crime, but Serge was definitely not one of them. He knew exactly what was going on and where the money was coming from.

I read in last week's paper that 'Typically, he would meet his dealers at the nearby Harbourside shopping centre and devour a Fasta Pasta takeaway before driving to another rendezvous to hand over drugs or collect cash. (Presumably, his

Harley Davidson was too conspicuous for this job.)' There's the Leo connection again.

He'd also have the cash to purchase a top of the line Land Rover, or more likely commandeer a re-born one, and also have the skills for driving. If it was him, Jill and I were lucky to lose him. But, it won't take him long. He's got plenty of associates who will track us down.

But, perhaps it's the Queensland Police Task Force tracking down known conspirators of the Reapers. We've been helping Serge and his Reapers get motor registration details: the real ones to aid with their robberies, and the fake ones for their re-borns, both vehicles and bikes.

Damn, Fuck, Bugger, Shit. This is getting really serious. There's no way we'll be taking on this new well paying job recommended by Serge. We'll be lucky to survive until next week if this keeps going on.

So of our major clients, that just leaves Vincent, and his Gold Coast Mafia.

Last night's TV news was saying that gangs are becoming increasingly violent on the Gold Coast as competition for their illegal trades become crowded. The Police Union says that it's becoming like Los Angeles or Moscow, and that's frightening.

We may have just completed some business with Vincent, and only for the 'Over Eighteen' cards, but there has been bigger stuff in the past, like those battery plans a few months back.

It's also been reported that the Australian Crime Commission is cracking down on Gold Coast organised crime, so Vincent's mates will want to make sure that we don't blab to them.

So was the Land Rover Serge, or maybe the Mafia, or perhaps the Australian Crime Commission?

Fuck, Fuck, Bugger, Bugger, Shit, **Shit**.

So, what are the probabilities? Who is most likely to be trying to track us down? Perhaps it's all of them. So, how do we get ourselves out of this mess? Or am I just paranoid?

So, I called Jill in so we could go over the options together. She had just come back into the living room having persuaded Yolanda to take a nap in the spare room bed, with a Mogadon.

'Well, sweetie pie, listen to this', I said, hopefully with a smile on my face.

So I went through all the possibilities outlined above, any of which would lead towards the demise of our nice little enterprise, and now doubt a free holiday for a

few years as the guest of Her Majesty. Surprisingly, Jill didn't interrupt. She just sat and stared at me while I outlined my brain-storming episode.

Just as I was rounding out on the ACC, the doorbell rang, long and loud.

Chapter 4

I silenced my lips with my finger, pointed at the door and cricked my head in question.

Jill replied with a silent but nonchalant shrug of the shoulders. She looked cool and, as usual, beautiful. It didn't relieve my tension. Man was I getting jumpy these days.

Yolanda was strewn untidily in the leather lounge as I passed. She looked all in, defeated in sleep, a tired weak image. I had never seen her like this before. I couldn't even imagine her in this state she was normally so strong and relentless.

Through the peephole stood a small greasy figure clutching a couple of pizza boxes easily stacked on one hand while the other hand pressed the doorbell. He looked dodgy, a little smarmy but mostly harmless. God, here was I running the ruler over the pizza boy. Jesus, my nerves were just jangling.

"Pizza," I yelled over my shoulder as I casually opened the door. I grinned as I noticed the name on the boxes.

"You ordered from Leo's. What, are you crazy?"

The door opened wider and mister greasy stepped in.

From the next room Jill corrected loudly.

"I didn't order....."

Two shots rang out, blam, blam, so close together they seemed to produce just one long sound. On the lounge Yolanda's surprised face exploded into a red pulpy mess.

"...pizza," she continued.

With real menace the pizza boy waved the large black gun barrel with its deadly hole in my direction as he carefully backed his way out the door. His eyes never left my face and he never uttered a word. Despite this, I instantly got his brutal message and froze; I may even have closed my eyes, hoping the bullet, if it came, wouldn't hurt too much. Nothing else ran through my brain, just survival, and the noise, that deafening noise. As quickly as he came he left, pizza boxes, scary smoking gun and all.

Jill strode into the lounge and surveyed the scene.

"Well, she won't talk much anymore," she threw as an aside as she made her way to where I was shivering in my boots.

If it was possible to be more stunned I would have been.

She slipped easily into my grasp and felt my heartbeat with a light loving touch. “My, that thing’s really pounding darling. I think you need to relax. Why don’t we go out for a ride, take in the air, eat something.”

My mouth wasn’t working so I just nodded as she fumbled in my pockets for the car keys.

I think I pointed in the now dead Yolanda direction but Jill just pressed me through the door whispering “Later, darling, later,” into my stressed ear.

I tumbled into the car, wordless, nerveless and clueless. Jill, on the other hand, looked like she was having the time of her life.

She fired up the car and gave it a powerful rev before blasting into the night.

Casually, with her arm resting easily on the window sill, she looked over and decided my picture needed to be coloured in.

“That little bit of business tonight netted us more money than what we earned in the last six months.”

“Business!!” I managed to blurt out. “Yolanda’s head is full of holes. Business!!”

“Yes well,” she pouted from the driver’s seat. “You never liked her anyway.”

“True,” I replied, my voice returning. “But not enough to get her head blown off. What the hell is that?”

“That,” she replied hotly, “is business. Welcome to the big time Jack.”

“Jesus,” was all I had to say.

We drove in brooding silence to the beach. It seemed to be a really good idea. Nothing like a sober night on a deserted beach to get your head clear and mine desperately needed clearing.

Standing alone on the beach letting my feet dig holes in the sand with each passing wave, I felt my, up till now, pleasant life sinking. Jill waded in and held my hand. She’d been silent, just sitting back on the dry sand watching my back as I stood alone in the waves. Time had passed and I guessed she’s figured I’d had enough time now to fill me in on the gory details. The coolness of her fingers surprised me as they entwined through mine, then I realized I was freezing. Up till now I hadn’t even noticed.

“You’re cold Jack,” she soothed as she wrapped her lithe body around me. “Let me warm you up.” To her my silence meant yes, to me it just spelt confusion.

“She dealt in ice Jack, crack, heroin, you name it,” Jill whispered in my ear. “She was a big time drug dealer Jack.” She made it sound like we’re doing the world a favour.

“So what. That’s not our issue. It’s not my stuff.” I turned to face her. “She’s dead in my lounge room for Christ’s sake.”

“What about the cops?”

“Don’t worry about the cops. I think some money went in their direction.”

My head jolted back. “How do you know this stuff?”

She tapped her nose playfully. “There are a lot of things you don’t know.”

I think I’d prefer it that way.”

“Well OK,” she summed up cheerfully. “That’s the way we’ll play it.”

As she turned on her heel and made her way back onto dry sand she was swaying her hips to get thought the waves and wet sand. From behind it was hypnotizing. God, what a sight, I was blessed. Now if only I could figure out who she really was.

“Let’s go home Jack.”

I mumbled ascent and followed.

Driving home my mind still cart wheeled. “What was going on?” And, finally, the pizza boxes surfaced.

“Those were Leo’s pizzas Jill.” My eyes drifted to her face as she stared down the road. “Coincidence?”

“Well,” she slowly slurred. “That might be something you don’t want to know.”

I thought about it for at least a minute, daring myself to remain ignorant, but, I had to know. Where Jill went, I went.

“Fill me in,” I finally surrendered.

With a sideways glance and pursed lips she summed me up.

“Ok. Leo is Vincent’s fix-it man amongst other things. He also launders the money and other stuff, you know. He’s on the payroll and Vincent pays well.”

“Where did Yolanda fit in?”

“Yolanda, well, she was a problem. She was importing and dealing drugs on Vincent’s patch and wouldn’t cut him in on the action. His patience finally ran out and he got Leo to deal with it.”

“Well, deal with it he did,” I spat. “But why at my place?”

“Convenience,” she offered easily. “I knew she would be there, that’s all.”

Ugly gears were clicking in my head. “So, are you on Vincent’s payroll?” I asked unhappily.

She looked over with a sad face for what seemed forever. “We’re home,” she offered toggling the garage door opening button.

Yolanda was gone, along with all her mess. I was mildly surprised but Jill wasn’t. She sort of shrugged apolitically when I looked over. Who was this woman I was in love with?

It was when I was pouring myself a stiff measure that I realized how tired I was, dog tired, or more realistically, dog-gone tired. I slipped that warm measure into my tight stomach in one single gulp and let it burn.

“I’m going to bed.”

“OK darling. See you in the morning. I’m going to stay up for a while.”

I didn’t know what to say so I didn’t.

Ten twenty-seven and the initial shriek must have woken me. The clock on the bedside table illuminated the time but on the other side of the bed there was no comforting sleeping figure, no Jill. But, that shriek was definitely hers.

I ran to the lounge just in time to run into the business end of a businesslike sawn-off shotgun. Unlike myself, it looked locked and loaded, ready for action. At the control end of the shotgun stood the nastiest individual God has put breath into. Covered in tats, filth and attitude, this was not a man to trifle with. I wisely decided not to trifle. He easily had Jill by the throat and with one meaty arm pointed his weapon in my direction.

“Where’s Yolanda?” came a snarl through his untamed beard.

I could see Jill’s pleading eyes but the really fast shake of the head threw me. I didn’t know what to do, lie, plead, tell the truth. What was she telling me?

One eye winked. Was she in control? Man the coolness of this new Jill scared me. Seriously, one eye winked. There, she did it again. Her coolness just blew my mind. “OK, OK,” my thoughts rushed.

“Yolanda,” I replied as calmly as I could muster. “I’m not sure I know anyone called Yolanda.”

I could see his thickish brain digest this information. This wasn’t the scenario he was expecting. He would have to improvise, and this wasn’t his strength.

“Yea,” he snarled. “I reckon I’ll take your little lady here away till your memory improves.”

Before I could even leap Jill shouted. “It’s OK Jack. I’ll be fine.” She turned to the door to lead the way. Her captor followed suit, cautiously levering his huge body through the door, all the while vicing Jill with his grip and covering me with his shotgun. Maybe I looked more of a threat than I was but I have never felt more helpless than I felt at that moment. I saw Jill’s face as she slipped through the door. There was concern but no panic. Briefly she caught my eye and looked at me as if I would know what to do. I tried to smile in return but I don’t think I pulled it off. Then they were gone. The last thing I saw was the kidnapper’s clothes. He had colours on, the same colours that Serge wore, The Reapers. It didn’t take too many spare brain cells to work out that Yolanda must have been their supplier and therefore was a really important part of their operation. This was not good. Jill and I were firmly planted, smack bang, in the middle of a drug turf war where the losers lose their capacity to breathe. As the door closed I remained, vacantly watching as my life got further confused.

“Jesus,” I muttered to myself as I slumped on the lounge. “Jesus.” It was right here, right here where I was sitting that Yolanda got blasted. “Jesus.” I must have slumped there for a least an hour, unable to think, almost unable to function.

Midnight, and the doorbell rang. It was a polite ring, almost normal. I glanced at the door, just wondering what could possibly be on the other side. It took a while to work out that I really didn’t have anything more left to lose and I might as well just answer it. I didn’t bother with the peephole. It seemed unnecessary.

I opened the door and there stood Vincent. He looked dapper but evil, whereas his duo of flanking henchmen just looked evil. Over their heads I noticed a shadowy black Landrover. “Well,” I thought to myself. “That clears that up.”

“Where’s Jill, my favorite niece, Jack,” he soothed menacingly while waving a flashing GPS alarm device. “She always lets me know where she is.”

My mouth was flapping but there was no noise.

Chapter 5

My brain exploded within as millions of neurons sparked into action in an attempt to make sense of Vincent's revelation and its implications. My mouth finally offered up a gasp that sounded something like 'Serge.'

Vincent's broad head cocked to the side, and his furrowed brow ploughed another four deep rows across the expanse of his wide Mediterranean forehead.

I gulped hard, and added, 'You know, Serge...and The Reapers.'

Vincent's eyes darkened and he lifted his meaty fists. I took a quick step back and ducked hoping to evade a pummeling. Through narrowed eyes I watched him grip one paw with the other and proceed to crack his knuckles loudly. The sound of crunching bone caused my spine turn to jelly and I grasped the edge of the door for support.

'Sergio De Bosco?' he wheezed, leaning his mottled, reddened face closer to my paling one.

The garish scent of expensive aftershave, caused my eyes to water and my gut to somersault and consider regurgitating my last meal, which for the life of me I couldn't recall at this very point in time.

'You're saying that dago prick Sergio De Bosco has my niece?' he yelled, grabbing my shirt by the collars.

I nodded like a cheap bobble-headed toy and wished I'd taken some of Jill's Mogodon before slipping between those cool silk sheets a few hours earlier. I would be floating on cloud nine possibly dreaming about Jill and I downing a few Mojito's on a sun drenched tropical beach somewhere, say on an island in the Whitsundays. Instead here I was contemplating how to successfully kick off a pair of cement shoes and rise to the surface of the Noosa River for a breath of lifesaving air. Damn Serge. Damn Yolanda. Damn Leo and his vomituous cuisine. Damn Vincent and all the Mafiosi. Damn every drug dealer and drug taker in the Southern Hemisphere and most of all damn Jill. If It wasn't for her I wouldn't be in this friggin' mess. I'd just be a lonely computer geek, sadly living in some sordid flat at West End and eeking out a living working for Ebay or Eharmony or some other electronic online venture. Damn technology too!

Vincent dropped his hands and rolled his thick gold-chained neck to the right and then the left to make sure his faithful henchmen were still standing like ugly stone gargoyles in the doorway behind him.

'Where'd they take Jill?' he barked.

‘I have no idea?’ I shrugged. ‘They just grabbed her and took her away.’

Vincent eyed me as if I was a simple-minded, spineless, Caucasian who didn’t have the gall or the right to be hooked up with his niece - *the chameleon*. Then he just shook his head and turned away.

As the trio of hulks hurried away, retracing their steps back to the black Land Rover, I wondered at Jill’s entanglement with her uncle and the Gold Coast Mafia. Was she involved because of filial connections or was she being groomed as Vincent’s offsider, or worse yet - *his successor*?

The drinks cabinet called my name and I extricated an unopened bottle of Canadian Club. I unscrewed the cap and would have downed the lot if it weren’t for a thump and a groan that came from the vicinity of the bedroom.

I rushed in, whisky bottle still in hand, and caught sight of a figure on the floor beneath the open window struggling to free itself from the fallen drapery. A black beret appeared first. Next came arms and legs and then a spindly body all covered in camouflage material. As the person stood and turned to face me, I have to admit that I let out an unmanly cry. He rushed forward and forced me hard against the wall, his knee in my groin and his hand over my mouth.

‘Sssh!’ he spat, and bloodshot eyes peeked from below muppet-sized eyebrows. Falsely perfect teeth glinted amidst wrinkled flesh smeared with black face paint.

I peeled his gnarly hand away and scowled. ‘Dad, what are you doing here!’

‘Shh, they’ll here you,’ he whispered nodding towards the doorway.

‘There’s no-one here,’ I said pushing him off me. This is just what I needed now, my lunatic father to appear on my doorstep, or should I say, my bedroom via the window ledge. ‘What are you doing out at this time of night? Does anyone know you’ve done runner?’

‘They aren’t my keepers you know,’ he grimaced, ‘I don’t live in an aged care home remember, it’s a retirement village. Anyway, you needed assistance.’

‘What do you mean, you crazy old bugger?’ I was desperate for help, but not from this arthritic Vietnam Vet. This was not a problem easy to solve, like how to fix the starter motor on my lawn mower or which bank offers the best interest on a term deposit. It was way out of his league and I needed to be rid of him. I needed to work out my next move.

I heard his knees crack as he bent down to rummage through the folds of drapery. My heart leapt into my throat as he suddenly produced a rifle and waved it high like an enflamed revolutionary, barely missing the ceiling fan. It was an old SLR.

‘Jesus, Dad! Put that thing down!’ I indicated wildly in the direction of the bed mattress. ‘What are you doing with that anyway?’

Instead of listening to me, he shuffled over to the doorway, peeked into the living room and then marched out on polished boots with the rifle slung over his shoulder. I followed right behind of course.

‘I know what’s been going on in here,’ he said turning around and standing at ease with his hands behind his back.

‘No you don’t,’ I replied placing the whisky bottle back inside the cabinet. My father certainly didn’t need any more alcohol to add to whatever else he may have taken before venturing into the night. ‘I haven’t seen you for ages, so how would you know anything of what I’ve been doing.’

He raised one hairy eyebrow. ‘That’s true you haven’t contacted your poor old father for a while have you? And I only live a couple of blocks away.’

‘Dad I don’t need this. You have to go now. I’ll call you in a few days, I promise,’ I lied, and moved closer with the intent of firmly ushering him out the front door.

In a lightning flash he unslung the rifle and pointed it again. Once more I found myself flinching and ducking. My nerves were going into hyper drive. My heart was following suit and so were my bowels. Wouldn’t it be nice if I just woke up and discovered it was all a bad dream. A very bad dream.

‘There,’ he raised the muzzle towards the wall mounted TV screen,’ that’s how I know.’

I looked up. ‘What the hell are you talking about? Have you been watching too many Clint Eastwood movies again?’

He lifted the beret to scratch behind his ear then walked over to the TV. Reaching up, he used his fingers to pry loose a small object from the top edge of the screen. Then he handed it to me.

‘A bug?’ I squinted, carefully handling the tiny black object. This was something new. I hadn’t seen the likes of it before, not that I was really up on this type of technology. Jill was the one with the intel on this subject. Bloody Jill.

He shook his head. ‘A camera,’ he smiled, ‘I placed it there on my last visit.’

My mouth gaped. I couldn’t believe my ears. This was getting weirder by the minute. ‘You did? But how...why...I don’t ...’

‘You’re not the only smart arse in the family, young fella.’ He slapped me on the back. ‘I was a security guard for years before I retired, remember? And it’s amazing what you can buy on the internet these days.’

My head was in a haze. I contemplated the drinks cabinet then decided against it. I needed to clear my thoughts, not dull them further.

'So I know all about your latest fiasco,' Dad said, taking a seat on the lounge sofa and laying the rifle across his bony knees. 'Poor Yolanda. That was a mighty surprise that one. I spilt my pumpkin soup catching her sudden demise. Though it was very clever how the 'cleaners', he used his fingers to symbolise quotation marks, 'set everything right again. They were damn quick, and very thorough, so I see.' He patted the cushions and stamped a boot on the polished floorboards.

I slumped down beside him. 'But why?' I waved the miniature camera in front of his eyes.'

'I was worried about you Jack. You're always the one to get into mischief. You needed to be checked up on.'

This didn't make any sense at all, but I was too fatigued to follow the thought through. 'How long...?'

'Long enough.' He let out a huge sigh, 'Shame about Jill. I came as quick as I could after I saw those thugs drag her away. I always liked her you know. She reminded me of that Jane Fonda - when she was younger of course.' He chuckled. 'Very feisty, and always got my blood pumpin'. Jane I mean, not Jill...though...'

'Dad!' I interrupted before he told me anything else about Jill, or come to think of it, about her and I. I hoped to God he hadn't watched us all the time. I mean to say, the bedroom wasn't the only place we, you know. Actually the shag pile rug on this floor was a favourite place to, well, shag. Oh shit. Bile rose upwards.

'C'mon son,' he slapped my thigh, 'no time for lollygagging. We'd better get this show on the road.' He stood, gripping the rifle like a commando ready for action.

'What show, and what road?' I said, taking the rifle from him and making sure it wasn't loaded. Yep, it was. Oh shit. 'You're not supposed to have this,' I cried, 'I thought you'd handed it in years ago.'

'What they don't know, won't hurt 'em,' he grinned, thumbing his nose.

I wasn't sure about that. A lethal weapon in crazed hands leads to no good, that's for sure. I removed the cartridge and placed it in my pocket for safekeeping.

Dad put his hand inside his jacket and drew out a set of keys. 'Well then, want to go for a ride?'

I recognised them. They weren't his car keys. They were for his boat. A sweet little 28 footer, a Sea Ray Cruiser which was moored at the Noosa Marina.

'We could drift away until things cooled over. Jill'll be alright. She has those goons and that mafia king hot on her tail. Her uncle isn't it?'

'Yeah,' I nodded, 'So it seems.'

'Well let it run its course. We can lay low and do some fishing and you can think about other ways to earn your keep, other than all this illicit stuff you've been dealing with. Maybe you could dabble in some online dating sites, I hear they're pretty popular.' He gave me a wink.

'Bloody hell, I'm not looking for anyone else, Dad.'

'What? That's not what I hear. Aren't you a single mum with two kids looking for companionship etc, etc?'

I gaped, 'How did you...?'

He pointed to his chest, 'Single dad with two kids, new to the game.'

'That was you? Bloody hell!'

'Havin' a bit of fun, I was,' he danced a little jig, 'I knew it was you.'

He did? That's it. I was ready to throw in the towel, throw in the sponge, through in the whole bloody sink. How blind was I? I didn't know my girlfriend, didn't know my father. Hell, I didn't even think I knew myself.

'Well, what'll it be Jack?' Dad said, holding the boat keys aloft in one hand and the rifle in the other.

Chapter 6

I looked away from both options and headed for the drinks cabinet. No, The bathroom first – I needed to throw up *and* I needed one of Jill's pills and *then* I needed a couple of drinks and a little lay down.

Dad tapped on the toilet door after I'd finished alternately gagging and sobbing into the bowl. I wiped my mouth with really soft floral toilet paper (apparently aloe vera impregnated), nice choice Jill and flushed away the vestiges of whatever meal that had been. After splashing a little water on my face from the hand-basin, I opened the door and brushed wordlessly by Dad, who still had the keys and rifle in his hands.

I poured a healthy scotch and used it to wash down the tiny blue pill I'd taken from Jill's medicine cabinet.

"So, what do you reckon Son"?

"Dad, I think you should take the boat out for a spin and dump that rifle somewhere outside the river-mouth, before you get us both into a shit load of trouble from either the police or one of the million fucking gangs I seem to be tied up with! Please, go. I need time to think".

"OK son, if that's the way you want to play it. Just remember I'm here if you need me".

As he walked towards the door I glanced over to the TV; he'd put the camera back.

Snatching the tiny camera from the TV frame I tossed it to him – "No more spying either".

"I wasn't spying, I was protecting you" he said with just the right amount of hurt in his voice.

"Thanks but I'll be fine from here on. I'll call you in a couple of days, OK"?

And he walked out; I poured another drink and stretched out on the 'Yolanda' couch. Obviously I was going to have to find a new place to live and I will probably never order pizza again.

If I was to move, where would I go? Who would I tell? Who would I take ? Would I take anybody?

Maybe Dad had said one smart thing and as I succumbed to alcohol and mogodon, the thought remained and blossomed – Jill had her uncle Vincent to look

after her, he was going to sort this out one way or another and I certainly had zero input into deciding the outcome”.

I awoke to a typical Sunshine Coast morning – sunshine and traffic hum – and with a decision firmly ensconced in my mind..... I’m doing a runner!

I hastily packed my clothes into my backpack, and loaded my laptop and a couple of games into a satchel, the rest of the computer gear I packed into a box, taped it closed and addressed it to my cousin Rebecca in Horesham. I’d send her an email and explain, once I got myself sorted.

An hour and a half later I was on a bus headed for Brisbane. Free WiFi on busses is amazing and before anybody could say “Where the fuck has Jack gone”, I had a ticket to New Zealand and was already chatting to a pretty clever gamer from Christchurch, who had some interesting business ideas. Happy days.