CHAPTER ONE

My parents were initially amused by my decision to join the police force. They already had two children satisfactorily married; if their stroppy middle child wanted to try her hand at something unusual, then so be it. As my mother told the neighbours, frequently within my hearing, 'Where better to find an available husband?'

'Cop or crim?' I'd once asked.

'Either—or perhaps a criminal—it pays better!' Mum and the neighbour had cackled.

I certainly didn't look the part of a female officer, with my damp brown eyes and serviceable chestnut waves that should have carried a warning: Frizzes When Wet. My childlike overbite made me appear harmless, if not a little dim. Soft as I may seem, I've been told I've a tongue like a razor strop. And I can walk for twenty miles on nothing but a cup of tea, and frequently have cause to do so.

My parents Noel and Wilma had been progressive enough to ensure that my older sister Martha and I completed our School Certificate, leaving me with more job options than most career-minded young women. Still, none of the available professions struck me as being sufficiently significant or unique. I wanted to do something exceptional. I've a fiercely competitive nature that Mum claims is my cross to bear. Which seems hypocritical, coming from a dedicated midwife. Possibly she's jaded because her career was pulled out from underneath her. My father used to joke that he and Wilma fought for space at the sink of a night to wash the blood off their hands (no cause for alarm, Dad's a butcher).

The main obstacle to my ambitions, other than being of the fairer sex, was my lack of any singular ability. I was competent over consummate, doomed to come in second place. My childhood brass bedhead was decked with red ribbons, the runner-up's blushing shade. Martha, having promptly produced three offspring for her dentist husband, assured me children would quench the desire for recognition, replace it with a deeper satisfaction: the creation of life; nurturing whelps into able citizens. I remain unconvinced, particularly as Martha has a desultory hands-off approach to my nieces and nephew, and conversely complains that parenting is a yawn.

Mother considered nursing to be the obvious choice. I was reluctantly inclined to agree. I'm diligent and obstinate, no pushover for exploitative doctors or belligerent patients. Yet six months' training confirmed my reservations. I had no yen for emptying bedpans or lancing boils. By that stage I'd seen Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday*, the top-billing Saturday matinee at the Theatre Royal. I instantly fancied myself as a fast-talking career gal. I ditched nursing to try my hand at secretarial college, happening to miss by a year the commencement of the war, where, as a nurse, I might have met with more dramatic ailments. I soon decided typing was the pits. I abandoned the course, relinquishing the dream that it would somehow open a door into journalism.

At my dad's urging, impertinently backed by my younger brother Kenneth, I enrolled in teachers' college. My father and brother agreed the family know-it-all should have a pulpit from which to preach. Despite my patchy history, I was immediately accepted. The war was in its infancy, and though it was anticipated that the Krauts would be expediently dealt with, conscription meant staff were in short supply. I earned my qualification and made it as far as a classroom full of jug-eared, pasty-faced ten-year-olds before a happening on a tram rerouted me down yet another career path.

The couple sat across from me: a bullish man with a pale, knobbed head and bright devious eyes and a woman with an unexceptional face masked by the serene countenance of the unflappable. I noticed that he intentionally thumped into his partner with every jolt and judder of the tram. She elbowed him roughly back. There was something childish and brutal about the routine that seemed pleasing to them both. The man caught me watching and gave a wink. I fancied thrusting my funny bone into his rib cage too. Then I spotted the handcuffs he wore, bridging the crevasse between his knees, where his elbows rested. The tram shuddered to a halt outside the police station. The woman, in a belted olive knit dress with pleated skirt, jerked the prisoner to his feet. Passengers skimmed their shoes in under their benches to permit them access

down the aisle. It was a revelation. Not the fact of a woman apprehending a man, but the respect that her actions inspired.

I had found my calling. The police force was the perfect fit for my high ideals.

Any grandiose illusions I might have entertained concerning my choice of career were scotched on the first day of training. It was drummed home to the handful of new recruits that women police were essentially high-level social workers. The principal went on to impress the importance of our work. How crucial we were in supporting Adelaide's underprivileged. In spite of my misgivings, it would have felt despicable to welch out after that.

CHAPTER TWO

I had a knack for patrolling the beaches. I knew how to strike just the right balance of joviality and authority with the offenders I encountered. I usually referred to the conditions: surely it would be warmer, cooler, perhaps more comfortable, to take the liaison indoors—very casual, very charming. I aimed my torch at the sand so that embarrassed lovers could locate their shoes, and sometimes clothes, while still maintaining a degree of anonymity. The couples were generally agreeable, accepting they'd been caught out. A juvie was a different kettle of fish. If the lass looked underage, then I became stern, almost threatening. I'd ask to see the man's identification and slip it inside my handbag for safekeeping then escort them both to the station. The man would be charged and the minor returned to her parents. I'm not in the business of penalising naïve or needy girls.

Gwen took the job of upholding the moral virtue of Adelaide rather more seriously than I. She was partial to ambush and would flash her torch beam into lovers' startled faces, blinding them for as long as was necessary for them to presume their image had been committed to her memory. She never missed an opportunity for sermonising about respectability and licentiousness.

No one was better at taking down a felon than Eunice. The sixty-year-old had brought men twice her size to their knees in three ju-jitsu moves (defensive combat being an important part of our training) with her brown felt cloche still in place. Eunice was a drawcard for night patrols. We could all breathe a little easier with her by our side.

I was with Fiona on the night we saw the unknown man. Fiona was a good officer: meticulous, as Gwen or Eunice might say in praise. *To a fault*, I thought. I found her pedantry made her inflexible. Fiona had been an English teacher for the better part of her forty years, but a stint as a driver in the air force had broadened her horizons. Six months after the war ended, her husband had died during an appendectomy, leaving her with a teenage son to rear single-handed. She applied and was accepted into the police force, where her age and prior experience counted as assets.

Despite the lateness of the hour, Somerton Beach was still warm, the final night of spring. Three hours' walking had taken its toll. My nylons chafed against my inner thighs, my arches ached, the dry beach sand kept tumbling in over the sides of my shoes, making tiny dunes beneath my feet. We'd finished our patrol and were returning to the office. The last tram was due to depart in five minutes. I was longing for the staffroom's green chairs with their solid wooden legs and vinyl pads for buttocks and back. I was hoping someone had left me some nut loaf to accompany my final cup of tea of the day.

A monochrome figure lay propped against the sea wall only metres from the wooden steps leading up to the esplanade. In the silky moonlight I could just make out that he was semi-supine, his legs stretched out in front. Fiona directed her torch beam at his face as we drew in. 'Intoxicated,' she concluded. Charging him would mean supporting his weight back into town and across to the male cells.

I was in favour of leaving him to sleep it off. I scanned the area around him, my beam sweeping the sand like a searchlight. 'He looks to have finished whatever he was drinking. There's no sign of a bottle.'

‘Taken by someone else, most like.’

‘He’s well presented, doesn’t seem like a troublemaker. I expect he’ll wake with the sun and make himself scarce.’

Fiona lifted her gaze to the crippled children’s home looming on the ridge above, beyond the streetlamp’s waxy glow. The building’s Victorian facade was as dour as her expression. ‘I’d rest better knowing he was gone.’

I reminded my colleague of her mother-in-law, who wouldn’t turn in until Fiona’s key clicked in the lock. It was a dirty tactic, but I was longing for bed. She switched off her torch and moved onward, striking out across the sand like an officious water bird.

Word of our sighting was never leaked beyond the force—a confidence that caused Fiona no end of relief and compunction. I was equally remorseful, only my regret wasn’t due to carelessness but, rather, missed opportunity. The thought we’d knowingly passed him by would plague me. I doubt we’d have been in time to offer salvation, but the key to the mystery may have been within reach.

Then again, I consoled myself, if I had all the answers, what would be the fun in that?