

KILL SHOT by Blair Denholm

EXCERPT

Chapter 1

The searing heat prickled, nipped and stung. Beads of moisture dribbled from his forehead, infiltrated clenched eyelids and lashes. Fluids in his aching body were heating up. Humidity crushed like a ton of lead. *Take shallow breaths; stay still to keep the core temperature down.*

Bright tropical sunlight bore through the window, combined with the ambient swelter to turn Detective Sergeant Jack Lisbon's bedroom into a torture chamber. *Remember to close the venetian blinds next time, moron. And get the air conditioner serviced.* Lying in bed now unbearable, he stood, wobbled a fraction. In his semi-delirium, he determined to take a cold shower before the Good Lord claimed him.

Lisbon tottered towards the bathroom. He rubbed his eyes softly as he went, wondered how red they'd be after last night's binge. He'd stayed more or less sober for three years with the odd gentle tumble off the wagon. Last night's call with his ex-wife had a bigger impact on him than he could have imagined. After he'd hung up the phone on Sarah, he cracked a bottle of Bundaberg Rum, intended as a gift for a colleague. He'd demolished half of it in an under an hour and headed off into the balmy night to continue the party.

At least that's how he remembered it.

Bathroom reached, he turned the cold tap on full blast, splashed water on his face and neck, over his chest and under the armpits. The shock of the cold water took his breath away. He repeated the process two times. He must have looked like a tired elephant dousing itself.

Thoughts again turned to Sarah.

Why wouldn't she let me speak to Skye?

His daughter was seven now, she needed contact with her father. Jack loved and missed her achingly. He'd turned his life around full circle. From alcoholic bent cop to paragon of virtue. Kept his ugly busted nose clean and earned rapid promotion, in a foreign country if you please.

What was the point of Sarah's bloody-minded recalcitrance? She and the kid were a million miles away from him, far from his *destructive* influence, safely tucked away in their council flat in Peckham, South London. What harm would there have been in chatting with his daughter, for heaven's sake? He was at his wit's end with the situation and had no idea how to get Sarah to see reason. Constantly contacting her on the phone or Internet could be deemed stalking if she made a complaint. The last thing he needed was trouble with the job. It took four years to settle into life in Australia, now at last he was starting to feel at home. *Don't jeopardise it, Lisbon.*

He pulled aside the mould-flecked plastic shower curtain, stepped over raised tiles into the small cubicle and reached for the cold tap. Relief would be like an orgasm.

Make that a delayed orgasm.

The mobile phone on his bedside table burst into life. The ring tone was The Clash's driving punk anthem "London Calling". A reminder of the life he left behind, his beloved job, a copper with the world famous London Metropolitan Police. He retraced his steps to the bedroom, snatched at the mobile. Sweat beaded on his brow like condensation on a bottle. 'Yeah, wot?'

'Is that how a senior officer with the Queensland Police answers the phone? How long have you been in Yorkville?' Constable Ben Wilson's poorly disguised voice was chirpy as ever. Jack usually appreciated the cheeky geniality, this morning it merely aggravated his hangover.

'Long enough to know it's you on the other end, Wilson.' Jack scratched an armpit, scabbled in his coat jacket for nicotine lozenges. He popped one into his dry mouth and started sucking like a hungry baby. Headed back to the cool refuge of the bathroom. 'And watch the familiar tone, sunshine.'

'Sorry, sir.'

'Apology accepted. Bear with me one moment, will you?'

Headache worsening, Jack sat the phone down and spat the lozenge into a tissue. He fussed about in the bathroom drawers, flung little cardboard boxes, disposable razors and condoms about to reach their use-by date out of the way until he found what he needed. He picked up the phone, cradled it between neck and chin as he tore aspirin from its foil packaging, dropped two white disks into a glass of water.

'Go ahead, Wilson. Why the hell are you disturbing me? I'm not rostered on until this afternoon.'

A cough on the other end of the line followed by a gulping sound. 'Just so you know, sir, you're on loud speaker. Detective Constable Taylor's listening.'

'Understood. Now answer my question. What's going on?'

'A car's been found abandoned.'

‘Where?’

‘Connors Road, edge of the industrial estate near the mangroves. Five clicks heading west, just after the point where it turns into a gravel track.’

‘An abandoned vehicle heading bush is no reason to get excited. Probably joy riders got sick of it and dumped the car when it ran out of fuel.’

‘Not likely. The keys were left dangling from the ignition, engine running, radio on and no one within cooe. Also, what the caller thought might be blood stains on one of the seats. Suspicious as all get out.’

Jack took a deep breath, pinched the bridge of his nose. ‘Right. Anything else?’

‘No, sir. DC Taylor and I are en route to the scene. The tip off came via the hotline.’

‘Has forensics been despatched?’

‘No.’ It was the voice of Detective Constable Claudia Taylor, sultry to match the weather. ‘We haven’t established a crime’s been committed. Could be an innocent explanation for it.’

‘Then why does it take three of us to check it out? Two’s plenty for preliminary work.’

‘I’m bringing Wilson along for the experience. He’s been stuck on desk duty for weeks and things are a bit quiet in the old town. Besides, I think he could become a good detective later in his career.’

‘Should I care?’ A short uncomfortable silence after his sarcastic remark. *Make amends, Lisbon.* ‘Sorry, I’m not feeling a hundred percent today. It’s great the lad wants to better himself. Most laudable.’

There’d been no baffling crimes in Yorkville for a while. The chance to investigate something unusual could be an interesting diversion. Even with the annoying Constable Wilson tagging along. ‘I’ll get there as soon as I can.’

‘Better hurry,’ said Taylor above the soft crackle of the two-way. ‘There’s a thunderstorm forecast.’

‘If a cool change comes with it, I don’t care if it’s a bloody cyclone.’ The cruel weather in the far north enervated the body like nothing Jack had ever experienced. Three years pounding the pavement as a uniformed cop in sub-tropical Brisbane was bad enough. Then he got the promotion he’d worked like a dog for in the capital: plain clothes detective. Only trade off, it was up here in the sweltering furnace of hell. The humidity was a killer, but he was gradually acclimatising. At least the fishing was good.

‘You know how to get here, sir?’ said Wilson.

‘Ever hear of GPS?’

‘Of course. See you soon.’

The ritual morning home gym work out and run would have to wait. Lifting weights and punching the bag would have been painful anyway, so the early call out was an excuse to skip it, at least until the afternoon.

He guzzled a can of icy diet cola to accelerate the effect of the aspirin. On went a lightweight cotton suit. Locked doors. In the car. Gone.

‘Nice change you joining us in the pub last night, Jack. It was a huge surprise seeing you lumber through the door half an hour from closing.’ Lisbon’s partner DI Claudia Taylor, crossed the road with a cardboard tray containing two cups.

It was a surprise to Jack too. He didn’t remember meeting colleagues at the pub. Fuck. ‘Ah, yeah...’

‘Don’t worry. You didn’t do anything you’d regret.’

Thank God. Reputation intact.

‘You don’t look anywhere near as jovial as you did last night.’ She handed Jack a coffee. ‘Get this into you.’

‘Are you kidding? It’s too hot for coffee.’ He grunted and waved it away.

‘Come on. Don’t be ungrateful. It’ll put a spring back in your step.’

Jack took a sip, spat it straight out. ‘Jesus, I understand you have to sweeten service station coffee to make it drinkable, but seriously, how much effing sugar did you put in it?’ He handed her back the cup. ‘I’d be a diabetic by the time I finished that.’ The only spring caffeine induced in Jack was the desire to spark up a match and light a cigarette. The lozenges he consumed and the patches he wore under the suit helped; no tobacco for three weeks. He sucked in his guts, patted firming stomach muscles under his shirt. *Don’t go back to your bad habits, son.*

‘Whatever.’ She frowned as she tossed the contents of the second cup on the grassy verge, replaced the empty cup in the tray. ‘Here, you can’t refuse these.’ She handed him a pair of sky-blue surgical gloves and donned a pair herself.

‘Who called it in?’ Jack tugged on the gloves, wiped sweat from his forehead with a shirt cuff.

‘A truckie heading north to fetch a load of bananas.’ Constable Ben Wilson appeared from behind the abandoned vehicle. ‘Called the info line.’

‘Did he leave his name?’

‘Yeah. Don Hawthorne. Gave us some basic info. Got his number if you want to follow up.’

Jack nodded, scuffed black leather shoes in the dirt. He looked up. Dark cumulonimbus clouds were gathering in the east, the promised storm was building nicely. They'd have to work the scene fast. 'Probably won't be needing him further. Let's have a closer look at the vehicle. You,' he pointed at Wilson. 'Check the immediate area for anything odd.'

'Such as?'

'Use your initiative, Constable. You want to be a detective, don't you?'

Wilson trudged off in a huff.

'He's keen,' said Taylor. 'Give him a chance.'

'Whatever. He was rude to me on the phone this morning.'

'I'm sure he didn't mean it.'

The statement hung in the air without comment as Jack opened the driver side door of the late model maroon Mazda 6 sedan.

The first thing to catch his eye was a dark stain on the passenger seat. 'What do you reckon?' he called over his shoulder. 'Blood?'

Taylor peered inside the car. 'Could be. Want me to get forensics down here? The whole scene looks dodgy.'

Jack shook his head. 'Spidey senses tingling, are they Taylor? No, I'd like to know who the owner is first before we run at this like a bull at a gate. Have you called in the registration and VIN number?'

'Not yet.' Jack sensed a trace of annoyance in her reply, but she could suck it up. 'I was busy getting the coffee you didn't want.'

'Do it now.' Jack had learned to give commands like they were polite requests. If you stick the Australian rising inflection on any statement you can turn it into a kind of question. 'I'll have a shoofy through the interior.'

'Can you pull the lever so I can find the VIN, please?' Taylor's tone was now brusque and businesslike.

Jack's answer was the sound of the bonnet popping.

'Thanks.' She said something else Jack didn't catch. With her head under the hood, Taylor sounded like she was underwater.

The first thing Jack examined was the dashboard, littered with receipts, dockets and assorted papers. He pressed a button to open the glove box, more papers fluttered out like falling leaves. He scanned a few but nothing grabbed his attention. It'd take hours to go through them all thoroughly; he'd leave them to the forensics team if he and Taylor decided it was worth calling them in. *What else?*

On the floor, take-away wrappers, most from a famous fried chicken outlet, grease-stained white paper bags you get hot chips in. Maybe the mark on the seat was old tomato ketchup?

‘Got the number, Jack.’ Taylor dropped the bonnet with a thunk, walked around to the wound-down driver window and peered in over the top of a pair of designer glasses. ‘Just calling in now with the rego and VIN.’

‘It’s a wonder the officer who took the call didn’t ask the truckie for the number plate. We could have had the details before we even got here. Might have even spared us a trip.’ *And I’d be lying on the couch watching classic title fights on YouTube.*

‘Apparently the truck driver was already back on the road when he rang it in.’ Taylor ran fine fingers through her hair. ‘Didn’t bother to take note of the plates. Said he didn’t have time to hang around ‘cos his boss was riding his arse about deadlines. He’d seen the driver door wide open and no one inside or near the vehicle, so he stopped to check no one was sick or whatever.’

‘Haven’t there been attacks on women in this area lately?’ Jack asked.

‘You’re right. Maybe the truckie knew that too and it spurred him to do his civic duty.’

‘Maybe.’ Jack looked up from the debris. ‘Or he was seeing if there was anything in the car worth stealing.’

‘You’re a bloody cynical bastard.’

‘I grew up in South London, luv. Shaped my outlook somewhat.’

‘I’ve got a little more faith in people. According to the call transcript, the guy discovered keys hanging from the ignition and the engine idling. Had a quick look about, saw nothing else suspicious and thought the driver had headed into the scrub to ah..., how can I put it, evacuate their bowels.’

A laugh escaped Jack’s lips. ‘For God’s sake, Claudia. Can’t you just say take a shit?’

Taylor mumbled something.

‘Pardon?’ A receipt lay among the junk food debris. Jack held it up and squinted to read the faded ink. A generic cash purchase, unknown vendor, not paid for by credit or debit card. Not helpful.

‘I said no need to be crude.’

‘You think that’s crude? You should hear me when I lose money on a boxing match. I lose my fucking rag.’ Jack wrinkled his nose as he came up for air. The floor of the car gave off a mouldy smell to match the rubbish.

She ignored his remark. ‘Anyway, once the truckie was on the road again, he had second thoughts, wondered if the stain on the seat might be blood, and called it in. Hang on, I’m about to get the name of the vehicle’s owner.’

'I'll keep digging in this mess.' Jack knew from long experience nine times out of ten a car left on the side of the road wasn't a big issue. Usually it's been nicked and the thieves scarper when the petrol runs out or they get bored. A sticker gets slapped on the windscreen and the owners are notified to come and pick it up. After a specified amount of time if no one collects, it's towed away, sold at auction if it's in good condition or crushed at the wreckers if it's unroadworthy. Something felt wrong about this car, though.

Jack grabbed the lever under the driver seat and tugged, slid the seat back and peered underneath. More rubbish. A rummage in the front and rear passenger seats and floor spaces rendered nothing but more detritus. He stepped out of the car, popped the boot. Inside, a broad blobby stain on a piece of old carpet that looked like a Rorschach test. Could be blood.

'Got a name.' Taylor ended the call. 'Terrence Bartlett.'

'Say again?' Jack's inner voice told him he'd heard that name before.

'Bartlett. Terrence Brian Bartlett.'

Yes. Jack did remember the name.