

# PETER CORRIS

the big score



**G L I F F   H A R D Y   C A S E S**

the big score

PETER CORRIS is known as the 'godfather' of Australian crime fiction through his Cliff Hardy detective stories. He has written in many other areas, including a co-authored autobiography of the late Professor Fred Hollows, a history of boxing in Australia, spy novels, historical novels and a collection of short stories about golf (see [www.petercorris.net](http://www.petercorris.net)). He is married to writer Jean Bedford and lives in Sydney. They have three daughters.

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**C L I F F   H A R D Y   C A S E S**

  
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for civilising and editing.*

All characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons and circumstances is coincidental.

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Allen & Unwin  
83 Alexander Street  
Crows Nest NSW 2065  
Australia  
Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100  
Fax: (61 2) 9906 2218  
Email: [info@allenandunwin.com](mailto:info@allenandunwin.com)  
Web: [www.allenandunwin.com](http://www.allenandunwin.com)

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*For Bill Barnettson, a sharer in the pleasures  
and pains of golf.*

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# Ram raid

He was waiting for me on the front porch of my house when I got home. Big, bulky, suited, self-assured. A cop. I opened the gate and stood just inside it.

‘Are you Hardy?’

‘What if I am?’

‘Then I want to talk to you.’

I went back onto the footpath, closed the gate and fished out my mobile.

He advanced down the path and almost tripped on one of the pavers a tree root had lifted. ‘What the hell are you doing?’

‘Calling my solicitor. He lives close, can be here in a flash.’

I hadn’t noticed the unfamiliar car parked across the street and a little way down. My peripheral vision isn’t what it used to be. A uniformed policeman got out and began walking towards me.

‘Takes two to tangle,’ I said. ‘And three’s a crowd.’

The plain clothes man waved the uniform away. I heard the car door close. ‘They told me you were a smartarse.’

‘Did they tell you I don’t like being accosted by rude people at the end of a hard day?’

We stood with the gate between us. He was much the same height as me—say, 186 centimetres—and outweighed me by a good ten kilos. Years younger. It’s an old habit—estimating men by the centimetre, kilo and, lately, age, expecting competition or conflict. Doesn’t make for friendliness, but can head off personal injury.

‘Let’s start again,’ he said. ‘You—’

I said, ‘No. We’ll start with you identifying yourself and proving that identity and then telling me why you’re here. Of course, if I’m a terrorist suspect you don’t have to bother with any of that, or anything much—’

‘You’re determined to piss me off.’

I shrugged and juggled the mobile. ‘I hate bullies. Show me you’re not one.’

He didn’t like it, but he’d been out-boxed and he knew it. He produced his warrant card, identified himself as Detective Sergeant Christopher Wilson, and said he wanted to interview me in connection with a shooting.

I was mollified, but another old habit is making life tough for policemen. ‘Of whom?’ I asked.

He knew I was taking the piss, but held in his irritation and played along. ‘Cleve Harvey.’

I nodded.

‘You know him?’

‘What makes you think that?’

‘I’ve just about had enough of this, Hardy.’

I opened the gate, put the mobile away. ‘Yeah, me too. I know him. Can’t say I’m sorry he’s been shot. Or surprised. What’s it got to do with me?’

‘You haven’t asked how he’s doing.’

‘How’s he doing?’

‘He’s going to die.’

‘You don’t think I shot him?’

He raised his hand and I heard the car door slam across the street. Footsteps. ‘Let’s just say that you’re a person of interest.’

They took me to the Surry Hills police centre where I phoned Viv Garner, my solicitor. He said he’d be there within the hour. I waited, got up to go, escorted, to the toilet, and waited some more. Viv arrived and we were shown into an interview room. Decor functional, lighting adequate, atmospherics, since smoking went the way of the telephone directory slam and the kidney punch, sterile. Viv and I didn’t talk much. We’d been through the routine before and knew how to handle it unless there were any big surprises.

Wilson came in and fired up the recording devices. He announced the names of those present, the date and the time.

‘What’s the nature of your relationship with Cleve Harvey?’ Wilson said.

Viv said, ‘I think my client should be given some indication of why he’s a person of interest.’

‘It’s okay, Viv,’ I said. ‘I’ll cooperate as far as I can. Clue me if you spot anything sticky.’ I switched my attention to Wilson. ‘I met Harvey in Berrima gaol when I was serving a sentence for—’

‘No need,’ Viv said.

‘Right. Harvey was in for GBH. He was a thug and a

standover merchant, heavying the young ones for cigarettes and winnings at cards. I fronted him and we had a fight. I beat him. We met up again in a pub a few years later and had another fight. I beat him again.'

'This was when?' Wilson said.

'Perhaps two years back.'

'He's made what amounts to a dying declaration that you hired someone to kill him. His wife has made out an affidavit that he said the same to her several times before the shooting.'

Viv and I exchanged glances. Viv shrugged.

I said, 'They're both lying. No, hold on, she might not be lying that he said so. I don't know the woman. I'm surprised that he had a wife or that he kept one. He was a complete ...'

'What?'

'Careful, Cliff,' Viv said.

I wanted to annoy Wilson, couldn't help myself. 'Misogynist,' I said.

'If this person doesn't die,' Viv said, 'his statement amounts to nothing more than an accusation from a convicted criminal. And the wife's statement is hearsay.'

Wilson nodded. 'He's dead. Just heard. He was murdered and your client's name is the only one we have in connection with his death.'

'You better look harder,' I said. 'His middle name was machismo, if it wasn't arsehole, and—'

Viv cut in, 'My client denies any involvement in the death of Mr Harvey. Unless you are prepared to charge him, and I hardly think that likely on what you've told us, he should be free to leave.'

To underline the point, Viv and I stood up.

Wilson hit the stop button. 'It's early days,' he said.

Viv drove me home. We were turning into Glebe Point Road before he said, 'What's going on?'

'Search me.'

'Okay. There's nothing to it, so you're just going to sit quietly and let it fizzle out, right?'

'What d'you think?'

His sigh lasted almost until we were outside my house.

I said, 'I'll be discreet and careful.'

'That'll be a first on both counts. Your licence is hanging by a thread, mate, as always. And remember that whatever you do on this you're not getting paid.'

He shook my hand, which is not something we usually do. It seemed to jar me into a more serious mood and I went into the house keen to have a drink and a think.

A person in my game necessarily has contacts in the criminal community—as I suppose it's called these days. The next morning I put the cases I had on hold and made some phone calls. Then I trawled around several pubs and clubs. Eventually I located Ian 'Spider' Herriot, a retired burglar. Spider said that the security upgrade in residential and commercial properties over the past ten years put him out of work. A fall from a roof brought on various disabilities and he wangled a pension that kept him just above the breadline. I met him in the bar of the John Curtin Hotel in George Street—good Labor man, Spider.

It was middies of light for me and schooners of old for Spider for a round or two before we got down to business. Enthusiastic morning drinkers all around.

‘Cleve Harvey,’ I said.

Spider is a failed jockey—short in stature, strong once, but retirement had softened him and smoking had wizened his features. He had the jockey’s high-pitched voice. ‘A prick’s prick,’ he piped.

‘Right. He’s dead.’

Spider raised his glass. ‘The world’s a better place.’

‘I want to get in touch with his woman.’

Spider is an old hand at the information game since his retirement. There was only one thing he wanted to know, and it wasn’t why. ‘How much?’

‘A hundred.’

He drained his glass. ‘Sol Levy’s is just down the way. Throw in a carton of fifties and you’re on.’

That would double the cost but I’d been prepared to shell out two hundred anyway. We walked down to the tobacconist’s and I bought the carton. Spider eyed it as though it was a life jacket floating towards a drowning man.

‘Lola Swift,’ he said.

I juggled the carton as foot traffic parted around us. ‘Address?’

‘Erskineville—the fuckin’ Belmont Arms at this time of day.’

I handed over the money and the cigarettes, but he didn’t thank me.

Before heading back to the John Curtin, Spider had given me a rough, highly unflattering description of Lola Swift and I spotted her as soon as I walked into the pub. About forty, looking fifty, stringy, gaunt-faced, blonde dye job, wearing a top and skirt more suited to a twenty-year-old.

She was nursing a beer and bending over a racing guide.

The pub was the standard inner-city model that had undergone a bit of renovation some time ago so that the new surfaces were fast fading back towards the old. A few drinkers, singles, minding their own business, like Lola.

‘What’s Lola drinking?’ I said to the barman.

‘Old.’

I bought a schooner of Tooheys black and a middy of light for myself. I sat opposite her at the small table and pushed the beer across. She looked up from the guide, pen held tightly in nicotine-stained fingers with blood-red nails. She gave me a practised smile.

‘Hello, darling.’

I shook my head and moved the drink closer to her. ‘Sorry, love. I’m here for a talk, not for your services.’

The smile disappeared and with it the instinctive professional gestures—the raised eyebrows, tautened neck, straightened upper body. She pulled her drink a little closer.

‘Fuck off.’

I put a fifty down on the ring of moisture the glass had made so that it stuck there. She finished the drink she had on hand but didn’t touch the new one. Not yet, but she was paying attention.

‘My name’s Hardy.’

‘Oh, Jesus.’ For the first time a genuine emotion showed on her eroded face—disappointment, fear, regret ... whatever it was. ‘I knew there’d be trouble.’

‘You were right. I have to talk to you about Cleve Harvey.’

‘And you reckon you can do that with a schooner and fifty bucks?’

She'd recovered and was presenting as a genuine hard case. There were two ways to play it—tough or soft. Mistakenly, I went for tough. 'I could've made it a middy and twenty.'

'You're a bastard like Cleve said. I hope he nails you from the bloody grave.'

I had to retreat. 'Why, Lola?'

She was in full outrage mode now, voice raised, standing up, surprisingly tall. 'Drink your pissy light and your fuckin' schooner yourself and fuck off.'

She stalked out, skinny legs in high heels, scrawny bum in a tight skirt, hair flying, shoulder bag scooped up and swinging. Most of the eyes—some amused, some antagonistic—in the bar were on me. I sat tight, didn't fancy the idea of pursuing her up the street.

I drank half of the midy, picked up my damp fifty and left the bar. My car was a hundred metres away around a corner. I made the turn and became aware of someone close behind me. It was broad daylight at midday in Erskineville, which isn't the rough place it used to be, but you can't be too careful. I swung around, balanced, and with my hands ready.

'Easy,' the man said. 'Easy.'

He was tall and thin in jeans and a sweater, sneakers. Not young, not old. After years in the job you develop the knack of noticing the people around you and filing the information. This guy had been in the Belmont bar, pouring a can of Guinness—the kind with the loud rattle and the sound of escaping gas—into a glass, a movement that had caught my eye.

'Might be able to help youse, mate,' he said.

I relaxed. 'Yeah? How?'

‘Seen you talking to Lola and seen her take off. I can tell you where she lives. She’s a good root.’

‘You’d know, would you?’

He grinned, which didn’t improve his pinched, defeated look. ‘I should. Her flat’s just next to mine. When I’m flush I—’

‘Okay.’ I’d put the fifty in my jacket pocket and I fished it out. ‘I don’t mean her any harm. Fact is, I’m sort of more interested in the bloke she lived with.’

He nodded. ‘A real bastard, that one.’

‘Exactly.’ I showed him my card and my PEA licence. ‘It’s a private matter. Would fifty dollars get me to her door?’

‘Yeah, sure.’

‘Would it make you piss off and keep your mouth shut?’

‘Another twenty would.’

‘You’re on. You seem to know a lot about her. Where’s she likely to be now?’

‘In another pub, playing the horses for the rest of the afternoon. Then she goes out on the street.’

I took a twenty from my wallet and balled the notes in my fist. ‘Lead on,’ I said.

The block of flats had seen better days, much better days. It was square, squat, red brick and faded, but the remnants of some sense of style were there in the balconies and the garden out front and along the side, now dying of neglect. My escort said he and Lola were on the third floor. No security door, no lift. We went up the stained concrete steps in a dim light until we reached the top landing, which

would have given a view of some sort if the window hadn't been coated with grime.

I knocked at the door he indicated and got no answer. He took out his key and held out his hand for the money.

'Put the key away,' I said. 'You piss off down the stairs and don't show your face within a hundred metres for the next hour, minimum.'

He looked hurt, but he put the key back. I gave him the money and he started down the stairs.

'Let me hear the entrance door slam.'

I did. He could've been faking but I didn't think so. To someone with a set of picklocks attached to his always-present Swiss army knife, the old Yale lock was a piece of cake.

I've been in prostitutes' flats before and Lola's didn't surprise me. It was a tiny, one-bedroom job and it was neat as a new pin. It also smelled of cigarette smoke, perfume, room freshener and basic, underlying dirt. The double bed was precisely made with a black bedspread and a white sheet folded down at the end of the bed the way the working girls do. The decks were cleared for action. The bedside light held a red bulb; the table featured a packet of ribbed condoms, lubricant, dildos in three sizes. There was a strategically placed mirror along one wall, a small TV with a VCR and a stack of videos. The handcuffs were probably in a drawer, the lingerie in the closet.

Lola was in that grey area of the sex business—not flush enough to be in the phone book, but a notch above the streetwalker with the arrangement at a motel. The bathroom was quintessentially feminine except for a few traces of shaved whiskers in the basin.

I slid open the closet doors, probed drawers and shelves. The only thing out of place professionally was a heavy

suitcase at the back of a broom cupboard. I pulled it out and released the clasps—no locks. It contained all of Cleve that had remained in the world—some clothes, some shoes, shaving gear, some papers and some photographs in a big manilla envelope. The envelope was old and sealed with old, crisp sellotape until I slit it. I took the envelope and left the flat.

One question occupied my mind as I went down the stairs. Why hadn't the police examined Cleve Harvey's effects?

In the office I dealt with a few phone and email messages, keeping business afloat. I emptied Cleve Harvey's envelope out onto the desk and sifted through the contents: several papers relating to his release after prison sentences; a decree nisi divorce from a marriage to one Rachel Fremantle; a shooter's licence long expired; a collection of parking fine notices apparently unpaid; and a faded membership ticket for the Painters and Dockers Union.

The bulk of the material consisted of newspaper clippings. Between prison stretches Cleve had been quite a star in his day—a wood-chopping champion, a circus strongman, a long-distance swimmer, a movie and television stuntman, a Commonwealth Games trap-shooting medalist. He'd attracted notice for a one-round knockout of a Rugby League heavy in an off-season exhibition fight to raise money for Police & Community Youth Clubs in NSW.

One reason for his savage denunciation of me presented itself—fury that a man older and smaller than himself could beat him in a physical contest not just once but twice. It was hardly enough. I went through the documents again. Something there niggled at me but I couldn't pin it down.