

SICK & TWISTED STORIES FOR THE *DEPRAVED!*

# TALES FROM THE MIDNIGHT PIZZA

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PRESENTS



# HOMECOMING

BY SEAN BATMAN

## MIDNIGHT PIZZA, 2010

NINO SPREAD THE secret sauce slowly across the pizza base. He glanced up at the girl sitting in the booth by the arcade machines. Her head was planted in her hands, her scowl unmistakable. Her dad had just ordered a pizza and was grabbing some cold drinks. Nino thought the guy looked like a straight-up dude, but the girl — she looked like a bitch in the making. And Nino had a sixth sense when it came to shit like that. After all, he'd had two teenage daughters. And they had grown into two very nasty ladies — just like their mother.

Yes, Nino knew the look well and he also knew the probable outcomes of such a look. It didn't bode well for the father. But it wasn't just the look. The girl, who was maybe thirteen, hadn't stopped complaining from the moment the pair had walked in. She didn't want a 'fatty pizza', she wanted Subway. She complained about the smell, about the seats, about the music. As Nino's dead mother would have said, 'With some people, the glass isn't even half-empty — it's broken.'

Nino added some oregano and salt to the red paste. He watched the girl go after her father again — this time, it was over the drinks.

Vanni appeared at Nino's side. "I thought everyone loved Coke?"

"Not everyone," Nino said and shook his head.

Vanni began to add the grated cheese in small clumps, whistling and humming. Monte laughed from the back kitchen and his boisterous tones filled the room. The girl and father looked up.

Monte leaned through the kitchen window and said, "It won't be too long, huh!" His words came in a broad Italian accent, although he'd never set foot in Italy. Monte smirked. "Nino, tell them one of your stories, huh? The little girl looks bored." He wobbled his head at her like a jack-in-the-box. "I know! Tell them that story about the father and daughter."

Nino looked up. The father seemed pleased, but the girl rolled her eyes. Nino helped spread the cheese. "I heard this story from a friend. It only happened last year, but really the story begins much earlier — around 1989." He glanced at the girl. "There's a special bond between a father and his daughter. A sacred bond. But sometimes, that bond can be tested." He smiled at the girl who offered nothing in return. "This all takes places in Bundeena, not too far from here."

Vanni nodded. "I went there once."

## HOMECOMING

Nino smiled, but kept his eyes on the girl. “I call this one ...”

## HOMEcoming

IT HAD BEEN forty-five minutes since Carmen had called him and she was still waiting. The traffic, which had looked like an enormous shuffling glow worm, was finally thinning out. Carmen was parked at the Loftus soccer field off the Princes Highway, and she'd been lucky to make it that far.

The sun was long gone and she was hungry and tired. She looked again in the glovebox for some gum, but just like the last three times, there was nothing. A radio would have been a saviour in this situation, but a car under a thousand dollars didn't come with any miracles. In reality, what you got was a broken radio, no snacks, and judging from the drizzle of steam from under the hood, a fucked radiator.

While Carmen could blame herself for being cheap, she didn't. This was all Max's fault.

*"The car's as good as gold, Darl," he'd said. "Toyotas never die. This one's done over three-hundred thousand clicks, and look at that engine — clean as a whistle."*

The final statement summed the whole thing up — it made no sense. What did a whistle and a clean engine have in common? *Nothing*. And that's why she hated relying on her father — the man made no sense.

Ever since she could remember, Max had doted on her beyond the realm of 'normal'. Nothing sexual or freaky, he was just too fixated on trying to make her happy. And he didn't. Max was a fuck-up, plain and simple.

There were so many damaging moments from her childhood, it was hard to narrow it down, but there were plenty in competition for the top prize.

For example, when Carmen was twelve, she took up painting. She'd only done a few self-portraits and the odd landscape, but her school art teacher thought she was pretty good. And once Max got wind of this — he decided to lend a hand.

Max had just fixed some guy's car who claimed to be an artist and rather than take money for the job, Max scrapped the bill and asked this old codger to come and appraise Carmen's art. The problem was, all the old bastard did was drink two bottles of red and then tell Carmen she had no talent. Talk about nullifying the soul. Thanks, Max.

The older she got, the worse it got. Like the musical career she never had. After listening to the Pixies and deciding she wanted to be Kim Deal, Carmen saved up for a bass guitar. After two days practising, Max came home with a Fender Strat and

tried to ‘jam’ with her. Carmen got rid of the bass the following week.

And it didn’t stop with hobbies. None of the boys in Bundeena were good enough for her. Or Cronulla, or The Shire for that matter. Even her friends stopped coming around, because Max made them uncomfortable. There’s something off-putting about a middle-age man trying to help with make-up and nail polish.

Carmen knew if others could peer into her mind, they’d call her a spoilt brat. There were so many kids who wanted or needed a father’s love, but Max’s attention was wrong. He wanted to be friends — to be ‘*mates*’, as he often said. But Carmen just wanted a dad.

The weird thing was, Max wasn’t the same way with her older brothers. Sure there was footy and fishing, but outside those things, he pretty much left them alone. And Carmen’s mother, Sarah, had played her part perfectly. But not Max. He never took the hint. Even when the hint was as clear as, “*Fuck off! You’re ruining my life!*”

After that little outburst, Sarah had explained to Carmen that Max’s younger sister had drowned in a rock pool when she was eight. Max was meant to be looking after her and this was probably where all the bizarre attention came from. Carmen remembered softening for a time. Her dad was messed up by grief and she needed to help him. But after a while, Carmen realised she was his daughter, not his dead sister, and her dad needed a therapist, not a *mate*.

The thing was, if the attention had been good attention, it could have been okay. But Max liked a drink. And when he’d had a few, he could fuck up anything and everything. And most of the time, he was drinking.

But now came the irony. After all the years of trying to keep him at bay like an over-enthusiastic puppy, Carmen needed her father more than ever. Because *home* was a long way off, and the Toyota, with the clean-as-a-whistle engine, was dead-fuckedy-dead.

Carmen stirred in her seat, attempting to avoid the cold areas. It was weird to think of Bundeena as home again. She’d only been back three weeks, but wondered whether it was worth it. The old fibro shack on the hill was lonely. Her brothers were long gone. Tim was in the mines in WA and Larry was running trucks in Darwin. It was just Max and some dog called Rennie. Her old dog, Farley, had died five years ago when Carmen was in London. She’d skipped that funeral.

But she couldn’t skip her mother’s funeral back in January.

Again, Carmen shifted. She tried to avoid thinking about her mum, but it kept happening anyway. She supposed it was guilt. After all, she’d been the absent daughter. Carmen remembered those phone calls from Max. The ones where he would sob down the scratchy line. “When ya coming back, Darl? She’s real sick. She hasn’t got long.”

No one seemed to understand that Carmen’s life was in London. She’d got out of Bundeena at nineteen and was never going back. But last year hadn’t gone to plan. Just as her mum got sick, things went south with Doug. Carmen could never prove it,

but she suspected he was cheating on her. She hit the party scene pretty hard and took things a little too far with Phillip, her manager. He was married — and she lost her job. Then her mum lost her battle with cancer just as Carmen was touching down at Sydney airport. Of all the things to be late for ...

All in all, 2009 had been a pretty crappy year. And that's why she was back — there was nothing left in London, and while she wasn't happy about being in Bundeena again, there was a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. She just had to handle Max for a while, then it would be payday.

Carmen rubbed her forearm against the fogged up windscreen and took note of the playing field in front. To the far right of the field was a single white light, glowing in the mist. Carmen was pretty sure it was the toilet block. As a teenager, she had heard things about the toilets at the Loftus soccer field. By day, they were your average smelly concrete toilets, but by night, they became concrete rooms of debauchery, where gay men would come to liaise. Or as Chantelle Lowe had once put it: "Bum fuck their brains out."

Carmen knew better now. The Sutherland Shire, or The Shire as it was called by most, was full of urban legends and myths. Being away for so long gave Carmen some sense of clarity. Although no one in The Shire would admit it, the place was a lot like some southern USA backwater. It had its own rules and ideas, and every suburb within The Shire had its own stories. Unfortunately for Loftus, there were only two things it was renowned for — its pies and the activities in these toilets. But it was quiet tonight. Carmen suspected July was too cold, even for red-hot rogering.

She laughed and felt stupid for letting it slip. That little saying was courtesy of her older brother, Tim. And as her laughter built, she had to admit, she felt better for it. It had been a long time —

The shadow at Carmen's window silenced her laughter and her body seemed to recoil before she knew what was happening. Her eyes went from the lock to the fogged up shadow at the driver's seat window. There came a knock. Carmen didn't move for a moment. Was it Max? Wouldn't he say something? Carmen leaned back in and rubbed the window with her forearm. It was a man, with a face she couldn't really make out through the smudged glass, but it wasn't her father.

"Carmen — it's Todd Smith."

Like the fogged face, she didn't recognise the voice, but something in her memory twigged on the name.

"Max got me to come pick ya up."

Carmen wound down the window, making sure Todd Smith couldn't fit his hand through the gap. She could see his face now, but didn't recognise him. While she knew the name, she also knew to be cautious; ten years travelling the world had taught her that.

"Where's Dad?" Carmen asked. She gripped her mobile phone in one hand, while the other waited on the handle, ready to wind at the first sign of trouble.

“He’s had a few beers,” Todd said and smiled. “I work with him. I was staying late at the garage when he gave me a buzz.”

Carmen considered what Todd had said. Max must’ve had more than a few to avoid the drive out of Bundeena. He thought sinking a six-pack and driving was fine.

“You don’t remember me, do ya?” Todd said.

Carmen didn’t. The name gave some recall, but not enough for her to unlock the door. She felt the unease of the situation.

Todd leant closer. “I live in Bundeena, too. I was mates with Tim. We went to De La together. You were just a kid, then. Probably saw heaps of us pouring in and out of the shack back in the day.”

That much was true. Carmen remembered Tim had a whole group of mates who would routinely appear on weekends, surfboards in hand, blistered lips and long blond hair. The man at her window had short silver hair and a lined face — the kind that had weathered a few sizeable storms.

Todd shrugged. “Maybe I’m just fat and old, hey?”

Carmen sensed how ridiculous this must have seemed to him and unwound the window. “Sorry.”

“Listen,” Todd said. “I didn’t bring me tools and the truck’s already on a runner tonight, so I’ll give you a lift home and we’ll work on the car tomorrow.”

“Yeah, okay.” Carmen took her bag and got out of the car. The night air took hold and she shivered. “Guess I’ll be on the ferry tomorrow.” She slammed the Toyota door with more vigour than usual.

“Never liked them meself,” Todd said and walked to a dark blue ute behind her car. “Loved growing up in Bundeena, but hated the ferry ride. Especially to school. Always wanted me own wheels, you know?”

She followed Todd and climbed into his ute. It was warm and immaculately kept, not like her own car, which resembled a teenager’s bedroom. Todd started the engine and took off up the highway. He took a left into Farnell Avenue — the road home.

Like Todd, Carmen hated the ferry too. Growing up in Bundeena was all about the tyranny of distance. The place was almost an island: National Park on one side — Port Hacking on the other. When she was a kid, there were only three ferries a day. One early, one at lunch and one in the evening. There were no buses, and there was just the one long road in and out. It was a forty-five minute trip to Cronulla, anyway you liked it.

Carmen could see civilisation from her house. In fact, Cronulla looked like it was only throwing distance across the Port Hacking, but the truth was, it was another world away, and not just physically.

When Carmen was growing up, everyone looked down on Bundeenians. The sniggering was always about six-fingered freaks, married to their relatives, followed by banjo jokes. But times had changed. There was less talk about six fingers and more talk about six figures.

“So how ya finding being back?” Todd asked.

“It’s a bit strange actually.”

He glanced at her. “You got a little bit of an accent, hey?”

Carmen nodded. “Gone ten years. Guess it happens.”

“Don’t reckon I could lose me accent if I tried,” Todd said. “Nothing beats an Aussie accent, hey?”

Carmen couldn’t help thinking this was like a cab ride. The problem was, it was the kind where you didn’t pay, and *had* to talk to the driver.

Todd continued, “Yeah. Bundeena’s changed a lot, hey. Everyone’s selling up. There’s not too many left like the shack.”

“No,” Carmen agreed.

“Your old man told me how you couldn’t wait to get out of Bundeena. Felt trapped did ya?”

“Something like that.”

“Funny. You wanted to get out and move to a big city and now look at it — all these city people wanting to move in. Place has become a gold mine.”

Carmen couldn’t help herself. “You know what they say?”

Todd glanced at her. “Nah — tell me.”

“One person’s trash is another person’s treasure.”

He snorted. “I reckon it’s always been a treasure. Then again, whole Shire’s been on the up since you’ve been gone. Nulla especially. Real estate fellas’ve been making a packet.”

Carmen nodded and silence built.

“Lotta queers have moved in.”

Carmen nodded again, but only in politeness. Now the trip felt *exactly* like a cab ride.

“Yeah, poofs with money.” Todd adjusted his rear-view mirror. “Doesn’t bother me. All the locals get a lot out of ’em. Corner shop’s even selling sushi! Can you believe that?”

Carmen plastered a fake smile.

“Dane Wilson told me he had an offer on his parents’ place the other day — 1.7 mill.” He shook his head. “They reckon your place’d be worth that. Maybe more.”

Carmen felt her gut tighten. She knew alright — she had the shack valued after her mum died. The house itself was worth nothing, but it was on a huge block, nestled on a cliff-face with the best views of Port Hacking, Cronulla and beyond. The sunrises were worth at least 1.7. While there was the odd fond memory, money was money, and Carmen wasn’t living in Bundeena for the ‘tree-sea-change’. She’d done her time, all nineteen years of it. Soon it would cough up the goods and she’d have her payday.

“So your dad tells me you don’t like your job much.”

“Did he?”



“Yeah, he reckons you’d prefer being back in London.”

Carmen sighed. “How long have you worked for Dad?”

“On and off for a few years,” Todd said. “I’ve been doing quite a bit since, well ... you know.”

“Since Mum died?”

Todd grunted.

Carmen examined him. She was five years younger than Tim, but she couldn’t recall Todd’s face. She knew most of Tim’s mates, therefore Todd must have been a ‘tick’. They were the type of guys who would just hang on anywhere they could in the group. Carmen turned back to the winding road that swirled in darkness.

Todd cleared his throat. “I’m sorry I didn’t come to the funeral.” He shifted in his seat. “Always liked your mum. She made real nice Anzac biscuits.”

Carmen smiled. “Yeah, she did.”

“It’s just, ah, you know, I’m not real good with funerals. Sick of going to ’em. Specially after what happened to Damo.”

Damien Williams.

Carmen didn’t have to dredge up a memory for that name. Damo had been in the legendary Bundeena Wipeout of ’89. And like the Loftus toilets, it was etched in Shire mythology. There were others involved in the car crash. Chad Smith or ‘Boss’ as everyone had called him. There was Waz-Dog Leonard, and someone she only knew as Spaz. They’d lost control of their car on this very road, near Deadman’s corner, and had driven off a ravine. Boss and Waz were killed — Damo and Spaz survived.

And now that Carmen thought about it, something had happened to Damo just after she’d left for London. Tim had emailed her about it. Something about Damo killing himself — driving his car off the same ravine.

“Do you know why he did it?” Carmen asked.

“Did what?”

“Killed himself.”

Todd turned to her. “Damo didn’t kill himself. He lost control of his car.” Todd’s eye began to spasm and twitch. “Why would you say something like that?”

“Sorry,” Carmen said quietly. “I just remember Tim sort of suggesting it —”

“No way,” Todd barked. “Damo wouldn’t do nothing like that. He was doing all right. He’d had a few bad years. But he was on the mend.”

Carmen remembered quite the opposite. Damo had never been the same after the first crash. He’d spent all his time smoking weed or drinking at the Bowling Club, staring into nothing. But she wasn’t going to bring that up — she needed to smooth this over. They weren’t even halfway to Bundeena yet.

“I’m sorry, Todd. I didn’t know you guys were mates.”

“Yeah, we were tight. You can’t not be after going through what we did.”

“What happened?”

Todd turned to her and the glow of the red dash filled the deep lines on his face.

“We survived the wipeout.”

Carmen spoke without thinking. “Spaz?”

Todd’s face twitched again. “Don’t fucken call me that! I hate that name.”

Carmen couldn’t believe she’d said it. “I’m so sorry —”

“There’s nothing wrong with me — never was.” Todd glared at her and then back at the road. “I’ve got Tourette’s. Not the swearing kind. Just get to twitching when I’m stressed. But everyone called me Spaz, didn’t they?” He shook his head. “I ain’t no spastic. I can’t help the jitters.”

Carmen shrank beneath his sideward glances. “I’m really sorry, Todd.”

“So that’s why you didn’t know me name, huh?” He scowled and shook his head.

“Cause you only knew me as Spaz.”

Carmen had stepped in it good and proper and it looked like Todd wasn’t going to let this go. She would have to fight guilt with guilt. “I did remember your name, Todd. It’s just that with Mum dying and the way Dad is with the drinking, I slipped up. I’m sorry.”

“Well everyone’s got their problems don’t they?” Small tremors rippled across his face. “I do your old man a favour and look what it gets me.” The ute swerved and Carmen’s shoulder bumped her door.

“Of all the bloody nights, too,” Todd grumbled. “You know how hard it is to drive tonight?”

Carmen noticed Todd was pushing the accelerator to the floor.

“My whole world ended in ’89. Boss and Waz were me best mates. Then Damo bites it — same bloody night, nine years ago. Me Mum reckons tonight’s cursed.”

The road blurred as Todd pushed the ute harder. He was hitting the winding corners with so much speed, he was correcting on the wrong side of the road.

Carmen tried to keep her voice level. “Todd — we’re going pretty quick. Just slow up, hey?”

Todd’s face twitched again under the red glow of the dash. “The thing is, I dunno ’bout it being cursed — I just don’t like drivin’ tonight ’cause it gets me thinking about the smash all over again ...”

He kept talking, but Carmen could no longer hear him. *Tonight* was the anniversary of the Bundeena Wipeout. “Oh, Jesus Christ,” Carmen whispered.

“I told Boss to slow down,” Todd said. His lip curled and he stared out into the night. “I told him we were going too fast, but he says, ‘Fucken shut it, Spaz! I know this car like the back of me hand’.”

Carmen could see Todd was looking well beyond the road, back into ’89, as the incident played out in his mind.

“Nobody takes Deadman’s corner at ninety-five, no one! But Boss was crazy.”

This much Carmen knew. Boss was never allowed over to the shack. He came from the backwoods of Bundeena, from a bad home. He’d already spent time in juvie before he ended up dead.

Carmen felt the ute accelerate and her stomach lurched. “Todd, you’re upset. Maybe pull over and I can drive —”

“No one drives this ute but me.” He glared. “And stop calling me Spaz!”

Carmen grabbed her seatbelt with both hands and dug her feet into the floor. It was like being trapped on a rollercoaster where you knew the dipper was coming. The problem was, this wasn’t a ride. If Todd kept driving like this, they’d plough off Deadman’s corner and history would repeat.

Just as Todd came into a long bend, the dash lights flickered and the headlights crackled and cut out. For a moment, they were doing ninety kilometres an hour in complete darkness. The stereo came to life and Guns N’ Roses’ ‘Welcome To The Jungle’ blasted from the speakers. It ripped Todd from his trance and he hit the brakes. The ute screeched and slid before coming to a shuddering halt. The headlights came back on and Todd slapped the stereo, silencing it. He collapsed on the wheel and sobbed.

Carmen kept very still. She didn’t know whether to comfort him or run.

“That was the song,” Todd mumbled.

“What?”

He looked up. “When we crashed. Boss always had it on. He loved the Gunners.”

Carmen offered the best fake smile she could. “It’s just a coincidence.”

Todd turned off the car and slumped in his seat. “I’m sorry about yelling. Ya probably think I’m a psycho.”

She did — but Carmen wanted to live, so she was happy to lie. “No Todd, this is my fault. You shouldn’t be driving tonight. And my stupid dad should’ve known better.” She wasn’t lying about the last part.

Carmen reluctantly put her hand on his shoulder. “Now, I know you don’t let other people drive your ute, but maybe just this once?”

Todd sniffled and rubbed his nose across his sleeve before nodding. Carmen smiled, but not for him — she’d done it. “It’s going to be oka —”

Axl Rose shrieked again — this time louder. The lights in the ute shimmered and the engine sprang to life.

“What are you doing?” Carmen asked.

“I’m not doing nothing!” Todd yelled over the stereo.

Lights hit the ute from behind. A car was coming in at high speed. Carmen felt a scream build inside as she braced for impact, but just as the car should have hit, it swerved and skidded past them before sliding to a halt about ten metres in front.

Carmen clung to the seatbelt, stiff with an early onset of rigor mortis. The scream escaped, but sounded more like a stuttering moan. Todd was also frozen, his mouth agape, eyes fixed on the car in front. The smell of burnt rubber seeped into the ute’s cab. Carmen tried to turn the stereo off, but it wouldn’t stop and Guns N’ Roses continued to blare from the speakers.

“We need to get off the road,” Carmen yelled. “Or else someone is going to smash

into us.”

But Todd didn't move, he continued to stare at the car in front.

“Todd!” Carmen cried. “Get off the road and then we'll go over and apologise.”

The music stopped, but Todd didn't notice. He uttered in a dry rasp, “It can't be ... it ain't possible.”

Carmen looked at the car that purred in front. The ute's headlights revealed a black Torana with SLR 5000 across the rear spoiler. “Do you know them?” she asked.

“It's them,” he whispered.

Carmen turned back to the car. It revved its engine again and for some reason she sensed it was hungry. Stranger still were its headlights, which had a green tinge. They illuminated the rich white smoke that billowed from its engine. Carmen knew Todd was crazy, but there was something very wrong about the car that growled and shuddered in front.

The stereo started again. Todd blinked once, threw the ute into gear and hit the accelerator. Axl Rose screeched with the tyres as the ute slid beneath them. It finally found traction and shot out onto the road.

Todd was robotic, shifting gears with manic intensity, but before long, green light crawled across Todd's neck and began to flood the ute's interior. Carmen peered through the back window. The Torana was in pursuit and closing. Its front looked like an angry face; the windscreen was its black sunglasses and the green headlights reflected across the grill, illuminating its demonic smile. As the face surged forward, Carmen's eyes succumbed to the intense glare and she fell back into her seat.

“Who is it?” Carmen asked.

“Them.”

“*Them*, who?”

“Them!” Todd yelled. “Boss and Waz.”

“That's impossible.”

“Well that fucken Torana's impossible, too. It was in three pieces the last time I saw it. And trust me — I got a good look.”

“This is a trick,” Carmen said. “You're playing a trick on me.”

Todd lifted his boot and slammed it into the stereo. It exploded in sparks and smoke before dropping to the floor. The song still played. Todd turned to Carmen. “You still think this is a trick?”

Carmen grabbed her mobile phone and dialled ‘ooo’.

“Who ya ringing?” Todd asked.

“The cops —”

“What the fuck for?” Todd said and laughed. “You should be calling the Ghostbusters.” His laughter became hysterical.

“Shut up, I can't hear!”

The phone gave the familiar click of an answered call and Carmen was about to start talking when she was blasted by ‘Welcome to the Jungle’ over the phone's

speaker. Carmen screamed and dropped the phone.

“Don’t you see?” Todd said. “They’ve come back for me. They took Damo and now they’ve come for me.” He laughed again. “Mum was right. That silly ol’ bitch was right!” His white-knuckle grip on the wheel glowed green and he turned and yelled, “Well I ain’t going with ya. I ain’t going!”

Carmen turned and watched as the Torana trailed inches behind them. It then edged into the right lane and Todd slowed the ute heading into a sharp corner. Carmen was flung onto him. Todd corrected the turn, before frantically shifting through gears again. Carmen pulled herself upright and watched as the Torana brought itself parallel with them again.

She leaned forward, looking past Todd, staring into the black tinted windows. It was a trick, it had to be. It was the anniversary of the Bundeena Wipeout and some local kids were playing a nasty prank, that was all. But it didn’t explain the music and the lights. It didn’t explain her phone. And what about the feeling in her gut? The one that told her this wasn’t a prank; the one that told her this was *real*. She was caught in Todd’s nightmare and if she didn’t get out, she’d join the legend and become a Shire myth. A name whispered only on the darkest of nights.

Todd pushed the ute harder, taking a corner so fast he scraped the guard rail. Carmen stifled a scream, clutching at the seatbelt. The ute’s speedometer went from eighty up to one-forty on the next straight, but still the Torana kept up.

“It ain’t possible,” Todd said. “That car can’t do them speeds.”

Carmen felt laughter build inside her — the kind of crazy laughter she’d felt at Loftus. She wanted to grab Todd’s shoulder and scream, ‘A ghost car could do whatever it wants!’ And like the driver of the Torana had heard, it pulled up beside the ute again.

Todd glared at the car and yelled, “Stuff you, Boss! You ain’t draggin’ me to hell!” He jerked the wheel towards the Torana and Carmen slammed into her door. The black car pulled away. Todd tried again, but the Torana veered with precision timing, before drifting back across defiantly, this time edging only a metre away from the ute.

Guns N’ Roses continued to blare, even though the stereo dangled from the cabinet; it seemed the song was an anthem to the madness. Carmen pushed herself off the door and pulled at her seatbelt, making sure it was still locked in. Deadman’s was just over the next ridge. She had to convince Todd to stop. “This is what they want — they want you to lose control and crash.”

“I won’t crash. I’m a better driver than he ever was.” Todd kept his eyes on the road.

“Just pull over, Todd. We’ll make a run for it.”

“I ain’t running.”

Todd made another quick set of turns and came over the crest of a hill. In the near distance, another car was coming.

Todd's face lit up. "Ah ha! Gotcha now." He turned to the Torana. "I ain't budging, so you better fall back."

But Carmen knew this wouldn't work — how could you kill what was already dead? "Todd, pull over."

"I know what I'm doing."

"What if the other car swerves?"

"Shut up!"

The car ahead flashed its lights and Carmen jammed her feet into the floor. The other car swerved frantically, flicking its lights and pushing from one lane to the other. It had nowhere to go — nowhere to pull over. It was so close now, Carmen could hear the other driver blasting the horn, even over the booming song. She tried to shut her eyes, but couldn't. The oncoming car stayed in the Torana's lane. It tried to brake, but was too late. The car and the Torana collided, but only the Torana exploded in smoke and flame — the other car seemed to burst through the debris unscathed. Pieces of the Torana pinged and pelted the ute and Todd howled with joy. Carmen turned to watch the Torana disappear in a fireball behind them. The music cut out. All that was left of the ghost car was a single wheel, which sped along the ground, still keeping up with the ute.

"Totalled, man!" Todd yelled and clapped his hands together. "That's what you get when you mess with the best!"

Carmen stared at the wheel, waiting for it to lag behind, but it didn't. Instead, it kept up with them. And from the darkness behind, small chunks of metal, machine and car began to catch up and connect around the black orb — reconnecting, reassembling, rebuilding.

"Oh God," Carmen whispered and Todd turned.

They watched as the Torana pieced itself back together. The other wheels and larger steel parts assembled. Doors skimmed across the road, launched up and joined the car's skeleton. Wrinkled dents ironed themselves out. Even fragments of glass flew past to repair the headlights and windscreen. Finally, the rear spoiler pegged itself down and the engine ignited and growled. The Torana sped next to them, fully restored, polished and new — back from the grave, again.

"No ..." Todd uttered in newfound misery.

Guns N' Roses exploded from the ute's speakers again.

"No!" He wailed and slammed at the steering wheel.

Carmen shared his hopelessness. The Torana couldn't be stopped — its hunger had no bounds.

The Torana's liquid black passenger window unwound and Carmen felt her stomach drop. She could not face what was inside, but she could not look away either. Todd was staring, too. Green light spilled from the passenger window, revealing a skull. The bone glowed green, but the eye sockets were blacker than midnight in hell.

“Waz ...” Todd whispered.

Carmen’s mind convulsed. It was like reality had been a mirror, and now that it had been shattered, only madness remained.

From behind Waz, the skeleton driver of the Torana leaned forward. It was wearing a black top hat with a cigarette clenched between its teeth.

“Boss,” Todd said.

The back window of the Torana now came down. The third skeleton, Damo, offered a grotesque smile and turned to the absent space next to him.

“No!” Todd screamed. “You can’t have me — I survived —”

Then in unison, the skeletons pointed towards the road.

Carmen and Todd both looked as the ute came upon Deadman’s corner — all too late. The guard railing shone brightly under the headlights before the ute shattered it and shot off the ravine. Carmen felt the absence of gravity — her body drifting in space and time. She watched the dark world around her cascade and then with great force and violence, her body smashed into the dash. Pain enveloped her and Guns N’ Roses collided with the noise of metal twisting and crushing. Hot liquid blasted her face and Carmen sensed huge balloons cushioning her. She imagined this was what a sock felt like in the washing machine. But she wasn’t in the wash, she was in the ute, tumbling down a ravine, and they would be waiting, waiting to welcome her and Todd — welcome them to the jungle.

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It was a miracle. And even though Max had gone through a pretty shitty twelve months, he believed in miracles now. How else could he explain why he felt so good?

Most people in his situation would be bitching and moaning. First he’d lost Sarah, his beautiful wife. And there was Carmen. Max thought she’d moved back to help him with his grief, but Carmen hadn’t adjusted very well and Max got the feeling all she really wanted was to sell the shack. He had to admit, he would have probably gone along with it, too. He could never say no to her. But it would have crushed him. He loved the shack. He’d spent his whole life in Bundeena and couldn’t imagine being anywhere else.

Then just when it seemed things couldn’t get worse, Max had sent that idiot, Spaz, to pick up Carmen. And what a fiasco that turned out to be. Dead-shit Spaz drove his ute off Deadman’s corner, again. Most people said it was a miracle that Carmen had survived the crash, but that wasn’t it. The real miracle was the outcome of the accident itself.

Max poured a nip of whiskey into his morning coffee and smiled. Now that he wasn’t working, he could afford an Irish coffee for breakfast. After all, every day was a Sunday.

He watched Carmen, out by the headland in her chair. She was facing the sun and

the early nor'-east wind had already blown off her hat. Max got up but did so with a smile. This was his job now. Looking after his darling girl. And that was the real miracle. He had a purpose again: making sure she had everything she needed — she needed a lot.

The accident had taken her legs. Not physically — they were still there, but they didn't work. Her arms were weak, too. She could only get herself so far in the chair before they gave up. But she always managed to get along the rocks, right by the cliff. The chair wouldn't go any further though — it wasn't a bloody four-wheel drive. But Max would have to keep an eye on her when she got the new electric one this afternoon. The last thing Carmen needed was another accident.

Max walked out of the kitchen into the yard towards the headland. He knew why she was out here so often. She was catching up on ten years worth of beauty. The early morning sun in the east, the mansions of Cronulla to the north, and the perfect blue of water below. Views like this were worth millions of dollars, but you couldn't put a figure on their worth to the heart.

When Max reached Carmen, he scooped up her hat and sat it at an angle on her head. "Here you are, Darl. You don't wanna get burnt."

She was humming as usual. It was the same tune she always hummed. Max had heard it somewhere, but couldn't quite put his finger on it. Maybe it was a song they played when they used to jam together? Or was it something Tim or Larry had on their Walkman? He thought the name of the band was 'Something with Roses', but he couldn't be sure.

He would've loved to have asked, but Carmen had bit off her tongue in the accident. Because of her weak arms, she couldn't hold a pen well enough to write an answer either. Her brain was still getting that stuff right. But Max didn't mind, he loved to chat, and she was a real good listener.

"Well, we better get ready for the trip, huh sweets?" Max knelt down beside her. "Now, just so you know, we won't go by car — I know how much that upsets you."

Carmen turned to him and Max felt a tiny flutter in his heart. They were needy eyes. Tim had said they were vacant, but that boy didn't know the way a daughter looked at a father.

She groaned.

"It's all right, lovey. We're going on your favourite." Max pointed out towards the water. A ferry chugged slowly along the bay, heading towards the Bundeena Wharf.

Carmen groaned again and became restless. Drool spilled from her mouth.

"I know," Max said. "You love the ferry, don't ya?" He pulled out a hanky and dabbed at her mouth. "Now don't you worry, sweetie. Ol' Max'll look after ya, hey? I won't let nothing happen to you again. We got each other. And we got all of this."

Carmen was crying now and he cooed and hugged her in the chair. "I love you too, Carmie."

If Max had looked closely, without the haze that an early morning nip of whiskey



## HOME COMING

brought, he would've seen Carmen's eyes dance back and forth like ants were crawling on them. He would have heard the desperation in those low moans, filled with a thousand things she wanted to say, but never could.

Her hat blew off again and Max laughed. "Don't get up, sweetie. Let me."

The ferry tooted in the distance and Carmen began to gag.