

Chapter 1

The mission

The summer sun was slowly going down over the dry countryside of north-western Victoria. The hot hours of the day had driven the folk of the sleepy town of Binawarra into their homes, leaving the streets parched and deserted. Some ten miles out of town, travelling in the subsiding heat, a car was making its way along the narrow road towards Binawarra. The afternoon sun into which the car's silent occupants were driving forced them to squint and shade their eyes. Despite the flickering glare as the sun danced in and out of the gum trees with the curve of the road, the driver was able to lounge in the late model Ford. He hummed a ragged tune, tapped the steering wheel, and looked absent. Between dodging the dying rays, the woman, with a cigarette stuck between the fingers of her right hand, concentrated on the papers she continually shuffled on her lap. The rolling and peaking hills intermittently covered with eucalypts and expanses of dry brown grass evidently had no attraction for her. At intervals she stopped the shuffling and stared at the jottings on a piece of paper held loosely in her left hand. Eventually she flicked at the sheets and frowned at her notes. Her driver glanced at her, and then at the paper. Casting a quick look along the road, he leaned closer. It was odd enough to break his boredom. She always made her notes in English. It was a strict rule. Not so this time.

Gerda Vrouwendijk could speak several European languages without a trace of an accent. More than this, she was so adept at mimicking some national and regional accents that she fooled the locals. To tune her ears, she often tested herself in unobtrusive places. Her steely audacity and the ease with which she brought off such performances impressed her companion. If she earned his grudging admiration, she did not reciprocate it. She had deep contempt for the man she had to put up with when circumstances warranted his special skills. Pistols, blood oaths, and brute savagery appeared to make up his retarded mental world. As brutish as he was, though, he served his purpose well. Coolly methodical in his work, he backed this up with great natural strength and

physical conditioning. Above all else, he had the compliance of indifference – as long as he could lock the task with its negotiated rewards into his limited vision. And as long as he had time to waste himself on the exploitation of those rewards, which he found mostly in the big cities. He revolted her like no other man could.

She called him Boris, almost always with a sneer. She did not know his real name and did not care to know it. Boris was unperturbed. He even assumed the name in his travels with her. The full significance of the nickname oddly enough seemed to escape him – so she thought. She had to reassure herself, though, in spite of the apparent indifference. He would shake his head sometimes and cast a menacing look from under those dark brows. He could be the author of unspeakable violence and then absently sucked the blood from his split knuckles, but he dared not touch her. Apart from any other consideration, his political goals, whatever they were exactly, depended on her. Now his constant glances began to irritate.

‘What are you looking at? What are you interested in?’ she said, blowing a puff of smoke out of the side of her mouth.

‘Your notes are in Dutch?’ he said, in correct but heavily accented English.

Gerda glanced at the sheet of paper in her left hand and then quickly folded it over. He recognized the different European languages, even spoke a number of Eastern European and Arabic languages well, but she was not sure how much Dutch he could understand. These sorts of things he was cunning enough to hide. ‘You are not paid to concern yourself with such matters. In any case, the reason would not advance your font of knowledge any.’ Then realizing how much she would need him in the coming months and how effectively the energies of his dark hatreds could be exploited, she forced out: ‘These are notes of the briefing reports you gave me. Right? I was tired at the time...unconsciously reverted to my first language. It’s the easiest way of organizing your thoughts. You should know.’

Boris frowned slightly at this explanation. The real Gerda Vrouwendijk was elusive and her telling the truth was always coincidental with her aims. Her present manner of speaking would lure anyone into placing her in Australia’s influential social milieu, a milieu he had occasion to mix in. And why was she suddenly so accommodating? Well, she did need him. Thus, Boris’s caution and chronic distrust led him to truth and doubt at the same time. Gerda’s explanation about the jottings in Dutch was true. She had been uncommonly lax in this. Through tiredness? Through common human frailty? Who knows, she thought, unwillingly considering the point? It did strike home that it was important

to keep in character. She would be more alert. 'But thanks for pointing it out,' she added at length, feigning a conciliatory tone.

Calmly stubbing her cigarette out, she pretended to return to her paperwork. She hoped her casual accommodating remarks would wipe the look of distrust off the face of the frightful man she would have to spend the following months with. A few moments later, Boris took up his humming and tapping again. She was relieved. That savage Balkan could be a nuisance when he had a mind for it. But Boris was playing the same sly game and kept an eye on his companion.

During this time, the car was winding its way slowly upward between two peaks. Close on their right, the land suddenly rose steeply up out of the undulating fields in a stream of rocks, dirt, dry brown grass, stunted and spiky eucalypts until it reached a sharp peak towering over them. Near the top of the peak was a strange, grey, rocky outcrop. Like a platform put there for some purpose. Underneath the platform, there was a sheer drop along a scaly cliff face for about sixty feet. From there a short levelling incline to the roadway. A little further on, on their left and not as close to the road, a massive mound rose slowly to reach a height above the sharp peak. Its massive, hunched, squatting shape was treed all around its uneven slopes. The grass, though burnt brown in the Australian summer, was long and thick hiding any sign of the reddish brown earth that appeared on the opposite peak. Its top was inviting and clearly negotiable by a fit walker.

Gerda and Boris drove on past the rocky outcrop, ignoring the hunched squatting shape on their left. The road reached its full height and then descended quickly to burst from the hills and trees onto a wide view of farmland with Binawarra nestled cosily just below them. In the distance, the farmland rose again to form a chain of low-lying hills. On their slowing descent, the township's pattern of roads, its settler-period public buildings, and the clusters of pioneer verandahed houses opened to them. As dull as their observations had been about the countryside on their approach to Binawarra, this enchanting rural scene intruded on their purpose. Indeed, they had the feeling, as they emerged from the trees between the peaks that they were entering a different sort of world. An uneasy feeling encroached, but it was soon gone. For as they drove on, two figures walking hand-in-hand towards the town drew their attention.

'That's her. Yes, that's her,' said Boris, without feeling.

'Keep calm,' said Gerda. Boris remained unmoved. 'Don't give any sign that we have seen them. Drive on, but slowly so I can get a clear view. Easy...I said easy!'

Boris gently eased on the accelerator. The two people, a very tall

man and a tall well-formed young woman, both of dark complexions, gave no indication they were aware of the approaching car. As the car drew level, Gerda turned cautiously and looked around Boris's head. 'Don't move!' she hissed. She had an unimpeded look, satisfied that the two walkers did not pay any attention to the car, let alone show any interest in its occupants. But Gerda was wrong. The young woman did see them. She saw them looking at her.

'Well,' said Gerda, more to herself than to Boris, 'reports about her have not been exaggerated. She is quite exquisite...quite exquisite...unusual...' She turned to Boris: 'You stay away from her. Or you will find yourself cut in pieces and fed to the sharks in Sydney Harbour. Don't forget that.'

Boris laughed loudly. Gerda did not respond to this mocking reaction. Both knew they were playing out a little theatre, and that a general warning had been repeated. They knew that Binawarra was worlds away from Boris's style of pleasure and, more importantly, he would stick to his task. Nevertheless, he would continue to contemplate the real warning. Ms Vrouwendijk was as heartless as a Queensland Taipan. They drove on in silence.

Stunning! Absolutely different. Not only the physical appearance – tall, sturdy and well-formed – but with a manner, an allure, like nothing Gerda had seen before. This was indeed a prize. She was not one to rush to judgment. She had been skeptical and hesitant when the idea and the possibilities arose. The results, on a long shot – almost far-fetched – did not promise to reward the time and effort, she thought. But now. Uncharacteristically, she rushed to judgment. This would be worth the risk. If this girl could take her, Gerda Vrouwendijk, so directly in, surely she would have the same effect on others. The car slowing almost to a stop broke in on her musings.

'What are you doing?' she snapped, glancing back over her shoulder.

'Well, where do you want me to go?' Boris calmly tapped the steering wheel and looked in front of him.

'Keep driving for a minute.'

They had crossed the bridge over a fast-flowing creek and were now heading towards the town centre. Gerda slowly rubbed her cheek, and then her chin, staring but not seeing in front of her. Boris glanced at her with smirking interest.

'Show me where the publisher of *The Binawarra and District Mail* lives,' she said waving her hand without bestowing even a sideways glance. 'Go on, and mind your business.'

She put her sunglasses on, took a broad-brimmed sunhat from the back seat and positioned it on her head. She lit up another cigarette and

thoughtfully exhaled. Boris, waving the smoke away, made a turn at the end of the large lush park in the middle of the town's shopping and business centre, took a turn immediately to the left and drove several blocks to a fashionable part of the town. He stopped outside a smart restored colonial style cottage. Despite the presence of few people on the cooling streets of Binawarra, Gerda took on the attitude of an interested visitor to the picturesque town and looked casually at the living quarters of the publisher of the main organ of communication in the district.

'Our publisher is a discerning man with a taste for the finer things of life,' she murmured. 'A most tastefully restored property. Your report has not been amiss as yet, I am happy to say.'

Boris nodded in acknowledgment.

Dropping ash from her cigarette, she flicked through the papers on her lap, motioning Boris to drive on. She isolated one of the sheets, looked around and then motioned him to stop. She read for a minute. 'How reliable is this? Is there really something between our publisher and the RSL President's wife?'

'It's a reasonable suspicion. They come into contact quite often. Collins fancies himself...the sophisticated type...targets the notables in the town...'

Gerda rubbed her chin again. 'Keep an eye on them...for whatever may be going on.' She returned to the sheet of paper. 'This debt and his ambition to establish a chain of country newspapers. Too vague. I want a clear picture of his debt. The ambition to build a media empire can be a virulent one.' Clearly not expecting a reply to this gratuitous opinion, she waved him to drive on. 'Take me on a tourist drive around the town.'

Boris, following the promptings of his companion, drove slowly around Binawarra, with Gerda taking in as much as she could. When they arrived back on the square, she said: 'Now the high school.' Boris drove around the square, at the end of which he turned into Melbourne Rd, the main road out of the town. He drove several blocks and then turned right into Goldminers Rd. At the top of a slow incline was the town's high school from which there was an arresting view of the town centre. The administrative block looked out over the fields to the range of hills, of which the great hunched mound and the sharp peak were prominent. The sport fields, set into the treed slopes, were lower down on the hill. They stopped there a moment, surveying the view.

'Now show me where *he* lives,' said Gerda.

Boris drove back down the hill and took a right-hand turn into Eureka St. They proceeded about half a mile to the outskirts of the residential area. The house with a view to the hills was the last on a large

block. All around was an abundance of plants in well cared for gardens. Behind the house, the farmland stretched out. Eureka St continued on, taking a curving swing to the left and met Melbourne Rd just before the bridge over the creek. As Gerda and Boris drew abreast of the house, the man himself appeared on the verandah. Gerda motioned Boris to drive on. Boris did not blink. He drove on through the curve until he was out of sight and then turned back.

At first, the man did not pay attention to the car. There were many such tourist cars driving around his delightful country town. He was rapt in his usual afternoon ritual: standing on his verandah, breathing in the fragrance of his flowers and the fresh country air, and musing on his good fortune. When the car approached a second time, he gave a friendly wave. Boris lazily returned the gesture.

'You fat old fool,' said Gerda, happy that the first sighting had reinforced the picture she had formed. 'You are going to be rocked out of your complacency.' Just then, a woman appeared on the verandah and put an arm around the man's ample waist. She gave him a kiss and snuggled up to him. Gerda turned her head away. 'Quick, drive on,' she ordered. Boris jerked the car forward and drove off swiftly.

'Now the girl,' said Gerda, ridding her mind of the detestable sight.

Boris turned right at Goldminers Rd, drove across Melbourne Rd and took the third turn to the right into Old Melbourne Rd. As with Eureka St, Old Melbourne Rd was an alternative way south out of town and joined the main road around fifty yards before the creek. The last house on a very large piece of ground, and hemmed in by two long dry stone walls, stood snugly amongst a friendly array of flowers, bushes, trees, and vegetable gardens. Boris nodded in the direction of this house. 'The girl's house.' He slowed the car while Gerda looked keenly at the house mingling with the early evening light. Then she saw enveloped in the yellow glow the girl they had seen on the way into Binawarra. The girl stood motionless, facing the hills at one end of the verandah. Gerda, at the risk of being seen, looked around as they passed.

'Stunning!' she said and quickly added, 'Drive on a little further, turn around and come back. I think she is too preoccupied to pay attention to us.'

Gerda was wrong again. As the car came back for a second pass, the girl seemed to recollect. She turned and walked to the other end of the verandah where she sat on a swing seat and gazed in the direction of the hills. Gerda could not help leaning around and having a last lingering look. When Boris turned into Goldminers Rd, she told him to stop somewhere convenient. There was nowhere more convenient than where they were and he brought the car to a halt. From there, they had a good

view up Goldminers Rd to the high school at the top of the hill. But Gerda was lost in reflection. What had seemed in the beginning a wild far-fetched plan was looking more than promising. The possibilities were endless. It was not that the plan was brilliant in itself. It was the young woman.

'Is she always like that?'

'Like what?'

'Serene, detached, aloof. Like she was gazing on the world from a different place. You know.'

'Yes,' he said, contemplating the question in his lazy manner. 'People her own age say she's as cold as a dead fish. The boys call her the "Ice Maiden". She has most of them in awe of her.'

'Good. What about other people in the town, the older people?'

'I've heard that some of the men, important men, have thought it necessary to protect her.'

'Against what?'

'They've warned the town's youth...'

'Hypocrites.'

'That's what I've heard. There is only so much questioning I can do. My accent is already a signal that I do not belong. You know the way country people are.'

'I certainly do,' she said distantly. There was silence while she considered this new information. 'You say there is frequent contact between the girl's family and that fat fool and his wife,' she continued, at length. 'It's a long walk from the one house to the other.'

Boris shrugged his shoulders. 'It may be, but I have often seen the girl in the vicinity of their house, either on her way there or back again. In fact, she is a great walker. She is known for her lone walks in the bush and farmland. The farmers look out for her. She is clearly fit and strong. A year or so ago, people apparently thought she would be a champion athlete.'

'That's not in your reports.'

'Well...the story was too vague. People say she lost interest. She takes part in the school sports, but does not try.'

'Extraordinary,' said Gerda to herself. 'To look like that and have the potential to be... ' Silence followed for a while, and then: 'The close connection with the Catholic priest, that's expected. But then there is this relationship with that woman. You don't say much about her.'

'There's not much to say. She's a shrivelled spinster in her fifties. She keeps to herself. Or when she does speak, it is often to abuse someone. She has most of the people in fear of her. She works part-time as the school nurse and lives cheaply. They say she had a bad experience with

the Japanese. Not much is known about her. She is not important, just a sad lonely figure. You don't have to worry about her.'

But in this one point Boris had failed. The cantankerous ageing spinster was the only person to have taken notice of Boris's comings and goings. She had been suspicious of his role as a salesman and of his sudden regular visits to Binawarra. She was the only one to perceive something discordant in the town gossip that followed him around. That afternoon she was the only person to have noticed him driving around the town in a car with a hire-car sticker on the back window – and with a passenger whose sunglasses and broad-brimmed hat were evidently meant to hide her face. Boris, without realizing it, had driven a number of times past her house on Goldminers Rd and, incredibly, had now parked almost directly outside. There was a lot more to the reclusive spinster than Boris could ever suspect. And his failure to take more notice of her would prove critical. Now from the comfort of her lounge room, and hidden by the spotless slats of her venetian blinds, that shrivelled ageing spinster was gazing intently at their car.

'You had better move on otherwise someone may see us parked here doing nothing,' said Gerda. 'Drive into the shopping centre again, and then to where the Vatican stooge lives.'

Boris, without reacting to the melodramatic comment, took a full turn around the large square and came to a stop outside the little sandstone church with its charming steeple. 'St Philomena's Church.'

'Oh, this is it, is it? Not very impressive.'

While Gerda was looking at the church with unfeigned disgust, the priest appeared at the stone archway of the church. He walked stooped with a great deal of difficulty, supporting himself on a walking stick. He had to stop and turn himself around so that he could shut the big set of wooden doors and then lock them. He appeared weather-beaten, his emaciated figure covered loosely by a cassock patched, discoloured and fraying at the edges. Gerda watched in silence, a look of contempt showing on her face. Boris, taking notice of Gerda's uncovered expression, moved on. They did not need to arouse the attention of the old priest who had been too occupied for the moment to notice. He drove to the opposite side of the park where the trees and shrubbery hid the car. They continued to watch as the stooped figure slowly checked the front area and sides of the church. He was evidently in some pain, for he grimaced every now and then.

'There you have him,' said Boris, smiling for the first time that day, 'a compatriot of yours.'

'Yes, but from the south-east of Holland, the Province of Limburg. I'm from the south-west, the Province of Zeeland, very different.' The

gratuitous distinction appeared not to interest Boris. 'Besides, your notes say that he has spent more of his life out of Holland – in New Guinea.'

'Yes, his disabilities date from that time. I don't know what happened to him. Nobody knows, except his doctor, it is said, and he will not talk about it.'

'That may be useful.'

'They say he's been put out to pasture.'

'Oh?'

'There are few Catholics in Binawarra – the girl's family are among the few – so his superiors, the order of priests that is responsible for this small parish, have never had a priest stationed here permanently, that is, until Fr van Engelen was exiled to this God-forsaken place. It seems that he is a sort of recalcitrant.'

'A recalcitrant?'

'He can't adjust to the Second Vatican Council, they say. They put him where he won't cause trouble, which didn't please some of the townfolk – at least in the beginning. I haven't a clue how much of this is true. But what is obvious is that he's not popular with his superiors. Otherwise, he wouldn't be here in such poverty. As I reported, he is very close to the girl and her parents. He has been giving special instruction to the girl.'

'This priest is going to be my biggest obstacle. I want you to focus on him. I want to know all about him. Find anyone who is antagonistic to him and the Catholic Church. Now drive me once more around the town. Show me where some of the minor figures live. I want to orient myself as best I can before I arrive here tomorrow.'

Gerda Vrouwendijk leaned back and settled in to assessing what she had seen and learnt. A self-satisfied expression slowly appeared on her face, as she listened without comment to Boris's unmodulated narration. But despite her applying her usual care in assessment, she was uncharacteristically sloppy in assuming that the priest was from Catholic Limburg. This one lapse in her painstaking planning would prove just as critical as Boris's failure to take more notice of the spinster. Boris spent another half-hour touring the town. At length, Gerda gave the signal and he dutifully headed out along Melbourne Rd. They drove up the fast-rising incline into the hills, passed the dark, squatting mound on their right and shortly after the rocky platform on their left. The hills, peaks and trees rushed past them into the darkness while each remained preoccupied with their thoughts. The tall, striking figure of the girl with the dark complexion appeared irresistibly in Gerda Vrouwendijk's mind. Boris resumed a vacant look and hummed a tune.

An hour and a half later, they were in their rooms in different motels

in the provincial city of Bendigo. Gerda booked two international calls. Drawing heavily on her cigarette, she walked up and down her room in a distracted manner. Boris threw himself onto his bed and then flicked casually through the motel's flyers. At about one o'clock in the morning, two young women knocked on Boris's door. Gerda Vrouwendijk, who stood opposite under a tree on the roadside smoking, watched as the door opened flooding the area with yellow light, and then shut it into darkness. She looked into the dull, lifeless, overcast sky. How she wished she could sleep through the night for once. She needed all her energy and alertness for what lay ahead.