

Chapter 1

SHE SAT IN the car, watching the house. It was an ordinary sort of house, the sort you wouldn't notice driving along Swan Street. A small, red-brick cottage built in the nineteen twenties by the look of it. There was a lamp above the front door and three doorbells on a brass plate on a wall. No verandah, just a porch. On it stood two terracotta pots, one sporting a fuchsia bush and the other was what looked like a small cumquat.

Her name was Anastacia Babchuk. Her friends called her Chook, but not to her face.

She'd been waiting since before seven. One man had left soon after, walking down the road to a small supermarket. A family business that could afford to survive if you had another source of income. Especially income on which you paid no tax.

She checked her watch again. Ten past eight. The watch was encased in leather, for protection if things got rough. She'd once been a kick-boxer, a State champion. Didn't do much kicking now, just hitting when necessary. The car was a rented Holden. Nothing exceptional about that. Holdens were everywhere in Melbourne in 1996.

Something about the house puzzled her.

It had a scrubbed look, as if recently steam-cleaned. The garden was perfect. Real money must have been spent on this house, the kind of money that didn't like to talk about itself. Chook had seen enough. She moved on, parked about thirty yards past the house and used her mirrors. Waiting for the other son to appear.

She knew this area.

As a kid, she'd lived in the next suburb out, Burnley. In an old cottage, perhaps one of the originals. Just four rooms and a lean-to at the back for a kitchen and a laundry. No front verandah, not even a porch. There had been a verandah many years ago, but it'd become so rusty it had to be pulled down. Today you wouldn't have looked twice at the house if you'd been walking past, except perhaps to wonder who the hell would live in a dump like that? Just she and her father after her mother died. Until she could take it no longer, the silence. The not-speaking. Only a grunt now and then as he ate his *borsch*. Every night goddamned *borsch*.

He was a Ukrainian, who'd arrived in Australia in 1959. Got a job as a storeman in a warehouse in South Melbourne. Arrived with a wife, who worked as a cleaner at the Children's Hospital. They had a daughter in 1963. That daughter was now sitting in a rented car in Swan Street, Richmond, waiting to kill a man.

A tram went by. Then a police car crept up behind, silently and respectfully. She smiled to herself. A young bloke in uniform got out, walked up to her window, tapped on it. Slowly she rolled it down.

'Something wrong, Constable?'

'Would you mind telling me what you are doing here, sir?'

'Someone complain about a strange bloke sitting in a car? Outside their place? For over an hour?'

'Please answer the question, sir. What are you doing here?'

'That's none of your business.'

The local cop didn't like that. 'Would you mind getting out of the car, sir?'

Chook stared at him. 'You want me to get out of this car?'

'That's right, sir. If you don't mind?'

'What if I do mind?'

The cop tensed. He was a one-striper. Looked to be in his early twenties.

'Just get out of the car, please, sir.'

'And what if I don't?'

'I'm going to have to arrest you.'

'You're going to arrest me?'

'That's right.'

'Why?'

'Disobeying a lawful order.'

Chook smiled. She was enjoying this.

'Let me show you something.'

Slipped her left hand inside her jacket. The young cop jumped, his right hand dropping to his sidearm.

'Relax, sonny.' She pulled out her ID, complete with photo. Showed it to him. 'Ever seen one of these?'

He peered at it. 'Federal Police?'

'That's right.'

'You're an agent?'

'Right again.'

'Level three? What's that mean?'

'Sergeant to you.'

'You're a sergeant?'

'Do I look like some snotty-nosed probationer?'

'No, sir.'

'No, ma'am,' she said.

'What's that?'

'I'm a girl.'

'You're a girl?'

‘You don’t believe me?’

‘They said a man.’

‘You want me to get out and drop my pants? In the middle of Swan Street?’

‘No, sir. I mean, No, ma’am.’

‘Satisfied?’

‘Sorry about that, Sarge.’ He looked around. ‘Doing a stakeout, are you?’

‘None of your business.’

‘Just trying to be helpful.’

‘Piss off, sonny. You’re spoiling my view.’

The young cop went back to his car, sat there for a while, no doubt reporting in. Then drove off, just as slowly as he’d arrived. Chook watch him go. Word would soon get around, about a big blond Federal bitch in an unmarked car watching a house in Richmond. She wasn’t worried. No-one would know which was the target.

She relaxed, tapping the steering wheel. And waited.

In the old days, she’d walk all the way into the city, a skinny girl nudging six feet, looking in shop windows. Looking for a job. Never got one. Too tall, too ugly. She’d frighten the customers. Since then, Swan Street had been tarted up, old stores replaced by fashion shops and beauty salons and fast-food joints, but the buildings still had their Victorian corniches and their faded pride. Back in the gold-rush days, Melbourne had been the third biggest city in the Empire. Richmond now smelt worn-out, like an old shoe you should have got rid of years ago. Chook could still smell the Rosella factory, smell the tomato sauce and the pickle. And the poverty of all the years between.

One day, passing the White Swan pub on the way home, a short bloke, standing by a Harley Davidson and holding two glasses, had said: ‘G’day, Lofty, feel like a beer?’ He’d bought the spare for a mate, who’d vanished when the police had turned up. She’d never touched liquor in her life, but she’d accepted. Sipped slowly, glancing at the Harley.

‘Nice bike,’ she’d said.

‘Yeah,’ he’d said.

‘That yours?’

‘Yeah, wanta go for a burn?’

‘I might,’ she’d said. ‘Then again, I mightn’t.’

‘Yeah? Really?’ He thought about it, hopefully. ‘Ever been rooted?’

‘Not that I remember.’

His name was Stumpy Watson. Walked with one leg shorter than the other. Result of a car accident years ago. Not his fault, got a big payout. That’s why he could afford a Harley. And that’s how she’d started riding with bikies. And got into a lot of trouble, especially with the cops. The usual reasons—drugs, booze, common assault, habituating with known criminals. Things were different now. She was a cop herself, over six feet and a lot heavier. And a lot more decisive.

She was going to kill a man, if he were at home. His name was Salvatore Pisano.

If she did, no-one would give a damn. Just one Mafia boss rubbing out another Mafia boss, the local constabulary would say. Let them kill each other. Pisano was more than a boss. It was said he ran things in Victoria. If so, he was the boss of bosses.

Chook looked at her watch again. Twenty past eight.

This could go on all day. The other son might not come out. Maybe he was having a day off? Maybe doing the washing? Or the cleaning? For his father who was, according to local intelligence, seventy-nine and bedridden. His wife was seventy-one, Giuseppina her name. Back in Griffith she was called *La Donna*, the Lady. She did the talking, because her husband was—

Something was happening.

A car was backing out from a garage behind the cottage, an old but neat Fiat. Youngish man at the wheel. Not quite middle-aged, maybe early forties. Reversed onto the street, then turned the Fiat’s nose around and drove off along Swan Street. Disappeared around a corner into Church Street.

She did a final check in her mirrors.

A hundred yards behind, an old man was walking a dog, the dog stopping every few yards to sniff and pee. The man was reading a newspaper folded into tight columns. Wearing thick glasses, looked as blind as a bat. On the other side of the street, two men were loading a van with two big words on its side: Move Yourself. They wouldn't be interested in her.

Chook patted the automatic under her left shoulder. Didn't expect to have to use it. Smothering should do the job. The Colt was just for show, in case anyone wanted to argue. She studied the house again, still worried about the three doorbells.

Some smelly, old Dago in there had ordered the hit on Evelyn Crowley. And Polly Politis had died trying to protect her. Chook had killed the hitman, and now she'd get rid of the bastard who'd sent him. But Pisano was close to death. She had to reach him before he croaked it. Had to have the satisfaction of killing him. No-one in this house was going to complain if she did. They knew the rules: You kill my brother, I kill yours. You rape my sister, I rape yours. No need to bring the police into this.

She got out and closed the door, waited for another tram to pass.

Then walked straight across to the gate.

Chapter 2

THERE WAS NO gate. Just a gap in a low brick wall about eighteen inches high. She walked up to the front door. The bell buttons still worried her. Then she realised—it was a safeguard. You had to know the combination. Which to press and in what order. She pressed the top one. Nothing happened. Pressed the second, the same. Then the third, no result. So, she pressed the first and the third together, which seemed to be the last thing any stranger would think of. Then she pressed the second. That was it. The door opened, just an inch or two. Held by a brass chain.

One eye looked out at him.

An old woman's eye, an inquisitive eye. A frightened eye.

'Oh, hi there,' Chook said. 'Salvatore? Is he at home by any chance?'

The eye blinked. 'Salvatore?'

'Yeah, Salvatore Pisano. Doesn't he live here?'

'What you want? I never see you before.'

'I want to see Salvatore. He told me the combination.'

'Salvatore, he tell you?'

'Yeah, I stuffed it up, as usual. Had to try them all.'

'Who you?'

‘Liam,’ she said. ‘Liam from the old town, you know? Griffith? Up north? Used to work for him. Back when I was a kid.’

‘You kid?’

‘I was then, pickin’ lemons. He used to call me Lemon Groves.’

‘Lemon?’

‘Lemon Groves, that’s me. My real name’s Liam Groves. It’s sort of Irish. How is the old bastard?’

‘*Bastardo?*’

‘Yeah. Gee, I sure would like to see Sally again. Used to do jobs for him. You know what I mean?’ She patted the Colt under the jacket.

‘You want for to see Salvatore?’

‘If that’s no bother?’

‘Salvatore, he sick.’

‘Sick? Is he? Gee, that’s bad. I’m sorry. Could I see him for just a minute?’

‘No, no, no.’

‘Just one minute?’

‘He not here.’

‘Salvatore’s not at home?’

‘He sick in hospital.’

‘In hospital? Gee, which one?’

The old lady was trying to close the door. Chook had a hand on it.

‘Which hospital?’

‘You go now, please.’

‘Gee, I’ve come all this way.’

‘No, no, no—’

She stepped right back. Then hit the door with her full weight, fifteen stones.

The chain snapped. The door flew open, knocking the old lady flying.

‘Your name Giuseppina?’

‘*Si,*’ she said.

Chook seized her by the neck. ‘Where is Salvatore?’

‘*Che?*’

Chook kicked the door shut. Shook her up. ‘Your name Giuseppina Pisano?’

‘*Che?*’

‘Spikida English?’

She nodded, terrified.

‘Where is Salvatore Pisano?’

Afraid she was going to die. She had heart trouble, her blood pressure bad. Now going up and up, bang, bang, bang...

‘Where is Salvatore?’

She tried to say, he sick, he no speak. Nothing much came out. Her eyes were wide with fear. Chook pulled out the Colt, poked her in the chest. ‘I’m talkin’ to you, stupid. Where is he? Where’s your fucking husband?’

‘Sal—Sal—’

‘In bed? Don’t give me no shit. You got him in here? Which room?’

She was choking.

‘Come!’ Chook said. Dragging the woman, almost lifting her off the floor.

Giuseppina Pisano had a screwed-up little face, wrinkled, lined, leathery, spotted with age, hook-nosed and hook-eyed, squinting up at her attacker. Frightened someone had squealed. Some deal gone wrong. What had she done? Salvatore had told her to make the decisions. Never say she made them. Nobody’d like that, a woman of her age, who’s not the brightest and not good at being authoritative. Not good at sounding like Salvatore, even though he no longer speaks.

Every day she’d telephone Guido Terracini his shop in Chapel Street and ask him what she got to do and Guido say nothing. Guido, he just bookkeeper, he don’t know nothing. But Guido, he’s scared. He’s plenty scared like her, like everyone in Melbourne. Who gonna be next *capo dei capi*? Who gonna get killed?

She was dragged from room to room, protesting.

‘Salvatore? He no here. He in hospital.’

‘What’s wrong with him?’

‘He sick, he got the stroke, he dying.’

‘What hospital?’

The woman was wriggling and gasping. Rapidly changing colour, now red, now brown, now blue. Fear rattling her eyes.

‘You don’t know? You’d better know fuckin’ well quick. Otherwise, I’m gonna have to make your eyes pop. You know what I mean?’

‘Who you? Who you?’

Chook stuck the Colt under her chin. Looking in one room then the next.

‘Who am I? I’m just a guy. I do jobs. Know what I mean? I do ’em quick. No fuckin’ around. I should be out of here by now. Understand?’

‘Somebody, he send you?’

‘Yeah, somebody.’

‘Who send you?’

‘Who send me? Somebody you know, sweetheart.’

‘Who I know?’

Chook lifted her by the neck, so her feet were almost off the floor. Only the toes touching. Held her close, almost nose to nose, stared into her eyes.

‘Silvano,’ she said.

‘Silvano? Silvano?’

‘Silvano Cosco.’

‘Silvano? Angelo boy? Angelo, he dead.’

‘Yeah, Angelo’s boy. Silvano says Salvatore did it, killed his fuckin’ father. Shot him sixteen times.’

‘No, no, no. Salvatore, he no do that thing. He good man. Why? Why?’

‘Don’t ask me, lady. Not my problem. I’m just doin’ a job. Already taken the money and I’m not givin’ it back, understand? And I’m runnin’ out of time. Where the fuck is Salvatore Pisano?’

‘No, no, please!’ She was spluttering something unintelligible.

‘What’s that?’

‘He gone rally.’

‘What?’

‘He gone rally.’

‘Rally? Rally? What’s that mean?’

Her face grey now. She went down limply. Then passed out.

When she recovered, the madman had gone. Phoned her sons and tried to tell them, but they were not available. No-one was available except Renata on the desk. She was Stephano’s wife. All Giuseppina could say was, you tell Stephano he got come home quick.

Eventually he did.

Then came the second son, Michaele, ten minutes later.

By then it was too late. Much too late.

Chook was crossing the road when it hit her. The old girl must have meant *Relais*, a place with a fancy name in Hawthorn, not far from Richmond. Just past Burnley, in fact. She knew it well enough. Her mother had died there of cancer, a year before she met Stumpy Watson. She got in the car and found the place on her mobile. Yes, they did have a Mr Pisano, but he was unable to speak. That did not matter, she said. Five minutes later she was out there.

It was a pleasant location, just off Hawthorn Road, in a side street that ran down to the river. One of the better by-ways of old Hawthorn—when it was home to bankers and owners of cash and carry stores and directors of co-operative building societies back in the nineteenth century, back before the big crash of 1893. The banks closing their doors, customers banging on doors, demanding their money. It was an old-money place, not the land of the rich, not Toorak, but it was middle-class, comfortable and nondescript. Now, new money was moving in, tradesmen’s vans parked everywhere.

There was a large sign out front: *Le Relais*, which in French means relay station, a sort of halfway house back in the old coaching days. A place where you could rest before moving on. Half way to where? You didn't need much imagination to work that out. This place was a hospice, where you might go after a serious operation. Most likely you wouldn't recover. In the old days it had been a big family mansion, extended several times since then. Nothing especially smart or new or prosperous about it. Well-kept gardens, however.

Chook went to the reception desk. A woman in uniform smiled at her.

'Can I help you?'

'Mr Pisano, please. I rang a few minutes ago.'

'Oh, yes, Mr Pisano may be asleep.'

'At this hour? It's not yet nine.'

'He sleeps a lot. He doesn't speak, you know.'

'I know. Giuseppina told me he'd had a stroke.'

'Emphysema too. All those cigarettes.'

'Gee, the poor old bugger.'

'Are you one of the family?'

'Not exactly. I used to work for him years ago. In Griffith,' Chook added.

'Griffith?'

'New South Wales.'

'You'll have to sign in, I'm afraid.'

'Yes, of course.' Chook signed, giving Lemon Groves and a false address in Griffith.

'Lemon Groves?'

'Old Sally used to call me that.'

The receptionist smiled in the way receptionists do, both warmly and modestly.

'You'll find him down there on the left. Room six.'

'Thank you very much.'

Chook went in, not seeing a man at first, only a few rumped humps in the bedclothes. Then she saw a head, rolled to one side, almost off the pillow. Mouth wide open, showing yellow teeth, some missing, a gold one to one side. His pillow was stained with pink dribble, the sheet too. Hair, thin and white. Quite handsome hair. In Chook's experience, most Italians had lovely hair, long and dark. They were good barbers too, tradesmen who knew their craft.

She went to him respectfully, bending as if to kiss him, the poor old bastard.

There was a smell in room. Not only the odours you would expect in a hospital—disinfectants and floor polish and drooping flowers. Not the smell of curtains or soft rubber soles on the polished floors. It was the smell of decrepitude. The smell of old age and old bodies and old teeth, badly cared for. All the cheese and garlic and olives and red wine. The food of the old days, the old ways. And the good times.

Pisano looked as though he'd been in Australia most of his life, probably arrived on a migrant ship soon after the war. Maybe a ship full of penniless hopefuls in the early fifties. Worked hard in a fruit shop or a grocery or on a farm and had made some money. But never enough. He'd want to be someone, have more money, have lots of children, everybody singing, everybody happy—in a country of easy pickings. No matter how much they had sent home to the old country, the old people in the crags and bluffs and the pines and rippling streams of the *Aspromonte* crags and peaks and pines and soaring eagle always wanted more.

Chook bent down close, examining that face, now at rest, breathing, choking, smelly. She'd expected to find a fat blob of a creature, but this man was not all that fat. Maybe he was not *the* fat man. But, if he'd been in bed for weeks or months, he could have wasted away. She didn't know. Perhaps Buster had been wrong. Perhaps the boss was not a fat man at all.

It didn't matter. Someone at his address had killed Polly, and that was all that mattered.

She looked as though she were going to kiss the old bastard, but she was checking his face. And his neck. There were indistinct blotches, like bruises which were not bruises but something else that comes with lying too long in bed, especially if you are old. It was a breakdown of capillaries. Large brown blotches that probably had started as red blotches. Here and there, random. As if his body didn't know where to start dying. In a few days, or weeks at most, the bodily functions would break down altogether. No matter how many times they turned him over, they could not stop the rot.

Chook was in luck. No nurse would notice any thumb prints.

She sat there, both thinking and not thinking about the job in hand.

This was the man who had ordered the hit on Evelyn Crowley, because she knew too much. The kid from Melbourne had got into the safe house in Canberra and shot first Polly because she was in the way and then Evelyn. Polly had been Anna Politis. Called herself Pollyanna, Polly for short. Anastacia was Chook, because no ignorant Australian could ever get her name right. It was Babchuk, pronounced *Babchuck*, but everyone pronounced it *Babchook*. Which drove her mad.

She'd spent weeks trying to find the hitman, some scrawny little creep on a big red dirt bike to Harry Becker's place, a farmhouse west of Wagga Wagga. Noticed the bike parked outside the gate. Had gone in and killed him. Now she was in Melbourne, sitting beside the man who'd sent him. An old man whose breath stank of decay. He was going to die soon, so what was the point of killing him?

None at all, except that she had sworn to the ghost and the spirit and the memory and the friendship of Polly Politis that she'd find him and kill him. Not only because she'd loved Polly, but because Polly had been the only woman who'd ever invited her into her own bed. Treated her like a fellow human being, a big bitch like her.

Chook didn't know what to do, so let her hands do what they liked to do.

Took his left hand in her right loosely, perhaps affectionately. Then slipped the left hand under the old man's cretaceous neck. If you happened to be passing, you might think his visitor was whispering to him. Which she was, but nothing complimentary. Nothing the dying creature would wish to hear, if he could hear at all. He must have been able to hear at home, when The Lady would pass on messages, asking for his decision. This old man was *lo capo dei capi*, the head of heads. The boss, who ran things in Melbourne.

Slowly, the hand under the scrawny neck closed, talons searching for the jugular each side. Then they went in. His eyes sprang open, not seeing but knowing. Something was going to happen. Chook watched the raddled face. It went red at first, swollen and stifled. Then blue. His mouth opened, his tongue moved, struggled. A brief cough came, like a fart from a fatalistic arse.

It took fifteen to twenty seconds. Then his face went soft and grey.

His heart had stopped.

Il capo dei capi delle famiglie era morto.