

CLEAR TO THE HORIZON

DAVE WARNER



FREMANTLE PRESS

CHAPTER 1

I remember the 22nd of October 1999 better than I remember most days. Most are a jumble. Hell, nowadays most years are like rubber bands left too long in a drawer. When you're not looking, they mutate into one sticky glob. Ninety-nine stood out partly because of the Prince song, 'Tonight I'm going to party like it's nineteen ninety-nine'. But here was '99 and there was very little partying to be had in the domain of Snowy Lane. There was a lot of shit going down in Timor. Pro-Indonesian militants from the west side of the island were raiding the recently autonomous east. They wanted things how they used to be. Don't we all? I crave for the body of my football days when I could run and twist and turn but twenty years on this was my exercise: floating on my back in the Indian Ocean, a stone's throw from the Ocean Beach Hotel, looking up at a timeless sky and the belly of the occasional big transport heading out to sea. I would right myself and gaze towards Rottneest Island. The silhouette of warships had grown more frequent these last few months. In my youth I might have found it exciting but now I didn't want war, I didn't want anything messing up my life which was – apart from being unable to twist and turn with my youthful exuberance – better than it had ever been. Business was good. There was just the right amount of employees stealing from their work and just the right amount of suspicious spouses to keep a private detective employed, with enough free hours to kick back. This was me relaxing, salt water licking my ears, the smell of seaweed close and fresh. There was a bunch of us, probably fifteen all up but usually around six to eight, mainly guys, one or two women, who would find ourselves half-asleep at the beach when the sun was still pale. We'd swim from North Cottesloe down to Cottesloe around the pylon and back, maybe two to three k,

I suppose. After that we'd dry off and trudge up the stairs to the café above, share a coffee and toast before taking off back to our real lives.

Most mornings I made the ritual. When I had a job on I sometimes had to skip but there's nothing like a swim to get me going. The reason I remember this day, it was a Friday, was because on Sunday, there would be – as Prince predicted – a party: Grace's first birthday. We weren't planning anything fancy, just a play in the local park with other kids and parents from the playgroup Natasha had clubbed in with. My job was to blow up balloons and cook sausages, Tash would bake cupcakes. After Grace was born, Tash had taken five weeks off full-time work. A smart move because that took her into Christmas and New Year, which all Australians know, is a virtual holiday. Goannas shut down in winter, for us it's summer – aestivate, I think is the word I remember from sweaty classrooms when a single ceiling fan did its best to push our collective BO around while a male teacher in short-sleeved nylon shirt, long socks and comb-over tried to teach science. From the Melbourne Cup in November till Australia Day at the end of January, we're occupying space but the only work being done is planning the Christmas party. Tash's workload was thin enough to manage from home while taking care of the baby, so in that regard I was off the hook most of the time. Tash does some editorial thing with a style magazine called, wait for it ... *Swysh*. Yes, that's how it's spelled. There's a lot of drivel about which coverings are in this year, a lot of recipes, a lot of stuff on weight loss. The two biggest interests for her generation seem to be food and how to make it look like you've never eaten it. I should have sold up my detective agency, bought a pizza parlour and a gym.

On October 22, 1999, Natasha's thirtieth birthday was around the corner but she hadn't aged in all the years I'd known her: not back then, not now. For a long time it was like that for me. Every day I'd stare in the mirror to shave, and my face looked no different than it had ten years earlier. Then Grace was born, and overnight I had character lines and my whole take on the world changed and ships on the horizon and low-flying transports were no longer exciting or interesting but disturbing.

Perth's October is as reliable as your parents' old Holden. This one was no exception. The sun was warm, not fierce, the flowers smelled good, tiny creatures hummed, the final field was almost decided for the Cup, and the bacon sandwich they made at the café, while overpriced, was good quality. I often idly wondered what it would be like to live around here instead

of where I did, inner-city north among retired market gardeners and Vietnamese. Very pleasant, I guessed, but knew, even on our combined income, I was dreaming. Former leviathan businessman Barry Dunn was said to inhabit an expensive apartment across the road and to frequent the café but our paths hadn't crossed for years. In fact I'd only seen him once since the funeral of his mistress, my former lover. A psycho rich kid had cut off her head; I'd wound up with broken ribs and become a five-minute hero exposing corrupt police and the wealthy they protected. Then I'd slipped back to anonymity. Dunn had taken a dunking on some big international plays, his ex-wife got the mansion, his racehorses had to be sold. The upstart Dunn would never get back to where he had been; the captains of industry were determined to keep him a cabin boy.

The grass isn't always greener. I had Tash and Grace, enough money to pay the bills, the ocean and a tasty bacon sandwich, so whatever envy came my way was fleeting. That day I sat back and sipped my coffee, grabbed an abandoned *West* off the table next to me. The headlines were all Timor. Was Indonesia going to become more involved, send troops back over the border? Consensus was it was covertly already provisioning the militia and this might escalate. There was an article about how our computers were going to stop working on New Years Day – I could only hope – and another about the Olympics. In a year's time they would be on in Sydney. Sports journos were tipping record medal counts, naysayers were claiming stadiums wouldn't be adequate. This is what I remember of October 22, 1999. Later the date would be burned into my brain because it was the last time I swam without a shadow looming over me, and I don't mean a troop transport.

About forty hours on, Emily Virtue, a twenty-year-old woman, said goodbye to her friends at a Claremont nightclub, went out to get a taxi home, and disappeared. Claremont was one suburb inland from where I sat that morning. It was the heartland of the city's rich and powerful whose kids carried on charmed lives around private schools and the university, a few Dolce & Gabbana clip-clops south of where twenty years earlier Mr Gruesome snatched the young female victim I later found.

In 1979, I was a young cop. That was an epoch away, before mobile phones and CDs, when there were still drive-ins and bands like Loaded Dice filled the pubs six nights a week. But nobody was thinking about that precedent, even though Emily's disappearance was out of character. The family were beside themselves; the police, I knew, would be taking it very

seriously. They'd be looking at boyfriends, perverts, anybody who might have held a grudge but these dreadful things happen not infrequently and Emily's disappearance just buzzed in the background of my life, another nasty piece of news that bobbed up on the TV during sessions while I tried to feed Grace yoghurt.

...

Things changed just after Australia Day as Perth grudgingly went back to work disappointed to find the computers hadn't stopped.

I'd headed into the office. A year earlier I'd finally shelled out for an air conditioner but otherwise it was just a slightly cooler version of the same crappy upstairs space I'd rented for fourteen years. I was writing up a report on an unfaithful husband. The wife was sure he was having an affair. She'd paid me to tail him over Christmas because she knew he'd bought a bracelet and suspected it wasn't for her. She'd even offered me triple rates for Christmas Day. Tash told me to work, she wasn't up to much anyway and the money would be useful. I advised the wife to wait and see if he gave her the bracelet. He ran a printing operation out Osborne Park way and for the nine days I'd be on his case he was flat out, working even Christmas Eve, long after all his employees had gone home. I ticked each one off as they departed. None came back, no dalliance there. He finally shut up shop around 10.00. I followed him home, no stop-offs. I was starting to think the wife was mistaken. She rang me at 9.30 Christmas morning to say he'd given her a basket full of beauty products but no bracelet. He'd also warned her he'd have to head into work right after the extended family Christmas lunch. This, she was sure, was when he'd give the lover the present he'd bought. I grabbed a couple of prawns from what was to have been our lunch platter, then roasted in my car in downtown Dianella imagining those along the street enjoying turkey, sparkling wine and traditional plum pudding. Around 2.00 in the afternoon I watched the target head out and followed.

There was little cover Christmas Day but it's not the day you're going to be looking for a tail either. He didn't go to his work. Instead he drove to a house in Yokine, got out and let himself in. There were no other vehicles in the place. About twenty minutes later a familiar car pulled into the driveway. The car was one that had been at the extended family gathering. A woman got out. At first I thought it was my client, same age, same slim build and, from a distance, same features. It crossed my mind

she was going to confront him and something horrible could happen. But as I was about to jump out and stop her I saw it wasn't my client at all but her sister. Instead of getting out, I took photos. After she'd keyed herself in I crossed over to the house and scanned for a clear window shot but there was nowhere that was not covered by a blind. I went back to my car and waited. Seventy minutes later he emerged. There was no kiss on the doorstep unfortunately. I followed him home and reported my findings next day to the anxious wife. Of course she was beside herself: her sister was a slut, her husband an arsehole. She was going to take him for everything he was worth. I handed her the photos and promised her a report in due course. My fee was paid by cheque six days later but there had been no further communication from her. That isn't unusual. Clients often don't want to be reminded of such humiliation. Then last week she'd called me out of the blue.

'How are things?' I asked, cautious. 'I was a bit worried.'

'Things are fine. It was all a mistake.'

That pricked my interest. I asked her how so.

'Tony told me he knew I'd hired you.'

'What? I never ...'

'He said he followed me to your office and guessed what I was up to. He decided to teach me a lesson. He had my sister get involved. She'd picked the bracelet out for me and he was going to give it to me but was angry I didn't trust him, so he made out like something was going on. I was stupid. You told me he worked all that week, right?'

You had to hand it to the guy. 'And your sister backed him up?'

'Yes. But it's all fixed. I even got the bracelet.'

'Okay. I'm glad it all worked out.' What else could I say? 'I still need to write up a report.'

'That's fine, I don't need it.'

'I'll do it anyway, fulfil my part of the contract. You can burn it or toss it in a bin.'

'Whatever. Don't bust a gut.'

And she'd hung up. So here I was in the early days of the new millennium doing useless work in a crappy office. My phone rang. I answered, still writing.

'Lane.'

'Snowy Lane?'

Not many people call me that any more – footballers, cops I used to

work with. His voice sounded too young to be somebody from my past.

‘Who is this?’

‘Snowy, it’s Dan Husson from *The West Australian*.’

Doubtful he was a potential client. Almost certainly some young journo wanting to quiz me about the Gruesome case. Every few years somebody rings me. They always get the same answer: I have nothing to say.

‘This is about Gruesome?’

‘Yes. You’re certain you got the right guy?’

This was a new tack.

‘Goodbye, Dan.’

‘Wait. Have the police spoken to you yet?’

My brain was entirely on the phone conversation now.

‘About what?’

‘You know about Emily Virtue?’

‘Yes.’

‘Another young woman has just gone missing. She’s eighteen. Caitlin O’Grady. She was at the same nightclub, Autostrada, left to get a taxi.’

I felt numb. ‘When?’ I said.

‘Saturday night, early Sunday. You see why I’m asking?’

Yes, I saw. The Mr Gruesome killings had been perpetrated by two young psychos, Steve Compton and Joey Johnson. I’d been told Compton killed Johnson and I had no reason to doubt it because the person who told me that was Compton’s father, before he shot his own son dead and turned the gun on himself.

‘These murders aren’t the work of Gruesome. Compton and Johnson were responsible and they’re dead.’

‘Johnson’s body was never recovered.’

‘Listen, mate, you write whatever story you like but this isn’t Gruesome. That ended years ago.’

‘Maybe there was somebody else? A third party?’

‘Run your theory by the police, I’m sure they’ll be glad for the insight.’

When you are touched by evil, it leaves deep within you a trace like some dormant virus waiting to be reactivated into full-blown dread. That phone call was all it had taken. I felt sick. I didn’t know enough to guess whether this was some copycat, or another psycho striking out on his own. I was certain however that I had nailed Gruesome, that Johnson and Compton were dead and that they were the only people responsible. I wanted to leave the whole thing, to go back to my mundane case of the

unfaithful printer. I wanted to forget that the world could be this ugly, even in the little nook in which I had chosen to live. In the blink of an eye, Grace would be one of these young women, out there enjoying herself with friends. I wanted the world to be safe for her to do that. My heart bled for the parents of the missing girls. Somehow I felt a failure all over again. Early in the Gruesome case I thought I'd helped catch the killer, only to find I'd been deceived. I'd regrouped, gone back, caught the real Gruesome. But you can't slay the darkness of the human soul. Victories are only reprieves before the next battle.

I reached for the phone. George Tacich was my link. He was now the top Homicide dog. I guessed he would be running the case. Funny, I hadn't even thought of him before in connection with Emily Virtue. We'd got on well in the Gruesome case and I'd lined him up a good job as an investigator with the corruption team investigating political skulduggery but he'd decided to go back to Homicide. From time to time I'd seen him on TV but it had been about four years since we'd spoken. That had been at his bowling club. I'd happened by while he was at the bar and we jawed on for a good hour or so without feeling obliged to follow up. Now I called the main switchboard and asked to be put through to Homicide but the woman on the other end was having none of that. I left my name and contacts, told her I was personal friend of Inspector Tacich and asked her to get a message to him to call me when he was able. I was guessing that could be a long while. Assuming the police were called about Caitlin's disappearance sometime on the Monday morning, it meant they would be just over the forty-eight-hour window now. Everybody would have pedal to the metal, the adrenalin stinking up the case room. Most wouldn't have slept more than an hour or two. I finished the report but it was even more meaningless now. I stuck it out in the office for just under an hour then drove home because I wanted to see my wife and hold my daughter and protect her forever from those who would do her harm.

...

Grace was driving her mother nuts. Tash was trying to eke out the last few days she had free to get anything meaningful done at home before work roared back to life, so I was welcomed with open arms. I put Grace in a papoose and walked to the local park. She sat in the sandpit and played with rubber Disney figurines. It helped.

Caitlin's disappearance led the evening news. The assistant commissioner took the questions. No sign of George Tacich, too busy I guessed. I dropped any expectation of him calling. Then around 10.15, the phone rang and it was him. Natasha had long hit the sheets, exhausted.

'I won't ask how it's going,' I said.

'Good, because we've got sweet FA.'

George knew me well enough to know that anything he said was staying zipped. I told him about Husson's call. He knew right off why I'd wanted to talk.

'Don't worry, Snow. For a start, if they are dead, he's not dumping the bodies. I don't see anything similar in the MO, not to mention it's been twenty years with no activity in-between.'

Perth's population had grown by probably twenty percent since those days. This was a psycho for the next generation. I asked one question to reassure myself.

'You spoken to Listach?'

'Yeah. He runs a restaurant in Bali now.' Franz Listach had been the celebrity shrink who had been treating and hiding Steve Compton. 'He confirmed what he told us twenty years ago. Steve Compton killed Joey Johnson and there was nobody else involved.' There had never been any benefit in Listach lying about Johnson. In fact the opposite was true. I breathed a little easier.

'How's Natasha?'

'She's great. We've got a little girl, Grace.'

'Best times. Don't waste them. Sorry mate, I have to go.'

'Good luck.'

'Thanks, we need it.'

That night I slept soundly. I didn't even hear Natasha get up to feed the baby. Next morning I swam, went to work and posted the report on the philandering printer. Like everybody else, I followed the case of the missing young women through the news. Husson's piece came out and created a brief flurry but I'd already lit out of town. Tash had given me the green light and I'd driven up to Geraldton to stay with an old footy teammate who ran a cray-boat. George Tacich was on the news a couple of times, eerily reminiscent of a coach whose team was welded to the bottom of the ladder, talking up inconsequential 'positives'. The case was stalled. They had no body. That was a huge problem. I ended my short vacation, went back to work, nobody bothered me about the case, Grace settled

into a better sleeping pattern. By the time winter crept into our beds, life in Perth was almost normal. Women were still careful about waiting for taxis alone; Claremont's night scene was skinnier than it had been but not anorexic.

And then Jessica Scanlan disappeared after drinking with friends in the same area. Australia-wide the story went ballistic. My phone rang constantly, reporters wanting a comment. In his rare TV appearances Tacich looked strained. Three young women, who all had attended the same school, vanished without a trace, a modern-day Hanging Rock. The city was petrified. The lack of any bodies stymied the press from dubbing these serial killings. Husson tried valiantly to tag the unknown perpetrator Ghost of Gruesome. Those seeking to spin the events as evidence of white slavery had even less success. But we all knew this was real and that unpleasant truth covered the city like invisible smog.

Yet, not quite a year on from when it had all started, here I was, seemingly unchanged, sitting on the terrace of my regular North Cott café with a view clear out to the horizon chatting with my swimming mates about the Olympic Games opening ceremony that we would all be watching that night. The women were excited about the prospect of Farnsy and Livvy. Living vicariously through Grace, my viewing highlight promised to be the Bananas in Pyjamas. One by one people drifted away but I had a light day ahead and was studying the paper and the chances of gold medals for our swimmers when Craig Drummond loomed alongside me. Craig was around fifty, slightly paunchy, pretty quiet. Even though he'd been swimming in our group for close on two years, I didn't know him very well. I believed he was an accountant or something in finance. We'd exchanged morning pleasantries many times, the temperature of the water, footy results but not much more.

'Mind if I join you?'

'Sure.'

I pulled out a chair. He looked slightly uncomfortable and even before he sat I had the awful premonition he was going to ask me something about discovering whether his wife was unfaithful. I would have to beg off. This was my one grotto.

'You're a private detective.'

Here it came.

'Yes, mate, but if this is about work...'

'I know it's not the right situation but my friend is out of his brain.'

Gerry O'Grady. His daughter Caitlin is one of the missing girls.'

He didn't have to tell me which missing girls. 'Oh. It's my worst fear. And mine's not two yet.'

'He's worried there's no advance in the case. He and his wife, Michelle, they're like ghosts. They can't work, they can't think of anything of else.'

'It'd be the worst thing. The worst thing. But I know the cop heading up the case. He's as good as they come.'

'That's the worry. If he can't find anything, what other cop's going to? Gerry wants somebody else to take a look. In case there's anything the police missed. You cracked Gruesome. You're the obvious choice.'

I could have said it was impossible, that I'd been out of the loop too long, that George Tacich was a friend and this would jeopardise that friendship. But all I could think of was, what if it was my Grace and I was the one asking.

'Okay. I'll meet with them, see if I think I can offer anything. I don't need money.'

'I know what your fee is. There's a group of us who'll pay. I don't want you out of pocket.'

'It's not necessary.'

'I'm his friend. I want to do this for him. And you might need assistance. I've got staff, office space, vehicles. They're at your disposal. Thanks, Snowy.'

He held out his hand and I shook it.

'You want another coffee?'

I suspected I was going to need a lot more than one.