COUNTRY CASEBOOK

(Omnibus Two)

by

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious.
The key locations are also imaginary.

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Country Casebook: Book Seven

Case No. 1: Up His Nose

Evenings, especially spring evenings, were pleasant enough in the small Queensland town of Buckton. The late sun could not catch shop windows because of wide awnings to protect the buildings along the length of the town's main street which crossed Buckton Creek and ran on past the Butter Factory and the motel, before heading nor'-nor'-west. In the other direction it ran out past the straggling outskirts of houses, yards, a school, burry paddocks, then headed for the small township of Dinawadding. And for those who turned at the T-junction at the town's centre and took the Winville road there was the fine sight of the Bank of the Darling Downs, an attractive old wooden building with iron lace verandahs, top and bottom, and wide sash windows to catch the sun coming and going. On the opposite corner of a small side road rejoicing in the name of Heussler Street and fronting the Winville road was the town's small police station, a brick oblong with a tin roof and a bank of windows facing the not-very-busy road. Its status as a nonentity among older more attractive buildings was irrelevant once people had cause to step inside.

Its current incumbent, Sergeant Dennis Walsh, was a large man. Some people found him physically intimidating whenever he loomed over them. Others put it down to a distinctly difficult personality, an attitude to policing that had little room for compromise, or an ingrained belief that his sole purpose in life was to make local residents, no matter how blameless their lives might be, begin to feel vaguely uneasy.

For all that, most people got on with their lives and hoped for good seasons and worried about their children's educational futures and gossiped about the new Catholic priest who had moved in to share the presbytery with old Father Colgan since the parish's popular younger man, Father Terry Dowson, had been moved to Roma. Several peope had used words like 'dynamo' and 'livewire' to describe Father Michael Meagher; others had sounded dubious as they talked of him 'livening things up', 'getting things moving' and even, in the words of their housekeeper Carmen Cavanagh, 'some days I hardly know whether I'm coming or going'. Even so, and people continued to have mixed feelings about him, no one could deny that he made a real effort round the parish to visit, to be available, to help, to teach.

He called in late on Friday to see Sergeant Walsh. Superficially the two men were similar; big sandy men with energy and a view of their work which didn't allow room for back-sliding, sloth, cop-outs, low standards, or easy interpretations of their guiding manuals. Admittedly the *Police Procedures Manual* set things out in less ambiguous ways than the Church. But Father Meagher wanted to be liked and respected and popular with his parishioners; something which never seemed to strike the sergeant as an issue.

Now he said, "This probably doesn't come within your remit, Sergeant Walsh, but you might be able to suggest something. It's about Steven Rolls. His family are getting to the point where they can't cope. I know it isn't a police problem. So far as I know there's been no crime committed … nor possibly ever will be. But there's a lot of anger and stress swirling round. And he refuses to even consider getting professional help. I know a lot of farmers, a lot of men really, would see it as a sign of weakness but it is an impossible situation for his wife and children."

"So what exactly is the problem?" Stories went the rounds that Steve Rolls was either definitely lacking up top—or barking … strange. Most people were kind enough not to talk of him as worse than eccentric. His three young children came to the convent school in town. His wife was a gentle pious woman who was the only person Sergeant Walsh had ever met in real life to use the expression 'bless my soul'.

"He thinks he's got keds up his nose. Well, not only there but everywhere, basically. Crawling on his skin. Caught in his hair. In his mouth. Filling his ears. Getting up his bum. He even presented

me with a small bottle with what I'm sure was his urine and asked me if I couldn't see them swimming round in it. I've dropped it off at the hospital to have it checked. But it looked perfectly clear and normal to me. I guess it's just as well he had his children well before this obsession started—or he would be afraid that the only thing he's capable of begetting would be giant keds. The poor chap is a mess. He looks a mess, he sounds a mess, and the farm is going to pot." He hesitated, then said with an engaging smile, "Don't take that literally … but his fences are in a bad way and he's so self-absorbed he's hardly capable of planning and getting things done anymore."

"I guess I can call in next time I'm out that way. But what specifically do you want me to try and do, or get him to do? If he doesn't believe the medical people that there's nothing crawling on him—"

"I know. But if we could get him to come in and spend a few days in hospital here, some tests, even just so they can treat the damage he's doing to himself—that could be a start."

"Okay." But after his visitor had gone he sat on another few minutes trying to decide how to convince Steve Rolls that the fauna living on him didn't have six legs and a nasty little proboscis. Steve Rolls was some relation to Mrs Kees … and that was another difficult and fraught situation because Mrs Kees' obsession was her retarded and unpleasant son Artie. But for all the trouble he had had with Artie Kees he still thought it might be an easier obsession than believing yourself to be covered in crawling sucking parasites.

In the end he decided to combine Rolls with a visit to the Parsons sisters, Ellie and Faye, so it wouldn't look as though he was doing more than dropping in to see Steven Rolls on his way past.

They had a quite different problem. Someone kept lifting their entrance gate off its hinges and dropping it on the ground. This practice had been an old New Year 'tradition' around the district but, fortunately, had fallen out of favour. Whoever kept doing it to them might have decided to reactivate the idea and not confine it to the New Year …

It was quiet on the side road that wound past the Rolls' farm. Dry grass fringed the narrow road. Grasshoppers whirred through the still warm air. The ditch alongside the road gradually became a small gully and fed into a dam in Steve Rolls' bottom paddock, Magpies were rearing families in the few box trees scattered alongside the road. He rolled down his window and let the slight breeze of his passing flow in. But it brought with it a distinctly unpleasant smell. There was no sign of anything dead on the road. He pulled over and got out.

If the Rolls family were letting their animals die on them …

But at the edge of the gully he came on the reason. Three greyhounds had been shot and dumped just out of sight of people on this side road. They had been dead a while. Their bodies were bloated. Maggots filled the entry points of the shots. He picked up a branch to move them slightly apart. Then went back to his car and got his camera. He had no objection to greyhound racing. It was the aftermath which got his goat. These animals had obviously been deemed too slow to be worth breeding from. Greyhounds weren't wildly popular as pets. Some people did the right thing and had them put down and buried them properly. But there were also people who dumped them, bashed them, or simply shot them and left them anywhere out of the public eye. And the Rolls children walked past here to catch the bus. Not a nice sight or smell for three small children.

Steve Rolls was not a nice sight either. Walsh drew into the farmyard and got out. The sounds of chooks laying came from a tin shed. But otherwise the place was quiet. He went over and banged on the back door.

Mr Rolls might've been a good-looking well-set-up man once. Now his face, neck, arms, even the bit of his lower leg that was visible had been scratched raw. His nose had been so troubled with constant picking and blowing that it was red and glaring. He carried a large handkerchief in one hand.

"What are you doing here?" he said suspiciously. "It's the hospital, isn't it, telling me lies again."

"Nothing to do with me, mate. You want to scratch yourself to death you go right ahead."

"It's all right for people like you. You didn't get the little blighters on you. They're eating me alive."

"Well, while they eat you alive, you've got a problem down the road. Someone's dumped three dead greyhounds in your gully. If it rains they're going to contaminate your dam. And your poor bloody kids have to walk past that foul mess every day. So I'd suggest you get straight down there and do something about burying them before they really give you problems."

"I can't do anything. Look at me. I'm going mad. They won't be happy till they've sucked out every drop of blood."

"Then you'd better get on to the job quick smart while you can still get around."

"What sort of monster are you? Can't you see the mess I'm in. The kids can cope—they're good kids. They understand what I'm going through."

"They may. I don't. You've got a legal responsibility for the welfare of your kids. So you'd better get a crowbar and a shovel and I'll give you a lift down … "

But there was no budging Steven Rolls. Dennis Walsh put a hand out, as though to frogmarch him over to the car, but as soon as he touched the other man he let out a long agonised squeal. "Don't! Don't touch me!"

"Okay, I won't. But if those dogs aren't shifted by the next time I come by—there'll be trouble. You can do it yourself or you can ring the Council, I don't care which, but just make sure it gets done."

There might be ways to deal with this. Hypnotism maybe. Or knock the bloke out and keep him sedated for a week. But they were hardly in his field of expertise. In the end Walsh said, "I've got work to do, even if you haven't, but don't forget. I expect to see those dogs shifted."

It might get Steve Rolls thinking along different lines; then again it might simply add maggots to the fauna he already believed was crawling on him.

*

Fiona Greehan had lived in Buckton for several years but she'd never been able to convince herself she coped with country life. Yet people who had been loudly critical of the Bank of the Darling Downs for appointing a female manager, 'What on earth does a dame know about rural debt?' and similar disparaging comments had swirled around her in the first few months, had come to accept her, even to find qualities usually lacking in bank managers. She adhered to a strong policy that it was always better to try and help people trade their way out of debt than to foreclose. A number of farm families had reason to be grateful to her clear-sighted careful oversight of their situations.

That she also went round to spend a night with Sergeant Walsh infrequently was more puzzling and harder for local people to decide what position to take. There was the tut-tut brigade. There were people like Noel and Mavis Barnard at the service station who were happy for them both. There were people who believed she took her life into her hands and, speaking personally, they would sooner tackle a lion in its den. A small minority believed she was buttering Sergeant Walsh up; just why was hard to say but it might have something to do with getting him to look the other way while she made off with the bank's assets. Her flatmate Raelene Perry who ran the town's popular little boutique believed it to be some kind of aberration, a brainstorm perhaps, something she'd soon get over and would then probably look back on as an inexplicable moment of madness.

For Fiona, sitting over dinner with Dennis in the old station house, it was always a kind of poignantly sweet time. Not least because the town and district seemed to think that they could ring at any time and expect instant action. Noel Barnard believed it was one reason why many people had come to accept their sergeant's tough stance on crime, on just about everything; that he would come, no matter what the time of night or the problem, was curiously comforting. He might abuse the person who had called him out but he never said, "It'll have to wait till morning" or "You call *that* a problem!" Sometimes she resented the people who interrupted their times together; at other times she accepted his departure with philosophic calm.

He had been asking to get another constable for months now without result. There was too much work here for one person and, Fiona felt, he often looked a bit weary. It was hard to find ways to make his life a little easier. He wasn't the kind of person to let anyone intrude. An intensely guarded privacy. She found his reticence and the deep and pervasive barriers he set round his

personal life hard to deal with. But she always felt she would rather have him with boundaries than other men without …

He had been telling her, though fortunately before they sat down to eat, about Steven Rolls' problems. The unfortunate man, far from getting local sympathy, was moving into the status of a bizarre joke.

"But what *are* keds?" she said, uncertain if this was yet another moment in which she could display her ignorance of country matters—or whether this was a curious local slang term which she couldn't be expected to know.

"They're a type of blood-sucking fly. They mainly infest sheep—"

He said it without thinking deeply; unpleasant but a fact of life. And then the thought hit him. Sheep! Why on earth was Steven Rolls, a man who reared vealers, convinced that he was infested with something to do with sheep—

"They sound revolting. But why are you looking so … so surprised?"

"They *are* revolting. But Steve Rolls has no sheep. So far as I know he's never worked with sheep. So why the heck has he come up with this particular obsession?"

"People do come up with some very strange obsessions—"

"I know. But usually there is a moment, maybe a split second, when it makes perfect sense. Just maybe."

The phone rang in the middle of dinner and he answered brusquely, "Will it wait? I'm trying to eat my bloody dinner and not get indigestion." And a minute later he sighed and said, "Okay, Bill, but I wish you'd spend some of the money in your mattress and hire yourself a bit of brawn."

After he'd hung up she said, "Bill Borrie?" Bill ran the Coolibah Hotel. Bill was elderly and getting frail. Though it wasn't a particularly rough pub Bill only had to hear a voice raised in boozy anger and he was on the phone …

"He does it on purpose. I'm convinced he does. He seems to think I'm his hired muscle. I wish he'd retire … or get someone to help out who's thirty years younger … "

She agreed wholeheartedly. "Dennis, don't rush your dinner. I'll put it back in the oven."

"You will stay, won't you? I shouldn't be long." He got up and came over to her and put his arms round her briefly. "Make yourself at home." But it wasn't much of a way to conduct a love affair, even with someone as kind-hearted and understanding as Fiona.

After he'd gone out she finished her own meal, tidied in the kitchen, then settled down in front of the television for a while. It was a house curiously lacking in the means of entertainment most people took for granted. He did have some books but few of them were light reading. Apart from a few technical things for his job they were mostly about birds, grasses, wildlife, soils … parasites. She couldn't imagine not having some light relief on her shelves … but then she wasn't called out, night after night.

A half hour passed, an hour. The faintly musty old house seemed to combine with the pollens of spring to make her feel a bit stuffy. "I need a hanky." She hunted in her handbag without luck. But he would be sure to have some in his drawers. He always said 'make yourself at home' and she felt sure he meant it; he tended not to say things unless he meant them. But she never liked to pry into his cupboards and shelves …

No shortage of men's handkerchiefs in his top bureau drawer. And under them what appeared to be a plastic bag with some photographs in it. She couldn't picture him hiding 'girlie' postcards among his handkerchiefs, nor was it very likely that they were from a case. He had a perfectly good and quite large safe over at the station. She felt she would like to see his family, his parents, his brother, a home maybe … and there didn't seem any reason to think he would regard the sort of photos people handed round to bore their relatives and friends as being off-limits.

She slipped them out of the bag. The top picture was of a young Aboriginal woman holding an almost invisible baby wrapped in a light pink blanket. The next two pictures were of the same woman. Then she came to a photo of two boys. Almost certainly Dennis and his older brother Terry. In the picture he looked about twelve.

There was nothing to stop her going through the whole pile but she found that she couldn't go on. Whatever the significance of the woman in the pictures it was a significance which seemed to

shut her out. If Dennis truly had another woman in his life, *and a child*, then she was merely … merely what? She couldn't begin to answer the question. But then it was said that men in far north Queensland had a habit of having Aboriginal mistresses. They didn't necessarily see it as meaning much. She had read Xavier Herbert years ago and hoped that things had truly changed. Dennis had grown up there somewhere in the Gulf country. And yet, somehow, it didn't fit her image of him. That bluntness. That hard-edged honesty. If there truly was another woman in his life, even a separated one, she felt sure he would have said so in the beginning. Or was it one of those situations where it is hard to know what to say and when. Something which might be ended … and then again might not.

She tidied the drawer again and closed it.

Life could go on, unchanged. They were just … photos.

But something had shifted. The idea of simply undressing and climbing into his bed, as she sometimes did, to wait for his return … or go to sleep if he was very late … no longer seemed acceptable. She could pretend to herself, and to him, that nothing had happened, that she had seen and wondered nothing. She could ask him in a neutral sort of way. She could say shrewishly, 'so who is your other woman?' She could apologise for prying …

But no course of action promised to take away this sinking uneasy feeling. Whatever she chose to do—nothing could be quite the same again between them. At last she accepted that she couldn't stay. She had wrapped the rest of his dinner in foil. It would stay hot after she turned off the oven. And a brief note. 'I'm sorry about not staying. But I'll see you soon. Love, Fiona.' She could add in an excuse. She *did* have a busy day tomorrow. But she couldn't bring herself to expand. Then she let herself out of the house, leaving the back light on, and walked home. Raelene had chosen to watch a video of 'Indiana Jones' and said cheerfully, "Grab yourself some carrot cake and come and watch. I know there is only so much Dinny the Dragon anyone can take—"

She could fire up in his defence, Rae was a very nice warm-hearted person in most ways but she was inveterately snide and critical where Dennis was concerned, but tonight she only responded briefly, "He's gone out on a case."

"It really isn't much of a life for you, Fee, always being messed around by other people's troubles."

"I know." Maybe that was what had happened to the woman in the photos; she had got tired of keeping his dinner hot.

She reached for a slice of cake. But it would take more than the best and moistest of cakes to remove this strange empty feeling which had spread out from the pit of her stomach to take her whole self over. She felt cold and miserable and rejected. It was going to be a long and sleepless night, she suspected, as she went over to pour herself a glass of sherry to go with the cake. Raelene watched this unexpected indulgence with a sharp eye but said nothing.

*

Sergeant Walsh always began his day early. A quick visit to try and find what on earth had sparked Steven Rolls' obsession seemed to be worth a try. He was no psychologist. If he was, he thought grimly, he might understand why Fiona had chosen not to stay last night. Boredom maybe? Or did she feel she had to make a point? Or had Raelene rung her? Or had she thought of something she'd left undone? Or … but his powers of invention had run dry.

He dealt with routine calls and appointments. Then headed out again for the Rolls' farm.

The children had left on the bus. Only Steven and his wife Cathy were still around the house. This time Sergeant Walsh wasted no words in polite enquiry. "Right, mate, you'd better tell me what the fuck is going on here before I really blow my top."

Steve Rolls looked as startled as his wife. Then he said angrily, "I'll have you mind your language round my wife, sergeant! You can talk like that to your lady friends but I'll bet they don't like it either."

The Rolls family had only heard the vaguest of rumours and suspected someone of pulling their legs; Dinny Walsh was hardly the ladykiller type. But they had heard plenty of stories of Dennis on the warpath and did not discount them. Now they saw a mild version of this. "You want

to get picky about my language, Mr Rolls, and I'll get picky about you allegedly helping to load duffed sheep. So don't you go getting on your high horse with me!"

Steven Rolls simply stared at the police sergeant for a long startled moment. Then he said, "I don't know what you mean."

"Then you'd better sit right down there, buster, and start talking—if you don't want me to start looking more closely at what you were up to last time you were out west." Dennis Walsh walked over and dropped into a cane basket chair on the verandah. For a moment the Rolls, husband and wife, had the horrible expectation that it would give way under him. But neither of them doubted that he was there till he did get some sort of explanation.

"I'll—I'll make us a cuppa," Mrs Rolls said awkwardly and scuttled away.

The sergeant soon came to regret her absence. Left with Steven Rolls who continually scratched, picked invisible things from his skin, blew his nose at intervals and studied with great care whatever was in his handkerchief, he began to believe that he too was infested; and the man's habits turned his stomach. What on earth was it like for the wife and children to live with this day in, day out, or had they found ways of simply tuning their father out?

Mrs Rolls came back with a tray and set it down on a small rickety table and asked Dennis Walsh what he would like. When she had poured, he said, "Well, this is all very nice and neighbourly but it isn't answering my question."

Cathy Rolls shot him a strange look as though to say 'you call this nice?' but she only said, when it became clear her husband wasn't going to answer, "It's true Steve was out west for a while. He went to look after his uncle's property for a month or two, out near Charleville. But he certainly didn't steal any sheep. He would never do such a thing."

"I didn't say he did. I said he helped. So who else was there with you, Mr Rolls?" This question too seemed to go over the man's head. But again Mrs Rolls stepped in and said, "There were men there. Not just Steve. There were two or three other men."

"So who were these other men?"

"They were just … stockmen, drovers, hands, you know."

"No. I don't know. That's why I'm asking you. Well, I'm asking your husband. But he's not making much of a fist of it when it comes to answers. So you might as well tell me all you know."

"But I don't know. I don't know anything about them, not even their names. I think one of them was called Keith."

A strange expression came over Steve Rolls' face. Sergeant Walsh, watching him closely, was at a loss on how to interpret it. But Mrs Rolls looked away slightly and tears glistened in her eyes. He didn't think she understood either, only that something about this man, this time, was at the root of all their mysterious troubles.

At last Steven Rolls said slowly, "I haven't got anything to tell you, sergeant. But if you want to charge me with stealing sheep then you go right ahead."

"But—Steve—I don't want you charged with anything." His wife looked at him in a pleading way. "Just to find a way … a way to … for you to feel better."

"I'm never going to be better. So there's not much point in bleating on about everything."

She looked hurt but didn't say anything. There was a sense of impasse between them. Dennis Walsh began to feel that it wouldn't really matter how long he sat around here—it wouldn't make one iota of difference. Steven Rolls wasn't going to speak about his time out west. Wouldn't. Couldn't. Or couldn't in front of his wife?

After a long silence he heaved himself to his feet. "Here, let me take the tray out for you, Mrs Rolls."

She seemed surprised but allowed him to take it out to the kitchen for her. Then he parked himself by a cluttered bench and said, "This isn't the sort of question I'm much good at asking people, it's nearly as embarrassing for me as it is for you, and it isn't really my business, but I'd like to ask you—have you and your husband had sex since he returned from that stint on his uncle's property?"

She turned away from the sink to look at him, then looked away again. Her embarrassment was obvious. But at last she said, "No, we haven't."

He wasn't sure where to go next. But at last he said, "I think we're worrying about the wrong problem. The keds are not the issue. They are … but they're not. They simply mean it was done somewhere dirty, somewhere infested … "

"I don't understand." She had grown very tense and anxious. "What was done?"

"It isn't for me to tell you both what to do. If Steven doesn't want to get help I can't make him. But rape is a crime. If he would rather scratch himself to death and let the buggers get away with it, that's his business. But I hate to think of any other young men being put through what he's been through."

"But Steve hasn't been … " and then her eyes seemed to widen. "You *must* be wrong. We're not … he's not … he wouldn't … "

"Look, you both need help. I don't know what kind of help. If you can't talk to Father Meagher … then go to the hospital and talk to Sister O'Brien. At least she'll be able to advise you … or go to Winville."

"Steve doesn't go … to Mass, I mean, not any more, not since he came back. He says it wouldn't be right to—to spread his infection."

"That's the worst part of it, isn't it? That he's the victim—but he's the one feeling guilty." He knew that Steve Rolls would be able to hear this exchange, if he was still sitting where they'd left him, but whether it would do any good …

"Anyway, I'd better get on my way. I don't know how I can help you both. But let me know if there's anything." He didn't like leaving the situation in that unresolved, possibly unresolvable, state. But in the end they had to make the moves.

As he drove away again, feeling drained, he stopped by the gully and went over. No sign of the dogs. That seemed a small step forward. Steven Rolls might *appear* to be totally self-obsessed with no room for anyone else to get between him and his imaginary parasites. But somewhere there was still enough decency or enough caring to want to protect his wife and children …

It might even be enough for him to finally take a step towards getting some real help …

*

It wasn't till the following evening that Dennis Walsh saw Fiona Greehan and Brian Collyer come out of the bank after work and stand a minute before Brian headed for his car and Fiona turned to walk home. He went out the back door of the station and called out to her. "Can you spare a minute?"

She changed course and he opened the gate behind the station garage and stepped on to the side street.

"Am I missing something here—or were you just compleely fed up with waiting the other night?"

"It wasn't that, Dennis. I just decided to leave."

"I may not be worth waiting for … but I was sorry not to be able to come home to you."

"Never mind. Some other time."

"Tonight then?"

"I think I'll take a rain check, if you don't mind. I'm being sent to Garramindi for a short spell. I've got quite a lot of organising to do."

"I won't keep you then. But surely you can give me ten minutes of your precious time."

She heard the edge to his voice. "Yes, of course. But what about the station?"

"Go on over. I'll be with you in a minute."

She nodded. It all had to be spoken of but the how was another matter. The simplest way …

She went round to the back of the house and took his spare key out of the cupboard in the wash house and let herself in. The house was silent except for a ticking clock on a kitchen shelf. She went over and checked the kettle and switched it on and set out two mugs and a teapot. But the small ritual did nothing to ease the tension which had accompanied her everywhere these last two days.

He came in, tossed a bunch of keys on the table and sat down heavily. "Will I start—or will you? I know it isn't much of a life. All these interruptions—"

"It isn't that, Dennis. While I was waiting I needed a handkerchief and I didn't seem to have brought one … so I went to your drawer."

"And? I'm not precious about my bloody hankies. I hope you found a clean one there."

"You keep some photos under them. I took them out and had a look at a couple."

"I've got no problem with that. They're only photos."

"But … couldn't you have *told* me you've got another woman in your life … before I got involved?" She hated the thought that it probably came out sounding like a whine.

"How many pictures did you look at?"

"Just four. Three of the same woman and one that looks like you and your brother. Then I felt embarrassed about prying and put them all back."

"The woman was my wife. The baby was my daughter. They've both been dead for more than twenty years." He said it in the sort of flat voice he might use for some unremarkable weather. But that didn't remove the shock in his words.

"Oh, Dennis, I'm so terribly sorry." It seemed strange to him that it should be her eyes which suddenly filled with tears. "What were their names?"

"My wife was Norena. We called our daughter Danielle. I know it was a bit of a fancy name but I think Norie found it in one of those romances women read."

"Mills and Boon?"

"Could be."

"But you liked it too?"

"Of course. A name that only one parent likes isn't a goer."

"And—can I ask what happened—or would you rather not talk about it?"

"I think you'd better go through all the pictures. Then you'll understand. What say I cook us something?"

"Okay. But just let me leave a message for Rae so she doesn't come home and cook for two." She went over to the phone while he got out a saucepan and frying pan and put them on the stove. Then he went out of the room, fetched the packet, put it on the kitchen table, and busied himself with putting vegetables on to cook and getting several chops from the frig.

*

Another person might have put photos into a photo album and the various pieces cut from newspapers into a scrapbook. But here they were simply bundled together and it took her several minutes to sort the cuttings into chronological order.

The first report said that police were investigating the rape and death of a young woman about twelve miles from Normanton. 'Police believe that Norena Walsh, 19, of Wexford Station, was raped before being bashed to death. The infant in the vehicle with her probably died later from dehydration and insect bites.' There was a little more describing where the Landrover and the woman's body had been found. The next news story had a not-very-clear picture of Norena Walsh and the information that police enquiries were continuing and anyone traveling on that road that evening was being urged to come forward. It said she had been visiting friends and relatives in town. Her husband, not named, had assumed she had decided to stay overnight and return home next day. Several more items appeared, one giving the information that the Walsh family had been in the district since 1948, and another one with a photo of Dennis. Then there was information on the date of the inquest. Then more information to say it was possible that the baby, Danielle Walsh, age 5 months, might have been smothered in her carry basket. Weeks more passed. Then the news that a trial date had been set for Townsville. There were items from several northern papers on the trial itself. There were mug-type-shots of six young men. It was hard to read much into them. Then there were some key points from the coverage, not least that all the men had sworn they were not on that road that night. Their difficulty appeared to be that they were each other's alibis.

But the main problem in the deeper quest for justice, and even the judge, Justice Michael Danvers, was moved to comment on the poor quality of the police investigation, including the fact that some semen samples had gone missing or been mislabeled, and the bodies had not been thoroughly checked till nearly two days later. In fact, he drew attention to the failure of the police to

give the prosecution reliable evidence to work with. The defence had made hay with some of the supposed forensic data.

And then came the verdict. All six men were found 'Not Guilty'.

There was another item a day later saying the Walsh family intended to appeal the verdict. The double jeopardy rule meant that the men could not be tried for the same crime. But the verdict could be appealed and they could and should be tried for causing the death of the baby. But there were no more cuttings. Just some more photos of the family, several more baby photos, then an attractive one of Dennis and Norena on their wedding day and another one of his brother and his wife …

At last she looked up and said, "Dennis, what did you do?"

"I paid a lawyer. I borrowed money to pay him to look into every aspect of the two cases. He said we would have exactly the same problems, if we tried to bring a civil case, because the police had not labeled and kept everything properly. He took my money and then basically said 'sucks to you'. I heard later that he was being investigated for overcharging his clients."

He went back to turning the chops and breaking a couple of eggs into the pan. It was hard to know how to respond to this tragic story, presented so laconically. He had had more than twenty years to learn to deal with it. For her, it had crashed on her like a thunderclap and she didn't know whether to offer him sympathy or encourage him to talk about it … or whether to talk on lighter matters and let him choose whether he wanted to say more on the subject.

"Would you like tea or coffee?" He put tea in the teapot and got down two plates. She let him continue to put their meal out on the table. Boiled potato, pumpkin, peas, and rice were probably nourishing, not to mention some fatty chops and a fried egg. She just wasn't sure she could now set everything aside and tuck in with a good appetite.

After a couple of minutes he said, "Don't let it get you down. It is the past. You can't live in the past. Maybe it's not even good to go back too often."

"Would you have told me … if I hadn't stumbled on the photos?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it's my past. Not yours."

She felt there was a flaw in this reasoning. Surely caring for one another meant sharing the sadness as well as the good things? But he never shared either. Nor was she sure how she should interpret 'caring'. She was here. She was available. He might think of her as good company and she didn't grizzle when he was called away. She had pressed herself on him … yes, she couldn't pretend she hadn't …

She had always avoided thinking about that aspect of it all. But she was certain, or nearly certain, that Dennis would never have lifted a finger to start anything …

He apologised for the potatoes. "Think they could've done with a few more minutes."

"It doesn't matter. There are more important things in life than potatoes."

"True. But I like to think I'm a reasonable bush cook. And did you have any particular more important things in mind?"

"Not really. It's just one of those clichés I use when I want to be polite."

"I can think of a more important thing to ask you about."

"Such as?" She half-expected him to refer to some case, some problem he was having.

"I don't quite know how to ask this. But have you ever thought of having a baby?"

"With you?"

"Well, anyone. But yeah, I s'pose I do mean with me."

It wasn't really a remarkable question. Couples asked it all the time. But possibly they tried to time it a bit better.

At last she said cautiously, "Dennis, I know times have changed. But quite a few people still see something coming before the question about babies."

"If you mean marriage—I know you don't want to marry me so there's no point in asking."

"So this baby—I would drop it round to you in a comfortable box when it arrives? Or you would drop by to go kitchy-koo before you head round to the pub to sort out the brawls for Bill? Or we would have the occasional get-together—"

"Of course I don't mean that!" He sounded angry; or he would if he was willing to let himself go. "I mean as an idea."

"As an idea it's a nice idea. But nothing more."

She felt she couldn't eat any more; not because of his cooking but because she seemed to have closed up inside. Every mouthful was an effort to swallow.

"I think … if you wouldn't mind … that I might go home now. I do have things waiting to be done." She stood up and took her plate over to the sink. "I'll—I'll see you soon." She came over to him and dropped a light kiss on his forehead then she took her handbag and went out. It was silly to want to cry yet it grew hard to see where she was going, her eyes were so misted over, but she blinked firmly and told herself not to be so stupid, so over-sensitive, to be upset with him, with everything, and made her way out.

After she'd gone he went on eating without much enjoyment. Then he pushed his plate aside and took up the packet of photos. It didn't sound very caring but there really were times when he forgot about them. And now Fiona had brought it all back.

But it wasn't really a baby he wanted. Danny would be grown up now, if she'd lived, even possibly with a husband and children of her own. And no one could replace her …

He didn't want to dwell on the thought. But he felt the strange prick of emotion and took out one of his unfortunate handkerchiefs to blow his nose noisily. The phone rang in the middle of this and he said curtly, "Yeah, what is it?"

"Oh sorry!" the voice sounded startled, then apologetic. "It's me, Dave Barry. I don't want to bother you this late, Dennis, but I was just doing up the till and it's short. I had young Damien Scully and some of his mates in here earlier. Mucking round a bit. I just got the wind up a bit when I found I was down."

"Give me five minutes." But five minutes weren't really enough to put aside the anguish of the past and present his usual self to the world.

"Damn her," he said suddenly. It was just as well Fiona didn't hear that, she was already feeling miserable enough, but it might have helped her to hear Dave Barry, the local butcher, say as Dennis came in, "Sorry to call you out of an evening, mate. You look like you've got a touch of hay fever." It was surprising to see Dennis with faintly red eyes and a sniffle. If he had nothing else local people envied he at least appeared to have an iron constitution. Even Cherry Morton and her cocktail of household poisons hadn't managed to do more than slow him down a tad.

"Could be. So what's missing?"

Dave Barry took up the old envelope where he'd jotted things down. "I don't like to make a big thing of it … but a hundred and twenty dollars is not to be sneezed at."

"So when did Damien and his pals come in?"

"Round about two. He said he wanted to buy some snags for a barbie. He had Ricky and Mick Low with him. I was here the whole time but I was busy weighing and wrapping. Even so, I can't for the life of me see how they could've got to the till. But that's the only thing I can think of. I had about six people in after them but all housewives and none I'd care to point the finger at."

"Are you the only person who uses the till?"

"My wife Sally."

"Well, I can try for fingerprints."

But before he could take it any further the case suddenly became something of an anti-climax. He only wished, later, that his relations with Fiona could be so simply resolved. Mrs Barry came bustling in the street door and said in some alarm, "Dave! Dennis! What on earth has happened?"

"The till is down a hundred and twenty. I thought it might be Damien and his pals but I was telling Dennis I couldn't see how they could've got to it."

She gave a slightly embarrassed laugh. "Then you can both relax. You know I told you at breakfast that I was going to go and pay some bills then go round to Jane to get my hair done?"

He nodded. “So you did. I’d forgotten that. But you didn’t put a note in to say how much you’d taken out.”

“Didn’t I? I’m so sorry. But I thought I’d be back in time to do up the takings anyway.” She turned to Sergeant Walsh. “And I’m sorry to bring you out for nothing.”

“That’s okay. I’ll be getting along then.” He turned and went out.

After he’d gone she said, “You should’ve waited till I got home.” Then an extra thought struck her. “We could at least have given him something for calling him out just to see how forgetful we’re getting.”

“He doesn’t do ‘on the house’, love, you should know that by now.”

She nodded. “Well then, what say we invite him around sometime? He can’t complain if we do the cooking and he does the eating.”

“Maybe. But let’s get this money organised for now and close up.”

Dennis Walsh thought, as he went back to the station, that Dave and Sally might often be at cross-purposes, probably because he wasn’t much of a one for spelling things out and she was notoriously absent-minded, but he wouldn’t really mind their kind of marriage. They forgave each other readily and always had a smile for their customers, even for the Damien Scullys of their world.

Fiona, too, was thinking … but on a much different marriage. It wasn’t really his insensitivity in virtually asking if she would like to provide him with a baby to make up for the one he’d lost. It was something far deeper and more troubling. It had sometimes amazed her—the effortless fury he could turn on the most minor of miscreants. But now she felt she understood that although he might’ve dealt in some form with his grief, though that wasn’t guaranteed, he had never dealt with those layers of rage and resentment. It wasn’t simply groups of young men, he was also angry at lawyers, he was probably angry at the church for not giving him anything but platitudes, he was most likely angry at Norena for making that unfortunate and dangerous decision, he was angry at himself for not being able to come to her aid. And he was still furiously angry at the police, at the whole system which called itself ‘Justice’. Not for him any sense of police culture, of supporting mates right or wrong, of hanging in together. And yet, unlike other angry people, he had co-opted the system in the hope that he could make it work to keep other people safe or get justice for them if all else failed. It was impossible not to admire him for that.

‘But I think I’ll go and … I can’t very well chop onions when I’ve supposedly just had dinner. I’ll just have to tell Rae someone told me a sad story this afternoon. Otherwise it will reaffirm all her worst fears that he’s a brute and a bully … and she’ll say she knew, she absolutely *knew*, all this sweetness and treating me nicely couldn’t possibly last.’

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For Dennis Walsh the only really good news was that he was going to get a new constable, that the said constable would be one Guy Briggs, and he was expected to be ready to start work next week. ‘Let’s hope,’ Dennis Walsh said to himself as he took the Burleigh road, ‘that he understands country life. A bit. That he’s a hard worker. That he’s got a hide like a rhinoceros. That he doesn’t mind going out and about and keeping a sharp eye on things. I’m beginning to feel like a very un-springy-chicken.’

Unfortunately Guy Briggs when he arrived in Buckton in an old but beautifully maintained black Holden Monaro gave no indication of being any of the things his new boss had hoped for. He was a city person, late twenties, well-dressed, a kind of spurious cocky boastfulness about him; possibly to hide the fact he felt that Buckton was well outside his comfort zone. He managed to antagonise Dennis Walsh in the first few minutes by saying he was relieved that the station actually did have its own computer. He hadn’t been sure what to expect. He then asked a patronising question about local crimes, referred to ‘rednecks’—to which Dennis Walsh responded with a tap of fingers on his own solid neck and the sharp reminder that rednecks was a word he might want to go easy on. “You can laugh about us when you get back to your sophisticated city life. Just don’t do it here.”

Briggs then added to the already unfortunate impression he had made by skiting that his father was racing car driver Campbell Briggs, that he was planning to write a ‘police procedural’ (to

which his new boss responded that someone had done it already, pointing to the manual; he hesitated then decided not to point out that it was a fiction genre) and wound up by saying he had been 'in' on a big case in Brisbane recently.

"And what does 'in' refer to?"

"The Canter case. You must've heard about it. I got to see the CIB big guns doing their stuff. All the latest technology—"

"Right. Well, there's no technology out here. So you'll have to use your brains instead. I'll take you on a quick circuit and show you the places you'll need to know. I'll expect you to read up on recent work and get started on some small stuff straight away."

It hardly sounded like putting someone on a spot but Constable Briggs looked faintly alarmed. However, for the first couple of days, he largely did as he was told; though not completely, Dennis soon found. Left to his own devices for any time at all he seemed to switch off the local community and its needs and focus solely on the computer. His offer to put all recent material on to it as a backup record might be deemed a sign of enthusiasm and a way of learning about local issues and problems—but it didn't take his superior long to realise it was also a way of avoiding having to respond to call-outs.

Sergeant Walsh had tried to be fair and set aside the sense of antipathy the young man's talk, behaviour, and attitude had sparked. It wasn't easy coming into a new place, new ways of doing things, surrounded by strangers who might be sympathetic and helpful but might equally be just the opposite. Nevertheless by the third day he was starting to feel he had been landed with a large personnel problem. Guy Briggs wasn't doing his expected work. He wasn't bothering to answer the phone when he was left in charge. He answered any face-to-face queries with a brittle request for the person to get on to Sergeant Walsh later. And he found excuses for not going out of the station. At first they seemed reasonable. Dennis Walsh never liked being stuck inside for long spells and didn't think much about it. But Briggs wasn't just avoiding any chance to make himself look good; he gave the impression that he found the world outside vaguely intimidating and somewhere to be avoided.

'Give him time.' As a mantra it soon began to wear thin, Buckton was hardly the mean streets of New York, and Sergeant Walsh began to feel he was being placed in a very unpleasant position. He had asked and asked for a second person. Now, if he went and complained about that second person, he would probably be told: it's Guy Briggs or no one. There were even times when he wondered if he'd had Briggs palmed off on him as a form of punishment. And times when even the relentless work load of running the place single-handed began to seem better. And yet the crux of his antipathy was hard to pin down. There were plenty of lazy cops, plenty who preferred to deal with technology rather than people, but that wasn't really the worst aspect. It was more a kind of slyness; something that struck him as furtive and underhand. It was as though Guy Briggs was always watching him out of the corner of his eye, always waiting for him to go out, always assessing the moment in a way that made him feel uneasy. And Briggs was always there somewhere, planted right in the middle of his space, so that he could use the station computer.

He had dealt with other constables. But, somehow, possibly out of deference to his authority, they had always seemed to leave the bulk of the small station space to him. Whether or not they had done it carefully and in due respect to him as boss or almost without realising it he had never had to tell them to move out of his way, let him get to his paperwork, either answer the phone themselves or move and let him get to it. He wasn't sure whether it was simply that the new man had been used to working in a larger space and didn't realise … but by the end of three days with him, Walsh was beginning to feel that flames were about to shoot out of his head and set the whole station alight.

And what the young man was doing in the police when he appeared to have no real interest in the work was equally problematical. He had taken two elderly people out to check that they were still safe to drive on Buckton's streets and had managed to offend both by saying he hoped they would never go near a built-up-area. He had got up the primary school principal's nose by saying blankly he didn't think it was his business to come and check the way parents parked outside the school when they dropped their children off. Certainly Nelson L'Estrange managed to get up a lot

of people's noses with his picky little complaints. But he was quite right to point out that the way people parked *was* police business …

Several times Dennis Walsh had caught himself on the verge of saying, "You might as well go on home. I'll get through this lot faster without you around." But that was to give in. It would be a relief not to have his constable around—but there had to be a way to get him to pitch in and show some enthusiasm and be of some real use.

Yet there was something else there. It wasn't just that Briggs was fixated on computers (his new boss wasn't in the habit of referring to anyone as a computer nerd) but almost as though he was afraid to leave the safety of his chair in front of the screen. Police who had been called to an horrific accident, who had been in a particularly traumatic hostage drama, who couldn't cope with the abuse of children, sometimes had to give up and either take extended sick leave or retire. But Briggs had not given any hint of such a problem … unless his skiting about the Canter case was his way of dealing with something he had found horrifying and stressful.

Four young women, all described as prostitutes, had been fished out of various reaches of the Brisbane River, some fresh but one had been caught under something for several weeks and was badly bloated and damaged. That was probably enough to turn the stomach of a young man. But in his experience Dennis Walsh had found most young men dealt with such unpleasantness by laughing over the grosser details. A man called Graham Canter had been convicted of all four murders. On the surface it looked to be a good swift bit of policing with justice at the end of it. But, just possibly, Briggs was focusing on that case because some other case had been less easy to deal with …

Anything was possible. He just wished he didn't have to come up with a way to deal with his constable and his possible problems …

Case No. 2: Gated

Sergeant Walsh had given a fair bit of thought to the troubles of the Parsons sisters. Each time their gate had been lifted off its hinges had been a Monday night. They were two women in their late sixties. They had run this farm together for forty years. Now they rented their bottom paddocks to Andrew McLaren who grew some corn and pumpkins on two hundred hectares and they took some cattle and horses on agistment up their back paddocks.

They had tried to stay awake of a Monday night. But it wasn't easy. They thought, but couldn't be certain, they had heard a car stopping then going on again a minute later; they thought at about eleven p.m. and wondered if it might be several 'young ones' thinking it was funny to give them all this extra trouble.

"We've thought about getting a different style of gate … or even closing that off and coming out the lane down there. But it's a perfectly good gate." They belonged to a generation which preferred to use things until they finally gave up the ghost. To have to change a gate because someone was playing stupid practical jokes on them …

There were several more farms out along this road. He tried to think of one with teenagers. There was Owen Binnie. He had some form of accreditation under some sort of employment scheme to take in boys from places like Westbrook Farm Home and Boystown, juvenile offenders, and train them as relief milkers, as farmhands. Neighbours were not wild about the idea but most people felt it was decent of Owen to give the boys a chance.

It was more than evens that it was some of these boys. But he hadn't been able to get any decent prints off the top of the gate. They were obviously using their hands, palms up, to lift the gate. Quick and simple. So if he wanted to catch them he probably needed to try and nab them red-handed. The trouble with that was—if they didn't do it every Monday night he might end up losing a lot of sleep. And was the gate the only mischief they were up to? Still … if he wasn't going to get to sleep with Fiona he might as well be out here catching vandals …

The simplest would be to come out here in his old brown station-wagon, park it somewhere out of sight, go up round the bend, set out a row of witch's hats … did he want to be a shadow or a public statement … he brooded on this. And why Monday, what was there about Mondays that made it happen then? And why Ellen and Faye Parsons? Though he could well believe they had been strident and very public in their belief that boys like these were already lost to sin and depravity.

He could go and talk to Owen Binnie. Maybe he allowed his boys to go into town, to come home late. Did they go to the pub? Bill would know. But he didn't want them warned off. He didn't want the problem to stop a while then start again when he'd put it aside. The sisters were two rigid-minded old battleaxes who believed everyone under forty was irredeemably corrupt and beyond redemption. It was a mixture of religion and the old belief that each generation is softer, laxer, and lazier than the one before. If nothing else he didn't want them forever hovering somewhere by his shoulder, ever-ready to tap him briskly and say, "Hey! What about *our* problem, mister?"

There were another four farms along here then the road turned into what had once been a stock route but Gus Mortimer had closed it off and used it as an extra 'long paddock'. He probably should tackle the old man on it; the route was still gazetted as a public through road.

But at least it meant he didn't need to worry about any through traffic and farmers rarely went out late at night—not if they had over a hundred cows to milk of a morning. Owen Binnie was a major supplier to the butter factory in Buckton.

He drove round past the pub and its parked cars on the next Monday night. The usuals. He hesitated. It would be much less work simply to go in and see if he could nab someone. But in the end he turned and drove out of town. It was quiet up the side road; an occasional mopoke calling. The lights in the Parsons' house were off. Somewhere in the distance a dog barked then went quiet again. He went round the corner, parked in along the dry verge, and got out.

No sound or sign of traffic. It was ten past ten.

In the end he turned his old car sideways across the road and set out the markers on the Buckton side. Then he walked quietly back to where he could stand watch over the gate. For another person this kind of waiting in a deserted landscape with only a half-moon for company and the occasional calls of night birds would have been a dismal way to spend a late evening. But it didn't bother him. He sometimes thought he preferred the land like this: empty of people and bustle and noise and fumes and demands. And there was always enough on his plate to be thinking on.

It came to half-past-ten, a quarter-to … He heard a car in the distance. Someone coming certainly. But were they innocuous? Someone returning late from a cattle sale, a meeting, visiting relatives. He retreated to watch. Then it came to him. The car. Something mildly souped-up. Not the sort of thing someone like Gus Mortimer drove …

He saw the headlights through the sprinkle of trees. Then the car swerving all over the place as it roared on the gravel bends. If this was their tormenter then he wasn't surprised that the sisters had heard something. But he hadn't told them what he planned. No point in tipping his hand …

The car drew in beside their gate. Four youths spilled out. It was a well-synchronised effort. All four rushed to the gate.

Rap music blared from the car. Sergeant Walsh crossed the lane, aiming to nab the driver. The gate was being lifted up by combined youth-power, then flung into the lane beyond. He brought a large hand down on one shoulder in a dark T-shirt, twisted an arm up behind, and looked to see which miscreant he had caught.

It was like playing a very boring record over and over. He grabbed his cuffs from his belt with his other hand and whipped them on to Damien Scully's wrists in a practiced couple of moves.

It was pandemonium then. Yells. Swearing. The other three boys taking a horrified look at what had happened then taking to their heels to disappear into the landscape.

"Well, well, well. The lad I gave another chance. The lad I gave another two chances. I need my head read."

"You can't do this to me!" Damien hated admitting, even to himself, that that hand on his shoulder had scared the pants off him. Now his voice rose to a squeak.

"Do what?"

"Arrest me! I haven't done nothing!"

"Malicious damage? Of course I can arrest you. Which would you rather—my cell or face the Parsons sisters?"

"Those stupid old bats! No one's scared of them!"

"Well, I would be, if I was you. They aren't nice kind forgiving people like the ones who work in the bank and thought your apology really meant you were sorry and would start behaving like a reasonably decent young man."

"That's baloney! It was fun to see them really getting the wind up. I'm not scared of them."

"No? Well, I'll leave you to their tender mercies."

He clipped the cuffs on to the fallen gate and walked away, leaving Damien with no choice but to get down on the ground if he didn't want to be bent at an awkward angle. Walsh reached his car, put the hats away in the back and drove on towards Owen Binnie's farm.

The dogs all came out to bark briefly in the night. Then Mr Binnie himself. "What the heck! Oh! It's you. What's happened?"

"Sorry to bother you this late. You've got three lads here at the moment? Is that right?"

"Yeah. I let them have Mondays off. I reckoned it might be less of a temptation than a Saturday. They do three weeks' training with me. What've they done?"

"I don't know that it was their plan. How come Damien Scully brings them home?"

"I get his dad occasionally to help me teach the boys or help out. He said he'd get Damien to drive them home if he couldn't do it himself. The current lot of boys are only sixteen. Do you need to see them?"

"I doubt if they're back yet. They scarpered when Damien stopped to take the Parsons' gate off its hinges."

"So it *was* them! I was worried it might be. I want to give them a chance but some people never learn." He shook his head slowly.

"No, Mr Binnie. I think Damien has discovered that getting other people into trouble is as much fun as doing it all yourself. I'll come out and talk to them tomorrow. But I think you'll need to keep them away from any of the Scully family. Boys with a record are far more vulnerable than boys with a clean slate."

Owen Binnie was still trying to think up a suitable response when Sergeant Walsh walked away to his car and drove back to the prostrate gate. Damien had laid himself out flat on the ground. But as the car stopped he struggled to sit up again.

"Let me get out of here! I won't do it again."

"We're going to need some witnesses to that statement, sonny. So you'll just have to go on sitting there." Sergeant Walsh drove on towards Buckton. Most kids, given a second chance, grasped it. Damien's pal, Josh Binnie, given such a chance had been a model of good behaviour ever since.

At the station he rang Damien's father who answered, finally, with a surly grunt. "Yeah?"

"Mr Scully, I have your son Damien in charge. I think you'd better come and vouch for him. Unless you want him charged. He's out at the gate of the Parsons' farm on Parsons Road. Meet me there in twenty minutes."

"I'm not going out at this time of night. I've got to be up to milk at five."

"Suit yourself."

Then it seemed to occur to Mr Scully that Damien still had the car. "I can't get out there anyway."

"Then you'd better come round to the station or borrow something."

Sergeant Walsh hung up. It took much longer to rouse the Parsons; they obviously slept heavily or felt that late night calls were more than likely a wrong number.

"Come up to your front gate. Better bring a torch. I'll meet you there in fifteen minutes." Then he went out to swop cars. He might as well look official—and it was more comfortable than his old wagon.

It was a strange get-together there by the gate under a fading moon. Both sisters had come up in their old ute, looking faintly witchlike with long grey hair and wearing dark dressing-gowns.

Both of Damien's parents had come in their neighbour's old VW. They seemed to huddle together for comfort in the face of their son's attempt at scorn. A rather feeble attempt in the face of his posture and his fear that he had been abandoned to the night.

"Now, this young man appears to have a thing about gates. I can't imagine why. So—any suggestions on how best he can go on enjoying them of a night?"

"The rotten little stinker," Ellie Parsons said robustly. "As if we don't have enough to do without fixing our gate every week." It wasn't the most Christian of expressions or sentiments. But her audience felt a certain sympathy. Or some of them did.

"But why, Damien, why did you do it?" Mrs Scully hated Dennis Walsh, she hated the Parsons sisters, she hated seeing her son like this. Because Damien's bravado had finally deserted him.

"I didn't do it. It was them—"

"Them being?" Sergeant Walsh was the only one who didn't appear to find this midnight conference bizarre.

"Them kids at the dairy."

"No, Damien. I was watching. You drove the car, you chose to stop here, you chose to let them out. I assume you've either got a thing about gates or you don't like the people who live here. I let you get away with an apology when you stole money. I let your stupid father pretend he was the one who'd been speeding on the Burleigh road. But you've run out of chances, son. So I am going to have to charge you with malicious damage—and it'll be up to the magistrate this time to try and sort you out. But let me tell you just one thing. Once you've got a record—that's it. It's always there. It'll follow you round for the rest of your life. Any kind of trouble—you'll be my first port-of-call. I don't like liars and thieves. But more than that, I don't like little smart-arses who use other kids and then hide behind them."

"Couldn't we … couldn't we work something out?" Chad Scully didn't know whether to find a kind of relief in this situation or lash out in anger and embarrassment.

"It's up to the Misses Parsons. It's their gate. Their trouble and time and worry."

"I'll put the gate up again," Damien's father said wearily.

"No. You won't. Damien will put it back up. Damien will also apologise to the owners of the gate. But it's not going to get him off the hook this time."

"What else do I have to do?" It was a very subdued Damien.

Sergeant Walsh went over and unlocked the cuffs and hauled the youth to his feet. "You can make a start now with the gate. You can apologise here and now to these two ladies. Tomorrow you will apologise to those other three boys for trying to get them into trouble. And then you will either work off your stupidity on this farm, if they have some tough jobs waiting, or you will pay them the equivalent. If you don't want to do that then you will come back to Buckton with me now and spend the night in my cell. Your call."

There was a long silence. Then Damien bent to lift the gate. His father went over to help him. When they had struggled it back into position, Damien turned to Ellie and Faye, and said, "I'm sorry. It was a stupid thing to do. I won't do it again." It was a curious thing to watch these two leathery old women, who had possibly never received an apology in their life, actually soften slightly.

"If you'll help us repaint the kitchen and clean out the gutters and chop some wood—we'll leave it at that. We aren't as spry as we once were. And climbing ladders is a pain."

Dennis Walsh wasn't as optimistic as the others. Damien didn't strike him as the sort of youth who would step back and take a good hard look at himself. He seemed to get a kick out of putting others into compromising positions. And the sisters might find he was more trouble than he was worth …

But for now it would be good to get home to bed.

And Fiona Greehan, when she finally heard the story, or Raelene's version of it, said she couldn't really work up much sympathy for Damien Scully; he had given her and everyone at the bank a lot of worry and stress.

"Well, true," Rae could not find a saving grace in the young man, "but it doesn't stop Commandant Dinny being a law unto himself. Still, I wouldn't have minded being there to hear Ellie and Faye lecturing him on the state of his soul, abusing him for his sloppiness, and then telling him if he'd been their son he would've got his mouth washed out with soap for calling them names. He's probably wishing he'd picked on a different gate. And I won't be the least surprised if he packs up and leaves town quite soon … " In which she was to prove prophetic. Eventually.

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"Come on over, Dennis." Noel Barnard at the local garage always enjoyed the times when he got to do anything to the local police vehicle. Some small boy quality seemed to surface. If this was a city the police would have their own mechanics and workshops. But in Buckton he got to do it all. "I think I need a beer after working on that truck of Ray Werner's. He's been carting hay. It's all down my throat and up my nose."

"Is Russell Tripp still doing any work for you?"

"Not much. Tony's put him on full-time at the nursery. Russ is pleased as punch. He sees he's got a job when some of the brighter kids haven't."

"Yeah. It's not all brains. Just as well maybe."

Noel didn't think of himself as a great brain. "Too right." But whether Dennis thought of himself as having much intelligence he had no idea and didn't feel he could ask. He thought he would trust Dennis with most of his likely problems—ahead of any big-shot city detectives—but that might have more to do with practical knowledge and common sense, not to mention a fair bit of hard grind …

Noel's wife Mavis got beer out of the frig as she said, "Why not stay and have a bite with us, Dennis, it'll go around. Save you cooking after a long day. We've been meaning to invite you and Fiona around one evening—but it's been pretty busy. Maybe when harvest is over."

"No. I think that mightn't be the best of ideas, Mavis. That relationship seems to have gone kaput."

"Nonsense! I can't believe that." Mavis, after her first taken-aback-moment, said briskly, "You two are made for each other."

"I doubt if many people would agree with you there. They probably commiserate with her behind my back. I know Raelene does."

Noel wasn't fussed on discussing Dennis's private life, anyone's private life for that matter, and it bothered him a little that Mavis always seemed determined to worm all the details out of Dennis. Something a bit intrusive. But then Dennis was quite capable of turning the conversation if he wanted to …

He said as his own diversion, "I was talking to a bod the other day. Don't know if you've ever met Dave Marshall?" Dennis shook his head. "Winville character. And we were talking about that business with Neale Clay. Before your time. But it created a big stir. He thinks that the young guy should never have gone to prison for killing those four kids—"

"I thought there were five," Mavis put in.

"No, the other one came after he'd gone to prison."

"So didn't that make them re-think? Or was it a completely different … thing."

"I thought you called it the MO," Mavis said. She was a keen reader and watcher of murder mysteries.

"Uh huh. But not everyone appreciates our kind of shorthand."

"I always wondered," Noel said as he led the way over to the dining table in its nook. "Take a seat, Dennis."

"Was Towner in charge then?"

"No. He was second to a bod called Des Blinco. Sullivan was their junior and they had a secretary called Mary Pacey. Mary is a rellie of Mavis's." He raised his voice to call out to his wife in the kitchen. "What was Mary Pacey to you, Mave?"

"My dad's youngest sister. My aunt."

"Yeah, I remember now. But Mary went to Dalby. They said they needed someone more up-to-date. And Des … well, if you think Towner's a pain, Dennis, Blinco was just as bad … but in a

different way. He was a show-off for starters. You'd hear him in the pub there, skiting away about all the big cases he'd been on. And he used to drive round with lights and siren blaring all the time."

"He didn't have a plain car?"

"He did. But he did a swop. He reckoned it got people shaking in their boots before he even got there to interview them. He used to call it 'softening 'em up'."

"And did it get results?"

"Hard to say really. But he was strutting round town like some bloody Napoleon after he got that kid convicted."

"You can't really blame people though." Mavis had apportioned a big steak-and-kidney pie into three servings. She had probably been planning to re-heat it for tomorrow's dinner. "It came just after … or was it just before—that awful level-crossing smash there. You can't blame people for wondering what was going to happen next. And it always seems somehow worse with little kiddies. They've lost out on so much more life."

"But there wasn't a connection between the two things?"

"Not that I ever heard. They said a semi failed to stop in time and pushed the small sedan that *had* stopped on to the line just as the train was coming. The train hit it and spun it round and it sort of bounced off again and went down the embankment there and rolled over. A very sad business—"

"Yeah, I saw the car afterwards. A complete wreck. But the semi only lost … only the front bumper, I think. But the young lad they got for those kids—"

"He wasn't retarded, but a bit slow, I'd say. And he had a big birthmark over … " Mavis raised a hand and placed it over her cheek and one ear. "The other kids used to tease him a fair bit. I guess there was a lot in there just waiting to boil over."

"And Blinco retired after that. I forget just when. But it was Doug who copped the later crime. He reckoned it was … you know, a copycat business."

"So who do they think did the later crime?"

"Well, some people blamed it on Colin Beattie. He was the semi driver and he went pretty odd after the accident. Seemed to think it was all his fault. Which maybe it was. But I can't see why they thought that would make him go out and hurt some poor little kid. And then there were some people that were convinced that it was Des Blinco who'd come back … but that doesn't make sense. Why would he want to make it look like he got it wrong first time around. And Doug said it was nothing like the others … and might even be an accident."

"Yeah. Not one of life's hustlers, Doug. If he can find an easy way out he'll take it." But Dennis showed little of his usual critical attitude towards Towner.

"Then Colin shot himself. That was a sad business too. But there were people quite willing to believe he'd done all the crimes and so this was payback time, like in the Wild West, some sort of vigilante thing … "

"And wasn't there another suspect … you remember those kids at the caravan park? They were traveling round working on farms in an old converted bus. But they must've had alibis because I'd reckon Doug was quite keen to nab them there for a while."

"That's right. People weren't too fussed … well, some people weren't too fussed on what they saw as long-haired hippies … "

"I can imagine. So have you got any ideas of your own? Either of you."

Noel leant over to top up Dennis's glass. "We did. I s'pose everyone had ideas. But we only really knew what was on the news and a bit of gossip round the traps … and I s'pose it's possible Colin Beattie did them all, that he topped himself because of that … not because of the accident. But I find that hard to believe. He always seemed a decent sort of man. He was Edna Hooke's son-in-law, you know."

"I never liked Des Blinco," Mavis said reflectively. "Just something about him. I'm not sure what you'd call it. He came here that time there was that business—you remember, love, when they said old Mr Maxwell had abused that girl that was staying there for a while, Sandy … was it Abernethy? Something like that. He really gave me the creeps the way he talked about it … and I thought they were supposed to keep the names of children under wraps … but he looked like he was quite ready to put the poor girl on trial … not that dirty old man."

"Yeah. I'd forgotten that. He came in here, some problem with his car, might've been the muffler … and I said I could fit a new one if he didn't mind waiting and Mave made him some lunch."

"What happened … and was Buckton involved? I've never come across that case in my old files. I s'pose they could've got burnt that time there was that fire."

"If you think Doug's no hustler … then old Joe had just about gone into hibernation! But I'd say Winville handled the whole thing."

"There was something about him. He started telling me all the details while I was getting some lunch for him. Really private things about the poor girl. And the language wasn't very nice either. I think he really enjoyed making me feel uncomfortable. I mean … would *you* want the details of old Mr Maxwell's private parts while you were trying to lay the table and make some soup?"

"I've only ever seen the old sod dead and mummifying. That was bad enough."

That started Noel on to talking more about the other Maxwells and then Mavis determinedly moved the conversation on to more pleasant subjects. But as she was seeing Dennis off later she put out a hand suddenly to touch him on the arm, almost as though she felt a sudden need to detain him before life and other troubles grabbed him again. "Dennis, don't give up too soon. I know you're not the world's most tactful old sod … but I am a hundred per cent certain that Fiona does care about you. So there's my penny's-worth of advice for today … "

"She's going to Garramindi in a week or two. She's going to look after the branch there for a month or till the manager comes back from hospital."

"Then … take her out somewhere nice before she goes."

*

All very well for Mavis to dispense advice with a liberal hand. His most pressing problem was still Guy Briggs who seemed determined to be thrown out of the force on his ear, and sooner rather than later. The times when the two of them were both in the office were always on edge.

But Guy had gone home. The sense of relief was almost palpable as he went into the station before going on to his own home. He sat down and rang Greg Sullivan in Winville. He got Greg at home and said without preamble, and over the noise of television, music, teenagers, and Mrs Sullivan telling someone to do something, "Greg, were you satisfied with the conviction of Neale Clay all those years ago?"

"He did confess, Dennis," the other man said after a moment's blankness. "And we didn't use our truncheons on him."

"Even so."

"I know his confession raised doubts in court. I mean that was one kid who would never say 'I then proceeded along—' or 'I realised I had done the wrong thing and I feel deep remorse over my actions' … I mean that kid couldn't string two words together. But the thing that bothered me more was the number of similarities between those deaths and the one two years later. Doug says it was a copycat killing and I can't say he was wrong. Everyone was talking about it all again … and plenty of local people had come to court for the preliminary hearings on young Clay—before they moved the whole thing to Brisbane. They said they couldn't get an unbiased jury out here … and I guess that was pretty right. But then they said he was going to plead guilty so he simply went straight to Boggo Road. No jury trial. But what's got you interested? New evidence?"

"No. I was just getting someone's take on it all, this evening, and I also got told that Des Blinco was a sleazebag—"

"I wasn't fussed on him. But he got results. And I was pretty junior then. I can't honestly say I picked up on anything wrong with the investigation. But if you want to look at it, in all that spare time you've got now … well, say the word. We never got anyone for the later death. You might see something that got missed then. If you like I'll run off some copies of the key material. Come out and have dinner with Narelle and me one evening. Bring that gorgeous lady friend of yours. Friday night … if you can make it. We've got the twins' birthday on Sunday. The way it's going half the town that's under twenty is planning on turning up."

He couldn't really see Fiona agreeing; she would be busy getting the bank and herself organised before moving to Garramindi and listening to him and Greg chew over an old and very grisly case wasn't the nicest way to spend an evening. And she might think that coming to dinner with someone with three children was a not very subtle way of saying he'd like to enjoy a similar kind of life. But he said he would ask.

How to ask was a more difficult question than he had allowed for. Go to the bank? Wait and catch her as she came out? Ring her at home? Ring her at work? It always struck him as a ridiculous idea to ring someone who worked forty yards away and lived hardly four times that, further on. In the end he wrote a note, put it in an envelope, wrote Ms F. Greehan, Manager, on it, and told Constable Briggs to deliver it. "If you're not keen on solving cases you can run an errand for me. They still haven't taken a restraining order out on Artie Kees. He's another accident waiting to happen. And I don't see why I have to do other people's dirty work."

The young man went to close down the computer but Walsh said, "No, leave it." For a minute he thought his junior was going to argue. Then the young man with a kind of shrug which had something faintly snide and angry in it got up and reached for his cap.

After his constable had taken the letter, reluctantly, and gone out Walsh moved over to see what the younger man had ostensibly been working on. Police files certainly but hardly Buckton's small offering into the world of computer records. He scrolled up and down for several minutes. At least it was an education in how computer-savvy high-powered CIB people in Brisbane appeared to enter their material.

He wasn't impressed. But then it was hardly something he felt qualified to judge …

But as looked at it he realised it wasn't simply Guy Briggs looking to see how to set up evidence in a case. He scrolled all the way up to the beginning and the title. It wasn't even a police site. 'What the hell is going on here?' The idea that Briggs had not only not been working on his set work here but was off on some private quest of his own in paid time …

The site appeared to be given over to looking at convictions which were later challenged because of dubious, confused, or unsafe evidence, even perjury. 'And the little bastard thinks I'm such a moron that I really thought he was entering our records … when all along … '

Constable Briggs re-entered the station. Dennis Walsh was now firmly parked in his chair in front of the computer. "Better pull up a pew, son, you've got some explaining to do." His superior merely sounded conversational; the sort of voice to discuss the weather … but Guy Briggs caught the hard edge to it.

"What about?"

"Look, I don't know if it's Buckton you hate, or me, or your job, or they merely sent you out here because they thought the fresh air'd be good for your health. But I'm fed up with everything about you. Your attitude. Your work. Your lack of work. You're untrustworthy, untruthful, lazy, and incompetent. I assume all this is so's you can get sacked and get out of Buckton … out of the force maybe. I don't care particularly. I wanted a constable so I wouldn't have to do everything myself. But I'm still doing every-bloody-thing myself—and then some. So either you give me an explanation that can stand on its feet—or you pack your bags and get on your way." Walsh hadn't raised his voice but there was no doubting that he meant exactly what he said.

Guy Briggs sat down as though his legs had turned to rubber. "It's not—about you. It's not … they sent me here … they said you were an A Grade bastard … they said you'd sort me out. I didn't care. I thought I'd be safe here. Nothing else mattered."

"Safe from what?"

"From … them." He pressed his hands down hard on his thighs in fear that they would start shaking again. "The detectives."

"For crying out loud! What bloody detectives?"

"You know I said something about the Graham Canter case, how I … how I saw some of the work on it. Some of the small stuff. Just on the edges. Nothing much." Not for the first time he wished he'd never had the slightest involvement, that the first he knew of the murdered girls was reading about them in *The Courier-Mail* or seeing them on the nightly news.

"Yeah. Sounded like you solved the case unaided. That bit. What of it?"

"I … queried … one piece of evidence. They went ballistic. They said if I didn't fuck off out of the way—then I might not be around for much longer to bother them. It was only about three weeks after that I was told I was being transferred."

"Okay. Go back a step. What was this evidence you queried?"

"I don't know if you ever read about the Canter case?" Dennis Walsh might not have his ego and his reputation tied up in such a high profile case. But he was still the archetypal tough-guy-cop. He might criticise Doug Towner but that wasn't a lot of comfort …

"So tell me in your own words."

"He's a—a sleazebag, an ageing rock 'n' roller who specialises in driving round in an old van, the old sin bin bit, and picking up prostitutes who are truly bottom of the market—runaways, drug addicts, girls that hardly know what day it is. He must be around fifty. He looks a bit like a skinny Elvis." He felt his words tail away. How to describe that sense of evil Canter managed to project. Maybe that was attitude. Someone who felt nothing, expressed nothing, like something dark and cold. "He—he gives you the creeps, there's something about him … I don't think any girl would, not even for the money, unless she's stoned, desperate, blind maybe."

"And he killed four of these unfortunate girls and dumped them in the river?"

"That's what they alleged." Then he wished he hadn't used the word. It sounded pompous. "But I know for certain that they planted evidence."

"How d'you know that?"

"We all wanted to look when they pulled him in—and his vehicle as well. I saw it sitting there, no one around. The others wanted to hear what Canter had to say for himself. But I thought I'd have a look at the inside of his vehicle first, just see if it really was set up for mobile sex … I had … a good look around."

"And?" It was like dealing with a slow witness.

"When the case came to trial … they showed photographs of the car from all angles, inside and out. There was a small piece of material from one of the girls' skirts caught on the inside of the handle to open out the back doors. It hadn't been there when I looked."

"So maybe they'd already taken photographs and removed it to the evidence room?"

"No. The car wasn't searched or filmed till later that day."

There was a long silence. Constable Briggs felt that same sense of overwhelming helplessness back in full force. The sense of being a puny voice trying to penetrate a large firm official wall.

"You think Graham Canter didn't kill those girls?" Dennis said at last.

"I don't know. I honestly don't know. I can see him being capable of it. He had the means, maybe the motive. Quite likely he did."

"But they planted evidence so they could nail him. Is that your line?"

"Yes. I think I can understand how they felt and why they did it. I'm glad he's off the streets. I really don't care what happens to him. But that … it was … they brought themselves down to his level … "

"And that matters to you?"

"I guess it sounds stupid … but I thought … I admired maybe … sounds stupid but there it is. And then … the way they went for me when I said what I'd seen. I mean—what I hadn't seen … no one would talk to me and I know I was being followed."

"Aren't you getting a bit … paranoid?"

"No. My family saw it too. I didn't want to come here … but my mum said, at least I'd be safe now." It was hard to admit to this complete state of funk.

"I s'pose you are." Walsh sat back in his chair with a long sigh. "Unless they fancy a spot of fresh country air too."

"What—what are you going to do?"

That embarrassing sense that neither his voice nor his hands were steady. It wasn't simply a profound sense of disillusionment; it was fear. That his life and safety might be at risk from those same men … to be given post-traumatic stress by your 'own side' was pretty hard to explain to anyone, to deal with …

At last Walsh roused himself. “Then I’ll do you a deal. Give me your material on that case and I’ll have a look through it. When I get some cold case stuff from Winville you can have a look through it. See if a fresh eye helps. But in the meantime,” Walsh turned and pinned him with all the force of that suddenly grim and powerful personality, “you will not *touch* that computer for the next week. I can’t trust you not to go off into la-la-land so all your work will be written up or typed up, whichever you prefer. And it doesn’t matter what sort of call comes in—doesn’t matter if it’s Mrs Low’s pussy up a tree or some kid’s lost his football—you finish up what you’re doing here and respond to that call. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir.” Constable Briggs wasn’t sure if it was a lifeline or merely staving off the inevitable moment when he handed in his resignation. As if on cue the phone rang. Dennis Walsh left him to answer it.

*

Brian Collyer and Fiona Greehan finished up at the bank and stood for a minute after locking up the building. Fiona felt sure the place would be in good hands. She was less sure about Garramindi. There had been rumours and stories doing the rounds for more than a year that the branch there wasn’t in good shape. Some people kindly explained it away as the manager, Hilton Browne, not being in good health and letting things go a bit. But other people were unhappy about the apparent nepotism of the ailing manager; and others thought there was some kind of fiddle going on. Just what, they couldn’t or wouldn’t try to define. She hoped she had both enough tact to deal satisfactorily with difficult employee relations and a sharp enough eye to pick up on any sort of muddle, mistake, or misdemeanour.

Brian went over to his car and drove home to his wife and family. Fiona stood a moment on the empty side street, Mosquitoes came up from the creek in the warm evening and settled on her exposed arms. She could go over and see if Dennis was still there. She could leave a note for him at his house. She could ring him from home … or she could ignore his invitation.

The dilemma was resolved by the simple act of Dennis turning the corner and heading for his big old four-square house behind the station. “Do you want to come in and leave the mosquitoes behind?” He sounded wry.

“I got your note today. Have you taken to getting Constable Briggs to run your errands for you … or does it have some secret significance?”

“Lazy little sod. About the only thing he’s done for me all week. But I hope I’ve finally got him sorted—”

“I’m not sure I like the sound of that.” Times like these Dennis disconcerted her and she felt perhaps she would be wise to try and place some distance between them.

“Probably not. But did you like the sound of coming to Winville with me? I know I can’t offer you much beyond dinner with the Sullivans … and a night in a motel if you’d like.” Put like that it hardly sounded a gripping outing.

“Not really. I’ve got to get myself organised for my time away. And I really would like to get away from these giant size mosquitoes.”

“Come in … just for a few minutes.”

He opened his gate. She hesitated. There *were* things waiting. Then her kindness won out. Even if she found ways to avoid Dennis, to let this relationship die gently, there were better ways and better places to do it than standing impatiently on the verge in a cloud of mozzies.

They went in, walked round the side of the house, and he unlocked the back door. She always felt this house had possibilities; but they seemed doomed like those flowers that wasted their sweetness on the desert air. The place was spartan and dull. “Time for a coffee? I’ve got a fruit cake there. I bought it from the CWA stall.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

He went over and switched on his kettle and got two mugs out and the cake. But while he waited for the kettle to boil he turned back to her. “I know you’ve got every right to be annoyed with me. I remember hearing a bloke describe his second wife as his ‘replacement brood mare’. I s’pose it sounded like that. But it wasn’t meant to.” It was times like these that he felt all at sea.

Which would be more appropriate? More words? Actions? Wait for some cue? He busied himself with cutting a slice for her and filling the mugs.

"I know, Dennis. I found it a bit hard to deal with—on top of all the other … information … you'd shared. All that sadness. But if you'll promise not to bring up the subject of children … then I'll say yes and come to dinner with the Sullivans."

She said it lightly, not wanting to get them back into the highly-charged territory she had found so difficult and so full of potential dilemmas, but she realised she had said the wrong thing. Not wrong exactly … but the subject of children was surely better ignored or carefully avoided rather than treated flippantly.

"They're nice people. And we don't have to sit round being social half the night—"

"I always find it hard to think of you being social at all."

"Well, strictly speaking, Greg's going to dig out some material for me on an old case—"

As soon as he said it he knew he'd reduced her to an appendage again; a little light relief when the serious business of his trip was concluded. "Sorry. I just manage to pull one foot out of the quicksand—and in I go with the other. I don't mean that the way it sounds."

She couldn't help laughing at that. "Well, you've got a reputation to keep up round town, you know. People would wonder what the world was coming to—if you stopped barging round and started treading delicately. It matters, the things you say … and do … but … "

But what? And by how much? And it wasn't really what they said to each other. She knew she couldn't walk away from this. He was still too important to her. Garramindi might change that … but she didn't know what she wanted from that sense of imposed distance and absence … not to forget but perhaps to be able to reduce it to something less demanding, less intense …

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As it turned out, Narelle Sullivan and her teenage daughter Jasmine looked upon Fiona as something close to the promised land when she came to their door with Dennis; Narelle might only be a couple of years older than Fiona but she felt it as a huge gap in which she grew ever older and Fiona probably stayed beautifully young. All through dinner she continued to try and define the differences. It wasn't simply that money could create style and good clothes, it was also that sense of poise and grace she knew was forever beyond her. And if she had been given the choice of parents that would go some way to re-creating her as Fiona she might've drawn back. Her happy-go-lucky untidy casual family had given her different benefits … though, even without understanding any of this, she didn't mind if some of Fiona's neatness rubbed off on Jasmine …

Fiona in her turn saw Greg and Narelle as two large placid people, Greg with his red hair going grey and his body running to fat, Narelle with shrewd hazel eyes and an aura of homemade scones about her. They were not remarkably different from Dennis in type and outlook yet in harder-to-define ways there was a gap; energy perhaps, dedication, but also something she hesitated to describe as 'driven' …

And their house, a large brick square in an untidy yard with crickets singing in the lawn, suggested a home in ways remote from her thoughts on the house Dennis lived in.

"So you've come to pick his brains?" Narelle said over roast chicken and the full complement of vegetables. "It really was a terrible business. It spoilt things for us. Part of the reason why I was happy to come here when Greg was transferred was that I saw Winville as being a very safe place to bring up kids."

"It usually is," her husband said soberly. "And once young Neale went down—everyone sort of felt things were back to … nearly normal. They could breathe easy again when they sent their kids down to the creek or the picnic grounds."

"And then it started up again. How did people react?"

"They were appalled." Narelle passed the gravy around and made a warning gesture to her twins; 'this is not the time for you to butt in'. "But I've always wondered if we were actually looking at two people. I know Doug and Des always told me I didn't know what I was talking about. But I think a lot of other people, other women anyway, wondered that."

It looked as though this had also been a family … if not an argument then something on which Greg and Narelle had agreed to disagree; possibly because Greg had not felt confident enough about the idea to query his two superiors.

"On what grounds?"

Fiona might not want to discuss serial murder over dinner, Narelle could well believe, but she seemed to accept that it wasn't realistic to expect Dennis to drop the subject. And whether she truly felt an interest or not her expression suggested someone who was genuinely and fully engaged with the moment. It struck Narelle as an enviable gift. She sometimes made her boredom or irritation quite plain when Greg brought 'work' home. But then, perhaps, Fiona had not had time to learn boredom with old cases and police gossip.

"Well, Greg can give you the details. But all the children were poisoned … but then when they wandered away into the bush or down along the creek … they said someone moved them, laid their bodies out in various ways, and I couldn't help wondering if that was someone else."

"Could it have been an accident?" Fiona said quietly. "That the children found something which had been dumped and ate it. How old were they?"

"The youngest was five—"

"No. Bryan was only four then."

"Well, anyway, it's all in that folder," Greg said as the easiest way out.

"They were four, five, and two were six," Jasmine said in a superior voice.

"If you say so, love," her father sounded unfazed. "I wondered if it was an accident too. But young Neale said in his confession that he had given them 'sick lollies' and then he set them out ready for the funeral when they went 'stiff'. We couldn't get him to explain what he meant by 'sick lollies'. They appeared to have taken a combination of painkillers and strychnine. If it had been poison alone we might've thought they'd somehow got hold of some old dingo baits or something. We pulled in old Cedric Darcy. He always boasted that he made a good living from dingo scalps in the hard years. And he certainly had a fair bit of dangerous stuff in his shed. But it was hard to imagine children hanging round him. He wasn't exactly Father Christmas … "

"And the other child, later on?"

"Little Melissa Benton. That was a tragedy. Truly. Her parents couldn't have more children. Her mother had had cancer. But she did die from poisoning too, though I'm not sure if it was strychnine." Narelle turned to her husband. "But she was laid out like the others, wasn't she?"

"We focused on the how—Des and Doug both said the laying out part was irrelevant."

"So when did Des retire? Was it before or after? I thought it was before."

"He went away with his wife. She had an operation for a brain tumour. They came back. Then he said she still wasn't well and he was going to retire early. But he extended it a bit when the case came up."

"How long was Mrs Blinco away for?"

"Oh, quite a while. She hadn't been well for a long time. But they weren't so good at picking up on it then. She'd been treated for other things … before they realised … "

"It wouldn't be relevant then—to suggest that children died when she was here and nothing happened when she went away … and another child died when she came back?"

They all turned and stared at Dennis. "You're not *suggesting* … " Greg finally said. "Not *Annette*. No, I couldn't come at that one, Dennis. She was a sick woman. We hardly ever saw her. She hardly ever went out. She was a very gentle quiet sort of person. Des treated her more like a nuisance than a wife. She was a mousy little kind of woman. The sort of person you hardly notice is there. I think he sort of resented that she hadn't come up the ladder with him, that he could've gone higher if he'd had the sort of wife who'd make him look good, entertain, do all that sort of stuff. He didn't really want to end his career in Winville. He'd been thinking he'd go out somewhere bigger and better … It didn't make him an easy person to work with, I can tell you."

But then he seemed to think it might be better to move the conversation into other areas. He had a policy, they both did, of not criticising more senior men in front of their children. It was hard enough to persuade the young ones that a bit of respect never went amiss.

Fiona asked them if they had any views on Garramindi, what it might be like to live and work there, and Greg said, "Well, I can't say it's the next-best-thing to paradise because it isn't. And there's been vague rumours around for quite a while … something to do with the bank. Probably just sour grapes. But people get upset every time the banks whack on some new charge. I've heard people say they'd be better off keeping their money in their mattress."

"Except people always do seem to know which old pensioner is doing just that," Fiona said. She didn't take offence when people made complaints. She too thought there were too many ways for the banks to get their greedy little mitts into people's savings. No wonder the government was always complaining that people no longer saved 'like they used to'; only the very rich were immune from the endless fees and charges. It really didn't seem worthwhile, people were keen to tell her, to save. Better to buy, to put money into land or shares or a better car or renovate the house …

But if rumours had reached Winville then maybe it was more than sour grapes …

"I know a very nice woman there who might be able to put you up, if you didn't want to stay at the pub," Narelle said. "I'll get her address for you. Dulcie Campbell."

The children, so long silent, though they'd put away second helpings, were allowed into the conversation to talk about their lives and interests. Later Fiona couldn't help thinking that asking Dennis not to mention children was one thing; asking the Sullivans not to would've been impossible.

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As they drove away an hour later, with several buff folders on the back seat of his old station wagon, Dennis said, "What would you like to do now? Will you spend the night here with me. Or we can go home and spend it there. Pastor Kramer says I'm a … not a pervert but next best thing and I am corrupting the youth of Buckton. Not a good role model apparently."

"Did he really? Because he knows about us? What did you say to him?"

"I didn't. I don't talk about us. He wanted me to come out in the middle of the night after he'd had a prowler in the garden. I said he might care to think it over a bit more carefully before he called me out again at night."

Put like that it sounded pleasant and polite. But she could well picture the scene that went with the words … and she was inclined to think that the Church of Christ minister would not be willing to make his allegations about sexual misconduct public round Buckton.

"I think he's the very worst kind of minister they could get. Sanctimonious and bigoted." She wasn't sure if it was the man himself or whether it was because he was a South African, or both; but the Aboriginal family which had gone there for years had left soon after his arrival and now went to the Uniting Church. "But some people like that crusading holier-than-thou style of his."

"They can have him. I told him his prowler appeared to leave pawmarks though it just might be a very clever piece of camouflage. He didn't like that. But I'm sure it's the wolfhound from next door."

She laughed at that. It wasn't that she wished Eric Kramer ill … but she wasn't sorry either that he'd been left looking slightly foolish. "We could go home—if only to prove a point. But as we're here—let's go to a motel."

Motels, most of them and certainly anything Winville could offer, were unexciting places. But at least they usually had a lightness and cosiness about the rooms which Dennis's house most definitely lacked.

They drove in to the Beefeater Motel which had made an attempt to tizzy the rooms up a little with themes of red and white and prints of grazing Herefords on the walls. They ordered breakfast and chose their time to eat.

"Would you like a shower, Dennis? We could be like the people in the poster—"

"What poster is that?"

"You know—Save Water, Shower with a Friend."

"No, I won't, thanks. I like my showers … private. But you go ahead."

She put her bag down and her light jacket and kicked her shoes off. "But … for people who have come here for very un-private purposes … I mean private from the outside … surely you and … surely since Norena … the women you've known … "

He had turned away to remove his watch and place it on the counter near the tea and coffee tray. She felt sure he had heard her—and it wasn't the sort of thing she could repeat—but for his own reasons he didn't want to pursue this line of conversation. It left her feeling faintly embarrassed and ruffled. And when she let herself think on it—there was so much of him cut off behind these barriers of silence, of not choosing to share. The things she learned about him were the things she virtually fell over. If she hadn't seen those photos she was quite sure Dennis never would've shared that story.

He came over and sat down on the bed to remove his shoes and loosen his tie and lift it over his head. They had come on from work. She had chosen to wear something that would do for both. He had come in his uniform. She sometimes had the curious feeling that he had virtually no other clothes anyway.

There was no point in taking any of it and stewing on what it might mean. He had every right to his privacy. She would never do anything to make him feel their intimacy came with justifiable demands that he share more of himself. It hadn't required Noel and Mavis to tell her Dennis didn't want to be seen in ways that might undermine the self he presented to the world. She had understood that very clearly the time Cherry Morton tried to poison him.

She went away to the bathroom to compose herself. Was it Norena, the mention of, who was off-limits? Or something to do with his life since then? It would become just one more of her unasked or unanswered questions.

A couple of minutes later she came back and sat down beside him. He turned from taking off his shirt and said lightly, "I haven't got a clue how to get you out of this thing … you'll have to tell me … "

"It's a cheong sam. There's a zipper down the side." It was something she could look businesslike in when she wore it with its matching jacket … something that was vaguely sensual for the evening. She knew Narelle and Jasmine would probably wonder about lashing out … something exotic to take the eyes of Winville … but she wasn't sure that Dennis even noticed such things. She felt his fingers fumble on the zip. She unclipped the shoulder and let him lift it away.

"What now?"

"I stand up … and let it fall."

The process, the grace she brought to the series of actions, the soft curve of her breasts, her slender waist, the flare of her hips, nearly brought him undone. Who was the fool who claimed age slowed men down, made them better able to indulge in the sort of long kissing and caressing most women wanted …

And if it was true that he would never be anything but the most conventional of lovers, the most unwilling to indulge in flights of verbal or sexual fantasy—then she knew he brought other qualities to their lovemaking, not least the growing knowledge that he truly saw each time not as an expectation or a right but as a gift …

After he had gone to sleep beside her she thought there was another quality there she had never considered seeking in a man; the idea itself seemed strange when considered beside more obvious things on any wish list for a suitable mate. A kind of integrity. But after she had formulated the thought she wondered if it was that or something deeper. Integrity wasn't enough of an explanation. Lots of people were true to themselves. It didn't mean those selves were truly worth being true to. There were always those compromises and excuses waiting. She leant over a little and kissed him. He stirred slightly then settled again. She was still trying to resolve her ideas into something clear and graspable when she too went to sleep.

Case No. 3: Laid Out

Fiona Greehan took the little stray dog she had taken in temporarily for his last walk on Saturday morning. Jon Dundas would have him from tomorrow. She had discovered, by observation and a few questions, that Artie Kees rarely went out before mid-morning. If she walked

between eight and nine she felt reasonably safe. Dennis had dropped her home soon after half-past-eight and she had taken Bandy out walking straightaway before getting back to her preparations.

Raelene had invited Jon and Kieran round for a farewell dinner. She had offered to invite the local vet, Vince Bromby, and a couple of other friends but Fiona had said no, she thought a quiet evening would be nicer. It was easier than trying to explain that although she felt a certain sympathy for Vince she didn't like the way he badmouthed Dennis at every turn. She had asked him at one such dinner whether he had a personal beef. Vince had replied vehemently, too vehemently perhaps, that it was nothing personal … but he just thought Buckton deserved better than a loudmouth and a bully. That, of course, had been music to Rae's ears. Hadn't she been saying exactly that for years? Now she had the pleasure of a new person to agree with her, to share stories, to delineate tactics, focus on claims …

She had said afterwards, "It isn't just me, truly it isn't, Fee. And one day your rose-tinted glasses are going to just drop off and you will wonder what you ever saw in him." She suited the action to the words and tossed away some make-believe glasses.

Fiona hadn't argued the point. Maybe she *was* reading things into Dennis that weren't really there … not least because she was lonely, she had no man in her life, or none that she really wanted, and she just wanted a quick fling that could be left behind when she left Buckton for a bigger branch. It truly didn't matter what Rae or Vince or anyone else thought. But she did deeply resent Rae's persistent attempts to get her to share with them what Dennis was like as a lover. Perhaps it was true what people said: the most damaging thing to any relationship between two women friends was a man. And yet—not wholly true. She liked Kieran. And she would never dream of asking Rae personal questions about their love life. Something radical would have to happen for him to become a factor in destroying a long friendship.

Over dinner, this time, Rae started telling them about the horrible anonymous letters that Joanne McNally had been getting. Joanne was the receptionist for the town's husband-and-wife doctors. She had temporarily lost her job when they arrived, Leslie Davis saying his wife could probably handle a bit of filing and making appointments, but Davis had found that decision didn't make him popular. People felt, and quite rightly, that there was work enough for two doctors and that Joanne deserved some recompense for her loyalty and hard work and dealing with the problems left by the previous doctor, Peter Wilcox. Sacking her simply wasn't on.

"I suppose it isn't any good me suggesting she take them to the police," Fiona said without emphasis.

"I know in books they always get solved," Rae said breezily, "but that's not real life. I cannot think of a single case where I ever heard of the police solving such a thing. Anyway, it's either Leslie Davis resenting Joanne because he was shamed into employing her again … or his wife getting jealous because she thinks Leslie and Joanne have something going."

"Well, I s'pose it is true that such things rarely get properly investigated or solved. We get the occasional strange letter at the Council. We're drowning under the flak at the moment since the Council decided they wouldn't let Japana Beef sell the feed lot properties in separate lots. I think they're making a bad mistake. In a way I can see where they're coming from. Someone with enough money to buy the whole business just might be able to afford to inject some money into Dinawadding." Jon didn't appear to be taking the problem to heart.

"But I think Japana is going to challenge that anyway. I've heard they're getting some big Sydney law firm to act for them." Fiona wasn't sure if this was supposed to be confidential information. Probably not. The whole town would know soon enough. "I'm sure they've got a strong case. I'm sure Japana just wants to make more money by selling everything separately. But all those farms were separate originally. I think a lot of people in Dinawadding resent the fact that that big conglomerate took over their land and gave nothing back to the community."

"Oh, I agree entirely," Kieran said briskly. "I'm just not sure that you can turn the clock back. The sort of people who owned those farms and ran them as a family have mostly packed up and left."

As she and Rae washed up later she wondered if Joanne would take the letters round to Dennis. But it wasn't her worry. She felt tired, a bit worried, a bit sniffly; she had driven out to

Garramindi this afternoon and found her way round the small town and gone to see Dulcie Campbell and any sense of adventure or helping her promotion prospects had dribbled away. Dennis had said there were some nice spots along the creek. The only spot she had found was a small scummy mudhole with a dying willow shedding into it, a weedy open space and two vandalised seats. If that was his idea of a nice spot then they probably *did* come from different planets and she just hadn't noticed his second heart beating …

But worse than her disappointment over the creek was a less tangible feeling. Garra, as its people called it, was surrounded by wheat. There were silos to overtower the town. There were huge expanses of open paddocks which appeared to be encroaching on the town, not even a fence or two or a line of trees to keep the huge tracts at bay. Far from the town nestling among its farms—she felt it was in imminent danger of being gobbled up by them.

It was a temptation to go and see Dennis one last time … just in case Head Office decided to leave Brian to run the branch here and moved her on somewhere else after the Garramindi manager was well enough to come back to work. She had avoided tackling the implications; after all, there were several ifs and buts in the whole thing. In the end she merely took a glass of hot lemon with honey and went to bed. It was hard going in cold to a new branch; it was even harder with a sniffly cold coming on.

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As Fiona was settling in to the small branch of the bank in Garramindi on Monday morning Joanne McNally was handing Constable Briggs the half-dozen unpleasant letters she had so far received. Could he help her? Had she come in several weeks ago he would probably have dismissed it as nothing to worry about. But things had changed. He had even found there was some satisfaction, even a kind of catharsis, in tackling the small problems that upset people's lives. Now he went carefully through any possibility of some incident which might have led to this kind of cowardly 'revenge'. Now he studied the letters and envelopes carefully and took down the dates of the postmarks and the dates she had received them. Now he asked her if she had any ideas herself on the sender.

"I know people will think it was one of the Davises. But unless they are brilliant actors I don't think it is. I think they resent me. But that is a different thing."

With the six letters laid out on the counter, alongside their six envelopes, each written in large round rather childish capitals in a black felt pen, the clear message was that someone saw Joanne as a 'sneak', as someone doing something underhand. The first letter said YOU SNEAK. I'LL GET YOU. YOU'LL BE SORRY. The second one said THEY WON'T KEEP YOU WHEN I TELL THEM HOW YOU'VE BEEN CARRYING ON. The next four letters rang various gruesome variations on these two themes.

Constable Briggs knew nothing of Joanne McNally's circumstances except that she worked for the town's two doctors and that she seemed a pleasant woman, not exactly pretty but with a wholesome and cheerful way about her.

"When the first one came I didn't know what to think. I've never had an anonymous letter. And it seemed so awful to think someone felt that way about me. I was going to throw it away but I put it aside because I thought maybe I should show it to my family."

"Did you—show it to them?"

"After I'd got four of these I showed them to mum. She was really upset. But she didn't know what I should do. I said maybe I should take them to the police but she said that would make everything public. And maybe, just maybe, they would stop. After all, I knew and she knew I wasn't doing anything sneaky."

Guy Briggs felt a familiar blankness come over him. It was one thing to see himself solving the unsolvable; quite another to face these pathetic little pages and have no idea who out there might have a grudge against Joanne McNally. He was tempted to say he would show them to Sergeant Walsh or that the person would lose interest and stop or that it might be worth showing them to other family members. And then he saw all that as a cop-out.

"Okay. Let's start at the beginning. Before the first one arrived had you been involved in anything that might've upset someone else? Maybe someone else wanted your job. Maybe you

bought a bargain someone else had their eye on. Maybe a patient thinks you've spread stories about them. Anything at all, no matter how small."

She gave it long thought. But finally shook her head. "I felt awful over losing my job. But people were very kind and told Dr Davis that he had to take me back. I don't think he wanted to. Maybe he thinks I used sneaky means to get myself back there. But it wasn't me. I didn't go round asking people to sign petitions or boycott him or anything." She dropped back into silence for a moment. "It really was rather wonderful in a way. Just to know that people liked me and thought I had been unfairly treated. I think that made these—" her hand strayed over the letters, "seem worse somehow. But, really, I live very quietly. Just groceries. And I buy a few clothes so I'll look nice for work. I'd like to take a little trip away but I don't really want to go on my own. I did ask my sister but she said no, she was too busy. But, honestly, I'm not the sort of person who gets into arguments. If people are upset with the doctors about being kept waiting, I do my best to soothe them. I can't think of anything … "

"Do you have a social life? Maybe you were invited out by someone … something like that?"

"If someone invites me I usually go. But I've got a son from my first relationship so I don't like to be leaving him to be gadding about a lot. Just occasionally it's nice to go out somewhere, maybe have dinner, or go to something in Winville. The movies. This may be a stupid question … but can you get fingermarks on them? I know a lot of people probably handled them … in the post office, I mean … "

"We can try. And when you say you go out occasionally—would it be with someone who's maybe broken up with someone who still isn't ready to let go, something like that?"

"I went out with Shane Binnie a few weeks ago. But that was six of us. We went for a picnic to the park at Burleigh. And I had dinner with George Hickman—but no one would be jealous of that surely? I mean George is quite old. He just likes company. And quite a while ago I went to Winville with Jon Dundas but that was just because Pauline was sick and couldn't go and he'd got tickets to a show there. And at Christmas some relatives came out this way and I went swimming with my cousin Ken Darcy and we went to the cricket. But that wasn't just me. I took my son along."

It didn't make her sound like a *femme fatale,* a man-snatcher, a woman who would be disliked by other women. And yet he couldn't get rid of the feeling that these letters did come from a woman. He felt, from his own experience, that a man would be more forthright in his threats, that he would be more likely to use swear words, that he would spell out what he wanted to do. Maybe that wasn't good psychology. Because the sort of men who'd send an anonymous letter might be the sort who *wouldn't* be forthright and unambiguous.

"Could you leave them with me to show Sergeant Walsh? I can give you a receipt for them."

The idea of a receipt for this rubbish struck her as absurd. But although she dismissed that with "you're more than welcome to keep them" she felt a bit uneasy about showing them to Sergeant Walsh. Finally she nodded and said, "Okay. You do whatever you think is best."

"And if you'd go on thinking about any small incidents. Even grabbing the parking space someone wanted or winning a raffle or something can cause bad feeling."

After she'd gone out, looking more cheerful, he wrote up his notes and put the envelopes in one plastic ziplock bag and the letters in another. It was unlikely that they could pick up any material evidence. Fingerprints. Saliva. But he felt he should try—if Dennis Walsh could not suggest anything.

He had half thought of inviting Joanne out but she was older than him, and there was that ethical question. She might be purely the victim. But it had been known for poison pen writers to send letters to themselves so they could pose as an injured party.

Dennis Walsh when he came in and tossed his cap on his desk with "Getting hot out there" and went to the frig for a glass of cold water didn't look very interested in the case of the anonymous letters.

"What are they threatening her with?" he said as he sat down and began to fill in his own records.

"That she'll be sorry. That she's a sneak. That someone will tell 'them' which I assume means the doctors."

"So what's your take on it?"

"I think it's a woman. It doesn't seem strongly-worded enough for a man. And it sounds like someone she's maybe offended without realising it."

"So who are the people you've got in the frame as having their toes trodden on? Anyone definite?"

"The doctors obviously. She made them look a bit mean-minded. Then she's gone out with Shane Binnie, George Hickman, Jon Dundas, and Ken Darcy. But that's spread over around ten months. It doesn't seem to be a busy social life."

"Well, go and hunt out a file. I think it's marked 'Childcare Centre' and read up about Pauline Stratton. Then take those letters and go round to see her. She'll be at work. I personally wouldn't want to take her out anywhere. But don't let me influence you." Pauline, he thought, was the sort of person who, once she had convinced herself of the justness of her ends, didn't care what means she used to get there. Admirable in a limited way; dangerous in others.

"So Pauline is her sister?"

"Yep. But if you want female company while you're here—I'd say you'd be better off with Joanne, even though she's the oldest in that family." It wasn't that he wished Guy Briggs on to Ms McNally, she had probably had her share of troubles, but rather that Joanne might be good for young Briggs. But then she might not fancy 'being good' for someone who was self-centred and self-obsessed when it came to his own life and troubles.

Clearly then, Constable Briggs thought as he drove, he wouldn't be compromising anything if he invited Joanne out to some function. But did he *want* to invite her out? He wasn't sure. He didn't want anyone to expect anything of him. Or did Walsh mean that the letters would stop if Joanne was clearly dating him—either because it would look as if she had some sort of authority standing behind her or because it would suggest that Joanne was no threat to anyone else's man?

A dozen or more children were at the childcare Centre. Pauline Stratton had been put off temporarily after she had used drastic measures to draw Council attention to the possibility that the centre had been built on contaminated land. It seemed to Guy Briggs that she was obviously a resourceful woman even if her methods were strange, even potentially life-threatening.

He asked for her as he let himself in the 'child safe' gate. "I'm Pauline," the woman he'd asked said briskly. "What's the matter?"

"Could we sit down somewhere?"

"Suit yourself." She turned and led the way into the small office. It seemed to him that she had already guessed what had brought him here. But he might be reading something into her calm apparently uninterested stance.

"So?" She sat down at the one desk and motioned him to a chair.

He took the two bags out and laid them in front of her. "Do you know anything about these?"

"Of course. My sister's been getting them. Someone doesn't like her."

"Do you have any idea who that person might be. It appears to be a woman."

She shrugged. "Wouldn't have a clue. But Joanne's not the little goody-goody she makes herself out to be."

"In what way?"

She obviously saw him as a very small gun sent to resolve a very small issue. Nothing about her suggested someone willing and eager to help. "She puts on this oh-so-helpful look and it pulls everyone in."

"Men, you mean?"

"Everyone. Old people. Kids. Teachers. You should hear the way they talk about her. You wouldn't think it was the doctor that fixed them up. You'd think Joanne had done it with a magic wand."

"She was a nurse, wasn't she? Maybe they find that helpful. But in what way isn't she the person people think she is?"

“She goes behind people’s backs. She says one thing and does another. And it is sickening to see the way they don’t realise that she is taking them for a ride. I’ll bet she wrote those letters to herself just to get some more sympathy.”

“Why would she want more sympathy? She seems to have a life she enjoys.”

“Don’t you believe it! You look at any divorced woman her age, living in a deadbeat place like Buckton, and you’ll see. Of course she wants to find someone and get out of here.”

Possibly she did. But he felt it was Pauline who wanted to get out. “You’re jealous of her, aren’t you?”

“Me!” She laughed loudly. “I could go tomorrow if I wanted.”

“So what keeps you here?”

“Don’t know really. Mum, I guess, and knowing a lot of people. Anyway, that’s none of your business.”

“Well, I’ll just get you to copy that top letter. You’ll need a felt pen from here.” He handed her a clean sheet of paper. “And underneath I want you to print your sister’s postal address with a biro.”

She did as he asked though without enthusiasm. “There! It’s nothing like.”

He felt uncomfortable merely sitting there and subjecting both bits of printing to a very careful examination. But the discomfort was worthwhile. He could feel her growing uneasiness.

“Well?” She sounded aggressive.

“Why do you hate your sister?”

“Because … who says I hate her? I don’t. I just think she’s a pain.”

He put the sample page into his case and stood up. “I’m afraid I’ll have to ask you to come round to the station and make a statement. Sending threatening material through the post is a crime.”

“Since when?”

“Take my word for it. It is.” He wasn’t sure how to deal with her. But he could see she wasn’t sure how to deal with him either. He was a completely unknown quantity. He might have skills she didn’t know about. Or he might just be Walsh’s latest stooge.

“I’ll only come when he’s not there.”

“When who’s not there?”

“Walsh, of course.” She sounded scornful.

“Suit yourself.” He got up. There might be more questions that would repay asking but he was beginning to feel a bit blank again. “And you’ll need to have your fingerprints taken for the process of elimination.”

“That’s baloney. Dozens of people must’ve touched those letters. I’m not going to agree to that.”

The centre’s manager, Nanci Coleman, came in. “Not going to agree to what?”

“To having my fingerprints taken.” Pauline stood up. “They think they can do what they like here. But I know my rights—”

“I don’t see what all the fuss is about.” Nanci Coleman looked tired. She was mildly sorry they had reinstated Pauline. She found her rather prickly and quick to take offence. She would’ve liked to hire someone a bit younger and better with children. Pauline had many good qualities. But she didn’t have the relaxed and cheery patience her job needed.

Then Nanci seemed to take in the full impact of what Pauline had said. “Your fingerprints? But why on earth do they want your fingerprints?”

“We think Mrs Stratton may have been sending poison pen letters to her sister.”

“I see. But that seems a bit extreme, surely?”

“More extreme than what?” Guy Briggs felt sure that if he only knew which buttons to press the case would burst wide open.

“Well, than … ” Nanci dried up. She didn’t feel she could accuse Pauline of anything; and getting angry with your sister was hardly a crime.

“If you want to tell us something—you might also like to drop round to the station later.”

He turned and went out. Clearly the two women would not speak openly in front of each other. Whether he should've tried harder …

Dennis Walsh would probably say he should've got tougher—but it was hard to get tough with two women in a place full of children.

"I've asked Pauline Stratton to come round and make a statement—" he told his boss.

"Did you charge her?"

"No. I'm sure she did it. But I couldn't find a way to get her to admit it."

Walsh sat back and let out a long breath. He would've charged the woman on the spot. But he was always willing to trust his gut feelings while he kept digging. He couldn't very well tell Guy Briggs to do that. His gut feelings might not be trustworthy …

"Right. Well, let's look at your material evidence. Spell out what you've got."

"The writing. The paper used. The envelopes. Stamps. Though I don't think she licked them. Self-seal envelopes unfortunately. The postmark dates. The words used. And now I know that Pauline Stratton resents her sister. I'm not quite sure why."

"Well, if Pauline isn't willing to confess you can try the post office. They might remember. It's hardly the GPO at Christmas. You can go and see old Mrs McNally. For now you can check whether any prints will show up on that paper, those envelopes, and the paper you got your sample writing on. But I'm not surprised Pauline resents Joanne. She thought she was being very public-spirited, finally getting action at the centre to test the soil, but there were no kudos. All people could think of was—what if she hadn't removed the razor blades from the sandpit before the kids arrived. And then Joanne turns round and gets treated like Florence Nightingale, simply for putting a few appointments in a book. And to top it off Pauline's been going out with Jon Dundas—and as soon as she gets sick he just goes off with her sister, hardly Joanne's fault, but it probably does look like Joanne's just been waiting her chance to nab him."

"And *is* it really a crime? We seem to be spending a lot of time on it." He had the suspicion that Dennis Walsh was sending him out on make-work errands.

"Of course it's a bloody crime! You'd better get stuck into some background reading, son, before you ask another stupid question like that."

It was almost a relief to see Pauline Stratton step into the station after the centre had closed for the evening; at least she wouldn't take him apart and leave him feeling naked and exposed and about ten-years-old.

"You've come to confess, I take it, Mrs Stratton. Very sensible. A lot of clear prints came up on that wad of paper. Surprising really." Dennis Walsh didn't raise his voice but it seemed to undermine Pauline Stratton's confidence.

"No. I just came because he told me to come." She pointed to Constable Briggs who hoped, even if he was embarrassed by doing so, that Walsh would continue to handle the situation.

"Right. Well, let's get this wrapped as fast as possible. It's wasted a lot of police time." She opened her mouth, then shut it again. He went on regardless. "You have two choices. I can charge you with sending threatening material and you will have to appear in Winville and I don't s'pose the Council will be fussed on keeping you on their payroll. Or we can ring your sister and get her to come around and you will publicly apologise to her for all the worry and fear and anxiety you have caused her. Your call. But let me just tell you one thing. Your sister *didn't* pinch your bloke. So next time make sure you get your facts right before you go overboard with some sort of stupid mean nasty pathetic cowardly sneaky underhand jealous behaviour." Every word seemed to carry the weight of his contempt.

After Guy Briggs had been detailed to ring Joanne McNally to come round to the station as soon as possible he found himself thinking, 'And I thought *I* was being given the rough end of his tongue.'

But it was Ms McNally who took the unpleasant edge off everything. She accepted the grudging apology with warmth and candour and generosity. "Why on earth didn't you tell me! I thought I was doing you a *favour*. If he went and invited Janice or Hayley or Sarah instead—then maybe he wouldn't come back to you. But with me I know he sees me as some old fossil, just about, and he'd be glad to take you out when you were well again."

Maybe Walsh was right, Guy Briggs thought when he finally got to walk home. Joanne might be older but she was by far the nicer of the sisters.

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Fiona Greehan had tended to take her Buckton branch and its atmosphere as the norm for country banks. So it came as a surprise to find that the atmosphere in Garramindi was much less pleasant. At first she was inclined to think that was merely the staff weighing her up, deciding whether she had come here merely as relief or whether she had another agenda. But as the days went by and there was no sign of any improvement she began to feel it was something intrinsic to this branch. She had heard people talk, slightly disparagingly, of Hilton Browne's decision to employ his one time mistress, Margaret Elliot, as his deputy and their daughter Julie as a trainee. The other employee was Brett Foley. And it didn't take long for Fiona to learn that he was the son of a Buckton resident, John Goodrick, who, around twenty years ago had lived with a Miriam Foley. Fiona had no intention of prying into their private lives but it didn't take long to see that Brett and Julie were an 'item', that Margaret was not wild about Brett but seemed to have an uneasy and rather tense relationship with him, and that Julie and her mother constantly swiped at each other in public but seemed to be much closer when no one was watching.

Although Fiona felt that if she had been manager she would've tried to find a way to create a better working atmosphere she could not see, at first, that the bank's problems were anything worse than a slightly uncongenial atmosphere. But her attempts at friendliness, at learning more about the history and traditions and stories about life at this branch, at inviting any of her staff to any sort of social gathering, were treated coolly. "We don't usually socialise out of hours," Margaret explained it away. "And the young ones don't really want to spend time with people twice their age."

Fiona didn't regard herself as being twice their age. Brett after all was about twelve years and Julie fifteen years younger. But she could see that Margaret resented a younger woman being promoted well ahead of her. She didn't let the thought upset her. She knew that Margaret would not take transfers or promotions so long as Hilton ran this branch. It suited her now to feel aggrieved …

Yet none of the commonsense explanations to everything quite explained away the fact that the bank wasn't doing very well. It might have to do with the price of wheat—because Garra was much more closely tied to one commodity. It might have to do with relationships. It might have to do with general bank policies, or interest rates, or a general lack of attraction and innovation about the bank premises though she found them quite pleasant. There was this constant feeling that the branch was in trouble but she couldn't pin it down sufficiently clearly to do anything about it.

It was Dulcie Campbell, a widow in her sixties, who asked Fiona one evening if she could ask her a 'shop' question. Fiona had moved into Dulcie's weatherboard house and found it quite comfortable. Dulcie was clearly a talker but she seemed to be keeping herself on a tight rein—or she found female bank managers just slightly intimidating.

"About the bank, you mean?"

"Yes. I've got an account there. Just an ordinary savings account. But it worries me a bit that the bank seems to keep increasing its charges. Not by a big lot. But I sometimes wonder if I might not be better off with another bank—or maybe a building society."

"You might. But can you tell me just what sort of increase you're talking about? Banks do sometimes make mistakes, you know, in which case it is worth making a complaint."

"Would you mind just having a look for me then? I'll get my bankbook."

Fiona sat and waited. Was this what people meant about 'little fiddles'? Just small mistakes in taking bank fees, stamp duty, other small items from people's accounts. She hadn't had more than the occasional grumble in Buckton. She had tried to tell people ways in which they could avoid some of the problems. But she often thought it would make life easier for people on the lowest incomes if they could have co-operative accounts, perhaps ten people joining together. Because it always seemed a bit like rubbing salt in to say to someone that they could earn more interest and pay smaller fees if they had over five thousand dollars in their account—when they were quite clearly only just managing to keep food on their table and shoes on their feet.

And Dulcie Campbell's bankbook was an eye-opener. It wasn't that the amounts constantly being taken were large. But everything was over the set limit by a couple of dollars.

"I know all the banks want to suck little accounts dry. But it does seem a lot." Dulcie sounded apologetic.

"There is obviously a mistake in the system, Dulcie. All those amounts are too large. It might just be a glitch in a computer but we'll need to look into it. Do you know if other people have been having similar problems?"

"Lots. That's why I thought it must just be the bank putting its charges up. Nothing to do with me."

"When you say lots—what would that refer to? Ten? Twenty? More?"

"I'm not sure. But each time I've mentioned it to someone they've immediately said they've been thinking the same thing. And I know a couple of people who have moved their accounts. I don't know about bigger things, shops, the hotel, the caravan park, the Wheat Board … but ordinary people like me have all been feeling a bit … cheesed off."

"So have you kept your previous bankbook? It might give me an idea on when the problem started." Dulcie had only got a new book a couple of months ago. It might be a recent problem. It might've been milking accounts for ages. It being the bank … in which case the bank would need to reimburse all these accounts … which would be a headache and a half …

"I'm sure I did. But I'll have to hunt it out, dearie."

"And if you would like to mention it to your friends—so I can get an idea of the size of the problem. If it is really large I may have to call a public meeting or something to try and reach all the people who have been short-changed."

"I knew you were a kind person the minute I set eyes on you," Dulcie said with renewed cheerfulness.

But Fiona couldn't really share her relief. The problem might be beyond her capacity to resolve. And was it merely human error, a glitch in their computers … or something much more sinister?

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Sergeant Walsh had flipped through all the material from Winville before passing it on to Constable Briggs. "Go through it. Then tell me if anything strikes you. I'd like to go to Winville and just check out the … geography. But we'll need to check protocol first."

"I thought you didn't mind stepping on DI Towner's toes."

"The fifth death is still an open case. Doesn't mean they're doing anything. But we'd need to run any possible interviews past them. Though there is one person we might go and see … Sharon Beattie. It was her husband who was driving the semi that was said to have pushed the car in front of the train. It was her mum who died in the house fire here a few months back. I could go and see how she's making out with all that stuff, I s'pose, and ask a few extra questions. Nothing to do with Doug."

Fair enough. Though Guy Briggs thought this Mrs Beattie would probably be astonished to find Walsh on her doorstep wanting to know how she was *feeling* … or maybe 'stuff' referred to something quite different. But he felt a new-found excitement at the chance to go through the case. Maybe he really *would* see something none of this band of old country coppers had picked up on.

To think with Sergeant Walsh was to act—or to say to his junior, "Look through the diary and see if we've got any spare time through the week. Otherwise it'll have to be an evening or maybe a Sunday afternoon—then give her a ring. Her number's in there."

Sharon Beattie said very cautiously that they could come around if they wanted—but it would have to be Sunday because she now had a fulltime job in Winville and she took her girls to sport on Saturdays. After he'd hung up and relayed the message, Walsh said, "I wonder where she parks her oldest daughter. Or maybe she's in some sort of sheltered workshop." Leela Beattie had cerebral palsy. It seemed very hard on the mother to lose her husband to suicide as well.

The Beatties lived in a small brick bungalow-style house on the Buckton side of town. But it was neat and tidy and well-kept. There was a big yard and several sheds behind the house. No doubt her husband had parked trucks there but now there was only a van standing on the gravel and a couple of girl's bicycles leant up against the fence.

Mrs Beattie came out on the small front patio area. She looked tired but unworried. Possibly she thought, regardless of their reasons for coming, that life had thrown a bit of everything at her and she had still coped.

"Come in. I don't see what I can do for you though."

"We were sorry we couldn't get anything more definite for you on your mother's death. But she certainly didn't suffer." Constable Briggs had done some background reading. Sharon showed no sign of being very interested.

"Have a seat." She indicated some vinyl chairs and a nest of tables. Constable Briggs had brought a folder with him. She looked from him to Sergeant Walsh, unsure whether there was some significance in his silence. "Would you like tea?" They accepted and she brought out some mugs and teabags.

They had driven around town, over that level crossing, along that small street, then back and around by the creek and the picnic area and the small remaining area of bushland. There was an obvious question in the geography which had led to the smash but Constable Briggs helped her with the jug of hot water and showed no desire to hurry on to other matters.

She brought it up herself. "You wanted to know about Colin but there isn't much to tell. He ran into the back of that car with Mrs Ford and her family in it and pushed them into the train. He didn't mean to. He never got over the awfulness of it."

"So tell me—why was he on that road in the first place? That's a very sharp run through there—and then the dog-leg beyond the crossing. That's no place for a semi-trailer." Dennis Walsh merely sounded interested.

She put her mug down and clasped her hands tightly. "He didn't meant to go through there. It was that Blinco that made him do it. You've no idea what he was like."

"So tell us."

"Tell you what?"

"What he was like."

"He never left Colin alone. It wasn't his business. But sometimes on a long trip Col would get something broken, a headlight maybe, or his blinkers mightn't be working. Once his rego was a week out-of-date. It was hard to cope with everything, with Leela and the girls. You don't get born knowing how to cope with a child like that." She sounded sulky and a slight whine had come into her dull voice. "But Blinco was like that. He picked on people. And he'd go round town, lights flashing, always coming up close behind you, almost on top of you, and Col would get the wind up. Any time he'd see Blinco out round town he'd try to get away from him. Normally he'd go round the circuit there and go over the crossing on Jennings Street. But Blinco came up behind him and he turned in there hoping Blinco'd go straight past. Maybe he wasn't concentrating enough. But it's hard not to get ratty when you've got a police car so close on your tail and he hit the sedan. He wasn't going fast. No one can say he was going fast. But it was just enough to push the car forward."

She looked from one man to the other with anxious eyes.

"Did Blinco charge your husband?"

"No. He didn't. He came around a few times, sometimes with other cops, and he made threats. But he never charged him."

Guy Briggs wasn't sure whether to continue asking questions or respond to the opening in the story. "That really is very strange. He definitely believed your husband was responsible for the accident—and yet he did not lay any charges."

"He knew—I'm sure he knew Col would say something about the way he'd been driving. And I know some of the men that weren't detectives—they weren't too happy about him screaming round town like that, lights flashing and everything. One of them told Col he reckoned Blinco was like a little boy with a new toy."

"But there was an inquest?"

"Of course. But they said the car would not have gone on to the line if it had stopped where it should, that it was going to cross and then it had stopped right at the last minute. So it wasn't all Col's fault. But he always said it was him who killed those four people. He got really funny and

strange. I know I said to you about him being killed in the smash. I know that isn't exactly true. He didn't die till much later. But, really, it was the smash which killed him. Sometimes he couldn't sleep. And he said he always saw and heard the engine coming. It was a wheat train. So it only had two or three people on it. I guess that was a relief. But Col used to say he sometimes woke up from dreams where the people got drowned in wheat. He stopped going to the pub or anything and he used to go walking by himself in the evenings. He thought people were pointing at him and saying he was a murderer."

It was a long speech for Sharon Beattie and she sat back then and let them decide if they wanted to ask any more questions.

"What sort of threats did Blinco make?" Constable Briggs said.

"Everything. How he'd get Col. How he'd take his licence away. How he'd ruin us. And then when the first couple of children disappeared and were found dead … he tried to say my husband did it. But Col was out in Charleville when the second little boy died. He could prove it. So Blinco left him alone for a bit. But then the next one … he came round here, he said he knew Col went walking by the creek, he said it was a … a copycat thing."

"Did Blinco say *why* he thought your husband might be doing it?"

"Not really. He said something about men that have a bad home life go out and do things. But I got mad at him when he said that. Really mad. How dare he say that about us. And everyone knew he treated his own wife like dirt. But I was very frightened all the same. Col couldn't take all this extra pressure and they booked him for several traffic things. He'd start to get nervous, he only had to see Blinco or a cop car or even drive past there, and I said maybe we should move. But I didn't really want to go back to Buckton. Mum would give him a hard time too."

"And when the later death happened, after Neale Clay had gone to prison, did Blinco come round again?"

"He did. He said he always knew there was more than one person at it and that Col had told the boy what to do. That was really stupid. Col hardly even knew the boy. Why should he?"

"And do you think it was this extra questioning which sent your husband … over the edge?"

"I don't know. Blinco got pretty strange himself. Sort of jumpy. And the way he'd stare at you. He went round town saying he knew it was Col who rung him about the little girl … and he'd prove it if it was the last thing he did."

"How did your husband deal with that?" Guy Briggs again had the feeling: if only it was possible to see into people's minds and know everything that was there instead of this feeling of groping around wondering if the answers were waiting—if only he knew the right questions to put.

"It was really peculiar in those last weeks. Col seemed to stop worrying. I think he'd made his decision. He took out an insurance policy for Leela, so the money will come to her when she turns forty. He left me some notes, just what to do about money and the truck and the equipment and everything."

"Did you keep them?"

"Of course. They said it wasn't a suicide note but that it showed how he'd been planning it. But after the inquest and everything was over I found another little note he'd left in the tool shed for me to find. It said he was sorry about not leaving us better off."

"Can we see both notes?"

She shrugged. "S'pose so." A minute later she brought them in from the kitchen and handed them to Guy Briggs. She got the impression he was being trained in his job and Dinny Walsh was mainly here to keep an eye on him.

They both read both notes. Then Constable Briggs said, "When he says down the bottom here 'I know you will understand everything' what do you think he was referring to?"

"That accident of course."

"Just the accident?"

At last she said reluctantly, "I did wonder if it was him that found the little girl and rang the police. But he never said so. But they said it was a man ringing from that public phone this side of the picnic area by the creek. He walked along there sometimes. There wasn't much water in the creek but I think he found it all restful … he liked to just sit and listen to the birds … "

"They said the child had sort of been laid out nicely, a bit like the other children. Did he ever mention that aspect?"

"No." A worried look came over her face. "But everyone had been told that. They even said maybe it was a funeral director doing it, wanted more business, it sounds a bit sick, but people were just so upset I think they tried to joke it off. I mean these were little kids … and my kids were little then."

"And he said nothing in those last weeks to give you any ideas on how he was feeling?"

"He got very calm and peaceful. I think he'd decided he couldn't go on. And he just put everything aside. But he did say something about wishing he could 'get' Blinco. I said lots of people thought that but I knew what he meant. Because Blinco never once let up on him. He couldn't even see us out shopping but he'd say something."

"Like what?"

"Like—are you coming in to confess, you pervert, things like that. People would turn and look at us. But I got back at him one time. He had his wife with him and she really looked terrible. She was really shaky and her skin was a sort of horrible grey colour. I said, you don't want to talk to people like that—not when you're doing your best to put your wife in her grave. Look at the mess she's in. He didn't say anything, just kept walking."

"Did he look upset—or worried—when you said that?" Dennis Walsh said suddenly.

"Well, I s'pose he did. A bit. I always wish I'd said more to him. But I didn't know what Col was planning to do. I'm sure he'd still be alive if it'd been someone else here, not Blinco. You maybe." She turned and looked at Sergeant Walsh. Afterwards Guy Briggs found that the strangest moment in the whole afternoon.

"Did your husband ever mention Mrs Blinco … or see her when he was out walking … or hear gossip." Walsh sounded as though he just wanted to tidy up some loose ends.

"People say she didn't go out. But she did walk down to the creek some afternoons. She would just sit there a while then go home again. A friend of mine said she was hoping that the extra sunlight would make her feel better. I don't know what was wrong with her. Later they said it was a brain tumour. I heard she committed suicide after he retired … but he probably did away with her. I heard he remarried … to a girl a lot younger. I hope she gave him a hard time. He didn't deserve to have everything."

But it doesn't come by deserving, Dennis Walsh thought later, as he directed Briggs to drive round past the house where the Blincos had lived. He wanted to get an idea how far it was from the creek. A five minute walk at most.

"And that is interesting." He pointed to another house.

For a moment Constable Briggs could not see the connection then it fell into place. The address where the Clay family had lived.

"Pull over a minute." Briggs did as he was told. His senior got out. He followed suit. Walsh was presumably referring to the proximity of the two houses. The Clays lived on the main road, the Blincos just round the corner on a quieter side street.

"I wonder why no one ever mentioned that." Walsh still sounded conversational.

"Mentioned what?"

"Stand on that rock and look over. I'd say a small part of the two back yards meets in that corner." There was another house intervening on the corner but the Clays had no doubt chosen their unexciting house because of its big roomy back yard, a good place for boys to play. About six metres of its side fence would have abutted the Blinco yard.

Guy Briggs could see that it was interesting, and he didn't mind to say so, but he couldn't see any significance beyond that. "Do you think Blinco picked on Neale Clay, said he was too noisy or hitting too many cricket balls into his yard. Something like that. We know that Blinco picked on people." He hoped it was a useful hypothesis.

"No. We know that Sharon Beattie says Blinco picked on people."

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Fiona spent a frustrating week trying to find where the problem was coming from. Although her computer skills were vastly superior to Sergeant Walsh's she had no luck in tracking down

anything. No sign of any virus in the system. No sign of anyone hacking in. Margaret did most of the business banking, as well as loans, transfers, opening new accounts and the occasional advice to travelers. Julie did most of the routine work at the central station. Brett dealt with a lot of local pensioners and welfare recipients but also did the enquiries and handled mailouts of statements. The bank had the services of a part-time cleaner and handyman.

She couldn't see anything wrong with this set-up. It probably used people's skills to best advantage. She could swop people around to see if they behaved oddly or complained of a problem in a different station. If they were bigger amounts or showing up with monotonous regularity … but these small increases in charges just seemed to be slipping through the system. And she could not take too much time away from her own work. Hilton Browne had let a lot of things slide, putting people off, saying he would discuss rescheduling loans … but he wouldn't have a chance in the 'near future'. Although people were reasonably sympathetic they also had their own financial burdens to worry about and several businesses had finally said bluntly, if Hilton could not expedite their business they would have to think of shifting their accounts elsewhere. Those who were in painful hock to the bank did not have this luxury but there had been enough threats for the bank's head office to finally insist on Browne taking extended sick leave.

And word didn't take long to get round town that she was willing to check all accounts as necessary. She found herself being stopped on the street, in shops, at the post office, the service station …

In the end she went in to see Sergeant George Stadler, Garramindi's one and only force for law and order, and told him about the problem. He had heard occasional rumours but hadn't been able to pin them down and no one had come with a specific complaint.

"So how many people are involved?" He took the problem cautiously; he took most things cautiously.

"I don't know. Maybe all the people affected have approached me. Maybe there are hundreds more out there who have just put up with it or transferred to another bank or just haven't realised. I am thinking about holding a public meeting to try to get an idea of the size of the problem. If it runs into many thousands of dollars I may have to get an auditor in but if it's twenty people I think I should be able to fix the problem on the spot in terms of reimbursing them. But I may need to close the bank for a day or two and get a computer expert in."

"Well, why not hire the CWA hall for an evening meeting. It will hold several hundred." He thought he would come along and try to get a handle on the situation. She was treating it as a computer problem but it was possible it was being done deliberately. Margaret and Julie and Brett might all be well-qualified for the work they did … but he always felt the atmosphere there was almost incestuous. It made him feel slightly uncomfortable. And young Brett had been heard to boast that he would get rich and leave Garramindi. It was probably hot air. But most country youths assumed they would need to *leave* their home town to get rich.

That same afternoon she rang him to say she'd booked the hall for Friday night and was putting some posters round town and a message out over local radio. "Good. You obviously don't believe in letting the grass grow under your feet." What she didn't tell him, not least because it was too subtle to be put into words, was the change in atmosphere when she told her staff what she planned to do. She had asked them all to be present but Brett and Julie had insisted they had already made plans. Margaret had merely sighed and said she could probably make it. "But I really don't know what you hope to achieve. Having people come along and say the bank owes them nine dollars is going to create a nightmare situation. I really don't know what Hilton would say if he knew what you're doing to his bank—"

"But it isn't his bank. It's the people's bank. We are here to serve the shareholders, who might well agree with you, and our customers who are going to thank us. And we aren't going to have anything to offer shareholders if our customers keep leaving us to move to other banks."

"It's only a few who've gone—"

"And that doesn't worry you? A town as small as this—and the loss of a few customers doesn't bother you?"

The disconcerting thing was that it really didn't seem to be bothering her deputy. If Margaret worried about things, and she always looked vaguely anxious, then they were obviously quite different things.

"I still don't think having a public meeting is a good idea."

"If it doesn't work then we look for another way to reach the people we've short-changed."

She was tempted to ring Dennis and put the problem on his shoulders. But that seemed quite unfair. And what could he do anyway? It might be better to discuss the problem with Brian Collyer but he might feel it was a lead-in to checking on him. And she was determined to give him her full trust …

Trust. Yes, that was what was lacking here. She didn't trust her staff and she wasn't sure they trusted each other.

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George Stadler didn't trust himself. At least, he didn't trust his ability to handle a situation of small but chronic fraud. Although it wasn't something he would admit to someone like Dennis Walsh he did let small things go, and if it'd been his call on this he knew he would've advised letting the situation go. He knew it was an admission of failure. But he didn't have any backup and he was in his fifties. Sometimes, in that word that was creeping into people's vocabularies, he just had to 'prioritise'. It wasn't a problem simply to go along and sit in the old wooden hall and see who turned up and hear what they had to say for themselves. But there was quite a lot of anger out there. It was largely directed at banks as institutions rather than this one small branch—but the knowledge that they were being diddled by one bank just might spark off a wider sense of grievance and anger.

He lifted the phone, hesitated, then dialed Buckton. "Dennis? George here in Garra. You doing anything on this Friday night? No, I'm not having my farewell bash—though there's times when it can't come soon enough. No, it's your Ms Greehan. She's called a public meeting. Seems there's a problem at the bank. She thinks, or so she says in public, that it's a problem in the computer system which is skimming people's accounts. She may be right. But I know the people who work there and I can't help wondering if it might be more than that. There's a lot of bad feeling swirling around. I'm not sure how things will go."

"If it won't look like overkill I'm happy to drive over. She happens to be a good friend of mine. I don't want her getting the rotten tomato treatment."

"The whole world now seems to know she's a good friend of yours, Dennis. I never managed to attract a bank manager in the days when I was looking out for someone … "

George Stadler gave the impression of being a confirmed bachelor. But there were still a couple of women round town who thought he was worth being particularly nice to …

"That's because they all used to be men, George. I just struck lucky. Anyway, what time Friday?"

As he hung up he thought it was true. He had struck lucky. Fiona might think she had made all the running but he knew he had done his best to gently nudge her in his direction. Nudging wasn't usually his style but anything stronger would probably not have worked. The luckiness was something different. They might not have found anything to talk about, any pleasure in each other's company, he might not have melted at the thought of getting between her legs … melted? … mightn't be quite the right word …

It was an unexpectedly chilly spring night. But that hadn't kept people at home. Maybe there just wasn't anything worth watching on television or they thought they would go on to the pub or a barbecue after …

Fiona had set up the place with chairs, an urn, some cups, milk, sugar, a couple of packets of biscuits, and she had borrowed a microphone from the local primary school as she knew she didn't have a strong voice and many of the people would most likely be elderly.

With everything organised to the best of her ability she went outside to see if Margaret was coming, if people were coming … It was hard not to feel a little nervous. Speaking to a hall of strangers, admitting problems in this very public way, maybe unleashing the sort of rage many farmers felt towards what they saw as greedy uncaring banks in drought times …

And people were certainly coming. The street was lined with cars. Little knots of people in cardigans and jackets were making their way along to the hall. Margaret came up to her. “I still don’t think this is a good idea. We’ll have every Tom, Dick, and Harry turning up claiming they’ve been diddled—and we’ll have to spend weeks trying to sort out the genuine claims from those who’re just trying it on.”

“Then we do the obvious ones first and the others will just have to be patient. But I’m sure some of these people have just come out of curiosity. So don’t start worrying yet that it’s going to overwhelm us.”

And then she saw George Stadler coming along the weedy footpath in the dim of the evening. And beside him … at first she thought she was imagining things. Several times she had thought of inviting Dennis and then she had quashed the idea. He had better things to do than drive all the way out to Garramindi.

The two men came over to them. Stadler said, “Evening, Ms Greehan, evening, Margaret. I think you two already know each other.” He turned to Dennis and introduced him to Margaret Elliot.

Walsh kept his expression as neutral as possible. But he hadn’t missed the look on Fiona’s face. Surprise. Relief. But something more. A flash of joy that seemed to light up her face before she carefully schooled it into a businesslike expression again. But looking at Fiona almost made him miss Margaret’s less-than-pleased expression. Even though this was supposed to be to sort out the people who had suffered through a technical problem he saw very clearly that Margaret Elliot didn’t want the police putting their noses in.

“We’d better go in,” Fiona said to her deputy, and the two of them turned to walk in. Was it fear, worry, something to do with the bank—or a much simpler and more basic sense of envy that put that expression on the other woman’s face? Margaret Elliot did not like playing second fiddle to a much younger woman. She probably felt, understandably, that she should’ve been asked to be acting manager while Hilton Browne was away. But Dennis left his thoughts on Ms Elliot for later.

Once people all seemed to be seated, with the two men at the back of the hall, Fiona stepped up to the microphone, and said, “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for taking the time to come along. As you all know there is some kind of small problem with our technology and many of you have been over-charged. I would like to be able to get a clearer picture of the problem and also give you all the assurance that the problem will get fixed and you will all be reimbursed by whatever amount you have been overcharged. Even if it’s only a few dollars you are entitled to the return of that amount. I would also like to say on behalf of the bank that I am sorry for what has happened. I am sure you have enough problems without needing to tackle your bank as well.

“Now before I go on to the big chart which gives you the current rate of bank fees for various kinds of accounts, I’d like to ask if anyone has ever found themselves being under rather than over-charged? Hands up. The bank won’t demand it back as it is equally our fault.”

But no one moved to raise a hand although several people allowed themselves a smile and someone murmured to a neighbour, “That’d be the day.”

Fiona then turned and gave a crisp rundown on exactly what the normal charges were, why they were charged, and what went to the bank and what to the government. Although several people were tempted to say something aloud about bank greed they mostly appreciated the clear way she was putting it all on the line. People who had made complaints about high fees or fees in general had often come away with no sense of satisfaction. This exposition did not make the bank sound like a friend to the poor but it was at least easily graspable. And her reference to ‘your bank’ helped undercut the feeling that the bank was a large impersonal thing ‘out there’.

Then she said, “You may not want to get up to say exactly what your own situation is. But it would be a big help if you could all give us some idea of the amounts you think you’re out of pocket by, and when you think the problem started. Ms Elliot and I will then know what amount of time, and when, would be most convenient for you to come to have your individual situations resolved.”

She said it in such a way that no one felt they were being singled out or put on the spot. Even so, there was a sudden moment of silence and inaction. Then Dulcie Campbell stood up. “I know it

won't sound like a large amount to some of you. But I am a widow and every penny counts. I've worked out that I've paid the bank thirty-nine dollars over and above their normal charges."

Margaret wrote the name and the amount down. Another person got up and said equally apologetically that they thought they'd been overcharged by about twenty-three dollars. After that people were almost queuing to say something. None of the amounts were large. The biggest was a suggestion of ninety-three dollars. A number of people said they weren't sure because it was only when the amounts seemed to vary that they started to wonder. Others said they hadn't kept past statements. And some said they were annoyed that this bank should be charging more than they paid on accounts in other banks.

After about an hour the claims seemed to dry up. Possibly some of those who hadn't spoken were too shy to do so in public or had reasons for keeping their financial details private—or had simply come along out of curiosity or to support friends and relatives and neighbours.

But it added up to a very large problem. Whether this was the tip of the iceberg or nearly the whole of the problem, whether people on farms had not heard about the meeting or whether everyone had made the effort to come …

Margaret had been tapping the amounts into a calculator after she'd jotted down the names of all those she recognised or who had offered their names. By the time Fiona thanked everyone for making public their grievances Margaret had a total of five thousand one hundred and twenty-one dollars. And if people had underestimated rather than overestimated their situation, which seemed likely as people had probably only added up from their current statements or bankbooks and if Dulcie was representative then the problem had been going on for nearly two years, it was likely the amounts would continue to grow.

Fiona glanced at the total on Margaret's calculator. "I had hoped we might be able to fix the problem quicky and easily but I think it is growing so fast I may need to clear the reimbursements with head office—"

"I knew it was too good to be true," an aggrieved male voice said loudly.

Several other people chimed in with things about there being a catch somewhere, that banks never paid people back if they could weasel out of it …

"You don't know that the bank will even agree to that. Not when they see how much it's going to be."

The mood had been a bit shocked, overwhelmed even, but now it showed signs of turning aggressive.

But Fiona, whatever she felt inside, remained calm. "I know you have every reason to no longer feel that your bank is worthy of your trust but I will see that you are compensated—even if I have to dip into my own salary to do so. But I feel sure that the problem will be handled properly and decently and as quickly as possible. I would like to set Monday week as the day to begin dealing with your grievances. If anyone cannot come in during the day we will remain open into the evening for you. If you know of anyone who is housebound, disabled, in hospital or isn't likely to be able to get into the bank in person please ask them to ring us next week and we will make arrangements."

She wound up with the offer of tea and biscuits and thanked them all for coming.

A few people accepted the opportunity to continue to talk over refreshments, others spilled out on to the street, and one or two came up to ask aggressively why the bank hadn't got on to the problem sooner. To that she could only say, "I don't know the answer to that, I'm sorry, but I will be looking into every aspect of it." Those who knew of Hilton Browne's illness were prepared to cut a little slack. One or two bypassed Fiona to demand answers from Margaret. She responded with a stock answer, "I am not the manager and I can only refer you to Ms Greehan." This didn't go down terribly well but people obviously had no intention of criticising Margaret personally—which might say something about the way she was seen locally or possibly a belief that her boss had never delegated anything to her.

Gradually the crowd of people moved out of the hall, some standing talking outside, others walking away or going to their cars. In about twenty minutes Fiona was able to wash the few used cups, put her bits and pieces back into the basket Dulcie had loaned her, and begin turning off the

lights. When she finally stepped out into the cool night it was to find Dennis and George still standing outside under the one bulb over the front door.

"Well, I believe it's called the cat among the pigeons," George sounded unruffled. "You did it very well, my dear." Fiona wasn't wild about being called 'my dear' but she accepted it was well meant. He said more soberly, "But I had no idea the problem was that big. And that's just people round town. I hate to think what the total will look like when all the claims come in."

"I know. But it can't be helped. We're just going to have to wear it."

"But it isn't a mistake, is it?" Stadler went on. "I'm not a very suspicious old duffer. But I was watching Margaret and I don't think a computer error would make her look like the cat with the bad fish. I think someone's had their sticky little fingers in the till."

Fiona sighed. She had kept hoping some simple answer might come along to save her more angst and more apologies and more time-consuming problems. But George was right. And if one of them had been siphoning small amounts off—then there was a very good chance that they all knew about it. To ask that one person be transferred, sacked, asked to resign, or even simply watched more closely was on thing—the entire staff another. "But I would appreciate it if you would stay with the line that it is a computer error for the time being. I think people half-expect computers to mess up their accounts."

"Well, stay in touch," George said briskly. "I'm no great shakes when it comes to computer jargon—but I'm here if you need me." He said goodnight and walked away.

The little side street had grown still and dark, the hall now silent and deserted behind them. She walked along with Dennis to his car. He unlocked and opened the driver's door.

"Dennis, thank you for coming. I wish you could stay but I feel pretty drained. And Dulcie will be expecting me."

"I know. And it isn't really a problem I can help you with. But you know where I live if there's anything … "

She smiled at that. After being so keyed up, and the hall had got quite stuffy towards the end there, she now felt a cool dry wind along the street. And he must be tired. A full day's work, the long drive, sitting on hard chairs, the long drive back …

She reached up to kiss him swiftly, suppressing the temptation to prolong the moment, then stood back to watch as the car moved away. Its tail lights turned the corner and she felt the depth of her solitude in that empty street.

Case No. 4: D Day

Guy Briggs hated the moments when he felt himself put on a spot. He felt he was being tested in more than basic policing, maybe in basic thinking; that maybe Walsh wanted to know if he really was observant, that he noticed small things, that he could put his material together …

He'd done a clear and fairly careful chronology of everything from the level crossing smash to each finding of a child, the inquests, the date when Neale Clay came in and confessed, the preliminary hearings in Winville, the material on the fifth child. He'd put in the dates when the Clay family arrived in town, for the father to teach at the high school, when Neale left school, the few dates and places after that when the youth had found some part-time work.

He had also done a neat map showing where each body was found, where each child had lived, where they were in relation to the Clay and Beattie families.

"You'll need to walk those routes as soon as you've got time," Walsh said non-committally. "And you'll need to know exactly what people could see from every position. Why did people continue to let their children come to the picnic area after the first death. Did they feel they could see them, keep an eye on them, and was there something in the bush that attracted children. Nice trees for climbing, a hollow they climbed into. Birds, animals, a play house, a sandy spot along the creek. We don't know if the children were brought there from somewhere else. There's nothing in those notes to clinch that one way or the other. So you'll need to look at where cars might've parked

and not been noticed. Young Clay didn't have a driver's licence, though it might not of stopped him borrowing someone's car. None of those questions of access and sighting have been properly dealt with."

Guy Briggs thought it all sounded like hard work. On the other hand he didn't mind an excuse to get out of Buckton in his free time. He thought he would take his camera and get shots from every direction; into the bush, back towards the picnic grounds, down to the creek, along the access roads, back towards the town.

Two of the children had been killed three months apart, then the other two died together; they had recently started school and were walking home together. But there were other children around as well. Why hadn't they seen … noticed … mentioned …

And adults … why hadn't *they* …

He didn't have the full files of the investigation. But he doubted if there was much more around to throw light on the case. And then, of course, Neale Clay had walked in and given himself up before the investigation had fully geared up again. Why that moment? Why not earlier? What was there about that moment? Something in Neale Clay's life …

*

Sr O'Brien popped into the newsagency on her way to work. It was busy but her gaze was drawn to Fiona Greehan as she picked through magazines; something a bit tired, a bit tense in her stance, something troubled in her face. The sister selected a packet of envelopes and a biro. She got quite a lot of letter-writing done on quiet nights.

She only knew Fiona slightly but she was a kind-hearted woman and not averse to taking the first step. She hesitated, then went over. "Hullo, how are you, Ms Greehan?" Fiona started. "Oh!" She dredged up a smile. "Thank you for asking. I'm very well." Sr O'Brien doubted the truth of this but said cheerfully, "I'm in good time for work—could I tempt you to a cup of tea with me—either in town or out at the hospital. We never really seem to have a chance to get acquainted."

It was Fiona's turn to hesitate. She was tired but there wasn't much point in stewing over things back at the flat while she waited for Rae …

"It's very kind of you. If it wouldn't be a trouble."

"I'll just pay for these. My car is right outside."

She shared a small sitting room with the two other nursing sisters. "What'll you have?" She fussed with electric jug, cups, spoons, sugar. "I s'pose you feel Garra is even worse than Buckton? Not the world's most exciting place by a long shot." She seemed to invite confidences with her comfortable chat.

"I know. But I won't be there much longer. I've just been told the bank is going to close that branch."

Sr O'Brien was startled out of her habitual calm. "Why on earth would they want to do that? I thought it was quite a prosperous little place really."

"There are problems—with the way it's been run—and I don't seem to be able to solve them. But I think the decision to close was already in the pipeline. They just didn't bother to tell me. I think they waited till Hilton was gone. People say he was quite popular there."

"So it's one of those things where a woman isn't seen as being equally important. Her reputation, I mean."

"I think it's partly that. But I can't work out why small amounts of money keep disappearing from people's accounts. I've said I'll make sure everyone is reimbursed as it is clearly the bank's fault. Head office is upset about the commitment. I have the horrible feeling they were simply going to cut and run. But even if it comes to the worst and I have to reimburse people myself and try to shame them so I get compensated later … " The anxious little frown was back; on top of failure was the knowledge of being linked to corporate callousness.

Kathleen O'Brien said in her comfortable way, "I'm so sorry. I had no idea what you were facing there. Look, I'm just going to pop along to the kitchen and get us some cake to go with this. Food *is* a comfort. I won't be a minute."

But outside she hesitated. It was sneaky, yes, but Fiona probably needed more than her kind of friendly chit-chat, even with cake. She ducked into the deserted dispensary and lifted the phone. If

Fiona did end up paying people out of her own pocket chances were she would never see the money again. She dialed and was thankful to hear Dennis Walsh's voice. "We need your help, Dennis. I don't know if you can spare ten minutes to advise me … if not Fiona."

"I'll do my best."

"Bless you. But make it look as though you were just dropping by." In the kitchen she helped herself to several slices of madeira cake. Mrs Binnie, though constrained by a small budget, was a good cook.

There had been vague rumours of some sort of trouble in Garramindi. She just hadn't taken much notice. Now she brought the cake back and sat down. "When I think back thirty years and remember us giving patients bread sopped in milk, stale bread at that, then cake seems like a luxury."

Fiona smiled. "Have you always lived in Buckton?"

"No. Twenty years. I saw the job here and applied."

Heavy footsteps sounded on the outside verandah. She went to the door. "Dennis! Can you spare a minute? We've got the jug on." It didn't occur to Fiona to query his opportune arrival; even when Kath O'Brien said briskly, "And I hope you can talk Fiona out of getting the bank out of the hole it's dug for itself in Garra."

"What kind of hole?"

Fiona repeated her story. He sat down and gave it his full attention. At the end he said simply, "The bastards. But can you afford to do that?"

"I did think of buying a house here but it's so much nicer, and cheaper, to live with Rae. So the money isn't really the issue. Just the sense of let-down."

"Except—living with Rae must get in the way of your love life." Kath enjoyed being mildly provocative. "I much prefer to live alone. Just my two cats." Which was quite a surprising statement from a cheerful gregarious woman.

"There isn't a lot of love in it. But I don't feel that my privacy is invaded there. Rae and I set boundaries." All three of them interpreted this in terms of Fiona going round to see Dennis in his home; a kind of discretion …

"So you still haven't tracked down the bastard who is milking accounts there?"

"No. I'm quite good with a computer but not an expert. I tried to persuade them to hold off on closure—without luck. I want the bank to go out as decently as possible. They say they'll re-employ Julie and Brett in another branch. Hilton will retire. Margaret hasn't decided what she wants to do."

"And you're quite certain it *is* fraud—not—" Sr O'Brien hesitated. She had acquired basic computer skills but did not feel she understood the jargon.

"If there is a general mistake in the system then it should be showing up in over and under payments across the board—business accounts, school accounts—not just savings accounts."

"Okay." Dennis pulled over a small table. "Here's the bank. Tellers here. Your office, here. Customers out here." He sketched the place with a finger on the table-top. "Where do people go? Which tellers where?"

"Margaret usually up this end. She handles most of the business banking. She also fills in for me if I'm out and does some of the loan application interviews. Occasionally she fills in if one of the others is out. Julie usually does the centre. Brett down this end."

"So where would most pensioners go?"

"Either Julie or Brett. But I've noticed a lot of older women prefer to go to him. And he's good with pension information. They think he's a nice young man. The closest they will ever get to Harrison Ford or—Tom Hanks maybe."

"You're being serious?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I did wonder if older women were being targeted. But maybe he's just added in an extra program to his computer. Not my field. I could maybe lend you Guy Briggs. He says he understands all this sort of stuff."

"I thought you didn't like him," Sr O'Brien said drily. Some lurid stories had done the rounds—of Dennis threatening his new constable with something close to GBH if he didn't lift his game.

"I don't. But he still knows more about computers than me." He still found Guy Briggs hard to like. But that initial and deep sense of antipathy was fading.

"It might be very simple. Just set up so that if you hit an extra key—or a different key—and it sets the charges at a slightly higher rate. But they must also have a way to constantly transfer those small amounts to an account without that registering as a separate transaction."

"What about a dormant account," Sr O'Brien said suddenly. "We see it here sometimes. Old folk in the Annexe sometimes forget that they even have an account. I heard of someone who died and it wasn't till nearly six years later when the relatives were sorting through the last of her clothes that they found a bank book with several thousand dollars in it. None of them even knew she had an account with that particular bank."

"It could work. I've been gradually going through all such accounts in case there's someone who hasn't been in touch or hasn't checked for discrepancies—just to see if I can find small amounts going in or out. But it's a big job. And if they re-activated an account that had been closed—or records weren't kept … "

"Then—can you simply take Brett's computer out of circulation somehow. Remove it from the bank. Get it to George Stadler. Get him to give you a receipt. Sooner the better. They've had plenty of warning—but they may think you've given up."

"Yes, I'm sure an expert could find traces—even if they think they've removed all the evidence."

Dennis stood up. "I'd better keep going. All those louts out there with nothing better to do—sometimes I wish I could dig a big pit like the Africans do and put stakes in the bottom—then just sit back and wait for them to fall in."

Sr O'Brien smiled. "If I didn't know you, Dennis, I'd say you had definite criminal tendencies." But after he'd gone again she sat back with a little sigh. "I do wish people would behave. He looks a lot better, the poor love, but I still don't think he's a hundred per cent."

The idea of anyone calling Dennis Walsh a 'poor love' astonished Fiona. But then Kath O'Brien in her fifties probably saw Dennis through quite different eyes.

"I know. I hate to think of him out late after drink-drivers and everyone. It doesn't seem fair."

"Exactly." But Sr O'Brien after musing for a moment struck off at a tangent. "I've sometimes thought, you know, that the biggest prude you'd ever find, fifty years ago, was an Irishman. My dad could use some pretty choice language but you wouldn't know he had a pair of knees. He used to call the men in shorts and long socks 'jumped-up-johnnies'. Cows might have tits but my poor mother was a blank slate … and if men like him got something wrong with their waterworks—they'd be at death's door before they'd let a doctor poke around. Your dad might've been a bit that way, maybe?"

Fiona smiled but looked slightly puzzled. "He was more interested in what he did—not in what he was. But what does it have to do with Dennis? He's a later generation."

"I s'pose it's different in the city. But I can remember thinking back to my dad when we had Dennis in. I think he hated Cherry Morton—not so much because she tried to poison him—but because she put him through all that embarrassment here. Jeannie and I did it all to save him having an eighteen-year-old giving him an enema. But it hurt me in a way to have to take away his privacy like that, the same as I would've felt with my dad."

Fiona could understand that. He would probably even hate her knowing … "It hurt me so much—seeing him so unwell … and not being able to help him."

"I think you did plenty for him, love, don't you fuss on that score. We nursed him. But he was talking seriously about resigning, going off somewhere else … I think he stayed on because of you."

"We're like comets perhaps—traveling at different speeds. Just occasionally we come alongside one another—and it's a special moment. But I don't feel at home here. I don't suppose I ever will."

"What do you miss most?"

"Oh! Lots of things. As I was driving back from Garra late yesterday I found myself thinking how I'd love an evening at the ballet—and it seemed another world. I don't imagine Dennis has ever been—or even *thought* of wanting to go along—"

"It *is* a bit hard to picture. But if you'd ever like company—I'd love to go myself. I had that dream when I was little—but the nearest teacher was forty miles away and we had a dairy farm. I always comfort myself by knowing I grew too big and solid to frolic round in a tutu or a leotard. But I know what you mean. Once the opportunity's gone you can't get it back. Anyway, love, let me run you home then I must think about work."

"Oh, it's no trouble to walk that far, it's only five minutes … "

Sister O'Brien stood on the verandah to watch Fiona walk away across the visitors' carpark. She seemed very slender and strangely vulnerable as she disappeared into the dusk of a spring evening. Vulnerable? Kathleen O'Brien held the thought a moment then dismissed it. Buckton was really a very safe place to live …

*

Dulcie Campbell seemed surprised to see Fiona return; possibly, like most locals, she had ceased to believe in the promise of reimbursement and redress and assumed that Fiona would disappear as easily as their branch …

"I'll just have a cup of coffee in the morning, Dulcie, I'm a bit on edge these days."

"Doesn't do you any good, all this to and fro. I don't say men make better bank managers but they don't get all het up about things the way you do."

That the bank might be in better heart if Hilton Browne *had* at times got 'het up' did not seem to occur to her landlady.

And she wasn't precisely het up. Easy enough to see clearly what needed to be done. A little less easy to put it into practice. But George said he would come round early and impound the computer for her. She had gone over and over the situation on her drive back to Garramindi. It could be worked as a very simple system. All Brett, and she felt reasonably sure Brett Foley was the 'brains' behind the scam, needed to do was to set up an additional program whereby an extra key would activitate his slightly larger fee entries, and then some way to simply drop the excess into a hidden account. It might only come to ten, twenty, thirty dollars a day but it could be netting him a hundred or more a week. She thought she would need to actually try out the idea to see just how it would work. But first things first.

Once the computer was removed she could focus on the claims that might come rolling in. And she had tightened every obvious aspect of their security.

She had asked George to come at 7 a.m. so that, with luck, everything could be done before anyone else arrived. It took her several minutes to disconnect and place Brett's computer and keyboard into a padded box. George said as he scribbled a receipt, "Well, this beats all. But I hope it works. You deserve a good result from all your hard work." The trouble with that was—she still had to deal with her staff. If she had got it all horribly wrong she would probably never recover. They would make sure she didn't simply walk away leaving their reputations in tatters. Then again an independent check just might clear the air.

After he'd gone out the back door of that attractive old Federation house-turned-bank and placed the box in his boot she busied herself with setting up everything, bringing the trolley out from the strong room then re-locking the door. She felt deeply on edge. But if good personnel relations were now a lost cause she could at least put as many cut-out security checks and balances into place as possible. She looked through the various small personal notes the others had left alongside their places on Friday evening; a grocery list on Margaret's chair, a travel brochure on Julie's. Brett had left everything bare.

Then she went into her small office and began on her own day's work. Even if she could think of no way to stop them closing this small branch, other than chaining herself to the front steps, she was still determined to go out with everything done decently. It wasn't fair to ask people to drive all the way to Winville or Buckton and she knew that most customers would simply shift over to the

Commonwealth if they were free to do so. The bank would lose more than it might gain by cutting and running. But there was no point in stewing over the issue …

Margaret was first in. She hung up her jacket and put her handbag in her locker. Then she looked around and said sharply, "What is going on? Where's the other computer?"

"Gone. Good morning, Margaret. When you've got yourself settled can you spare me a few minutes to discuss how we should handle whatever claims come in. We could put a table out there. Or deal with it from the enquiries counter—"

Margaret didn't seem to have been listening to this. "What do you mean—gone?"

"Gone to be checked. As it seems to be Brett's customers who have borne the brunt of the glitch it seemed most sensible to start from there and work our way through. Anyway, come in when you're ready." It was hard to sound calm and normal. Not when Margaret looked—flabbergasted was the first word to come to mind. But she recovered quickly. "Why Brett's? Why not Julie's? She gets rushed sometimes and I'm sure she makes mistakes."

"And Brett doesn't? You must be delighted to be getting him as your son-in-law. But I've noticed that women often do take that little extra bit of care—"

"So where is it now? In your car? Are you sure it's safe? There have been break-ins—"

"No. It really is safe. Don't worry. Now could we get on? We've got a busy day ahead."

Julie came racing up the side steps. Whoever else might be depressed or anxious about the closure she gave no sign of seeing it as anything but an opportunity to get away from Garra. She was still hoping that the bank would offer her a better job somewhere more exciting …

She saw the gap and stopped. Her glance went from her mother to Fiona then back again. Finally she said, "What's happened?"

"She's taken it to be checked—"

For a moment the word did not seem to register. Things in banks were always getting 'checked'. It was a word with various careless meanings. Then she said, "What do you mean—checked?"

"She's taken it."

Brett was invariably last in but he had arrived in time to hear this exchange. "Taken what?" Then his gaze went to his work station. "Like hell she has!" He turned on Fiona Greehan with something close to a snarl. If he had ever hoped to talk his way out of the hard questions it was lost in the sudden unplanned swirl of anger. "And you let her? You stupid old bitch!"

"Will you all please calm down." Fiona, if she had doubted before, was no longer groping to find a reason for the constant haemorrhaging of accounts. "It will need to be checked. But I am sure it is only something small. As for you, Brett, you can apologise to Margaret and move on to her place for today. She will be helping me with the claims."

"Helping you!" For a moment she thought he was going to strike her. His eyes went to the blank space and back to Fiona and she knew he no longer cared about trying to wangle his way out of this. "You fucking bitch! You bloody interfering little bitch!"

She moved to lift the phone. She hadn't thought she would need George Stadler but now she knew she had seriously underestimated these people. Their bland smiling the-customer-is-always-right faces were masks. They had set up an almost perfect little scam and run it with great patience, apparent politeness, unostentatious care, and now it was about to come unstuck before the branch closed and left them safely in possession …

It was Julie who came up behind her and brought a large stapler down on her head. She felt the stars swirl and clutched for the edge of the desk. Julie brought it down again and again and she collapsed to the floor.

"You fools! You stupid fools!" Margaret saw everything run away and disappear, like water through dry sand. "You've wrecked everything!"

"No. We haven't." Brett turned to Julie. "Get it all stowed, every penny. And you, you stupid old bag, can dump her somewhere. Here—" he turned to Julie, "we'd better get her tied."

As he spoke he was hunting out suitable materials and winding packing tape round Fiona's face. He doubled some string to tie her hands behind her and then turned to her ankles and ran the string between the two ties. "That should keep her quiet. Bring your car round the back." But

Margaret stood paralysed. How had it come to *this?* The blink of an eye and she was being asked to become an accessory to murder.

Then she said hoarsely, "You can't."

"Can't I? We'll be gone before you get back. So get going, you silly old—"

Julie intervened. "It'd be best to just do it, mum. You can say we pulled a gun on you if you want. But hurry up, for God's sake, hurry up!" Another twenty minutes and people would start collecting at the front door to come in.

Margaret backed in behind the old wooden building and opened her boot. It took Brett only a minute to lift Fiona and carry her out, toss her in and close the boot. Margaret had begun to shake. She needed to get well away from main roads as soon as possible; somewhere up beyond the junction in the scrub there, down a gully maybe. Somewhere where she could get well off the road to unload the body. But as she drove she knew she couldn't be a party to murder. It was one thing to hate Fiona—another to kill her. If Fiona was still alive she would simply dump her in the bushes and drive back and tell people that she hadn't seen her that morning, that she either hadn't come to work or had been called away and, no, she didn't seem to have left a note …

When she had the day under control she could decide whether or not to come back, all smiles and apologies for 'that Brett—I always knew he was bad news—'

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It was Sergeant Stadler who felt uneasy. Had it all gone calmly? Had the loss of the computer been passed off as 'maintenance' or something equally innocuous? Finally he felt he had to check. Although he rang the bank three times no one answered. He finally finished up what he was doing and drove around. There was a sign on the front door. Bank Closed for One Hour. We Regret Any Inconvenience. It appeared to have been written in a hurry. Mr and Mrs Jarvis stood there looking annoyed. They had drive twenty-five kilometres into town to be told that the bank regretted …

"What on earth is going on, Sergeant?" Mr Jarvis said though without much hope of getting an answer. "I always knew they'd find a way to wriggle out of paying us."

"You came to put in a claim?"

They both nodded. "We've already been here at least an hour." This was possibly an exaggeration. But they both had appointments and then some shopping. "We'll try to come back later."

Sergeant Stadler went round all the doors, knocking and calling out; he peered through the accessible windows. He checked for cars parked round the back. Then he returned, grim-lipped. "I don't know what's going on. But I think we've got a problem. It may not be worth coming back today." They took that in bad part and went off, still grumbling. It was hard to tell. But he was sure there was no one there. Had he misunderstood and they had planned to handle claims at a bigger venue, say the CWA hall? He stood a moment looking at the makeshift sign in the hope of inspiration then drove around to the hall. Three women were there cleaning out cupboards but they were adamant that there had been no booking of the hall …

At last he drove back to the station. Where had they all gone? Who might have a spare key? What in tarnation was going on? He could ring the bank's regional office in Toowoomba. He could ring the hospital in Winville to see if anyone had been admitted. He could drive round town in case they'd set up at another venue. He could ask Dulcie Campbell if Ms Greehan had said anything …

He could go round to Margaret's house to see if she or Julie was there. He could ask for Brett … his mother might know … though Brett had his own flat … He could ring the police in Winville. He could ring …

This terrible indecision bothered him. One person missing, he could understand, but *four?*

He lifted the phone and rang Buckton. He got Constable Briggs but asked for Dennis. The idea of asking for the young man's help sounded absurd. He knew Dennis was … unenthusiastic about the young man. It seemed ages before Dennis came to the phone but was only a few anxious minutes. "Sorry to bother you, Dennis, but we've got a problem here. I went round to check the bank and it is closed and all four people apparently missing—"

"Four! Strewth! You *have* got a problem. You've checked—the likely places?"

"I've run out of places to look round town. I've checked their homes—the hall, the pub, I've rung the hospital in Winville, I'm just going out now to start a shop-to-shop—"

"You've checked with Dulcie Campbell?"

"Yep. She hasn't seen Ms Greehan since she left for work this morning. I went round and took the computer and it's in the station. Whether that's what's sparked off this mass exodus—or something like a gas leak or fire alarm. Doesn't make sense to me."

"Keep looking, George, and I'll tidy up here and come. But it'll be at least an hour … "

At least an hour. A lot could happen in an hour. But if anything was going to happen to Fiona it was possible it had already happened. Walsh gave Constable Briggs detailed instructions. He was tempted to sign out a weapon but it was hardly likely that any of the bank staff were armed and to go storming on to George's patch like the arrival of some maverick posse …

But the route to Garramindi had never seemed so long.

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Something had changed in the interim. Margaret had re-opened the bank and was standing behind the counter when George Stadler returned, hoping the problem might've gone away quietly and left sanity in its place.

He seemed surprised to see her. "What on earth has been going on?"

"I don't know." She looked around the space and there was something tired and defeated about her. "They've gone and cleaned everything out. I don't know how I'm going to explain it to Hilton … "

"Who has gone?"

"Julie. Brett. And there's no sign of Ms Greehan so she must've gone too. I came in late … oh gosh, however am I going to deal with everything?"

"What do you mean—cleaned things out?"

"You can see for yourself." She waved a hand at the pulled out drawers. "I always knew that Brett was bad news. If only … I should've warned Julie … but I thought it'd only get her back up."

She went over and dropped into a chair at the desk behind the counter. She sat there dejectedly, shaking her head.

"Margaret—you know perfectly well that Ms Greehan would not go willingly with Brett and Julie. So where is she?"

"I don't know. It's no good asking me."

Sergeant Stadler wasn't much into making threats but now he said angrily, "If you know where she is and you don't tell me—I'll see that you don't walk away from this mess."

The trouble was, he realised, his threats tended to sound peevish. He hadn't got in enough practice. But was it anger—or cajoling—or even bribes—which would move Margaret? Because he felt sure she was lying. There was something faintly theatrical and forced about the whole business.

"Has anyone come with claims?"

"One person." She didn't sound interested. "I don't feel well. I think I'll close up and go home."

"You'll stay exactly where you are."

Having got one not very good witness George Stadler had no intention of letting her go. He had to have someone here to present to Dennis Walsh, one sacrificial lamb to offer up. Margaret hardly fitted the part but he felt certain that if there was a weak link in their chain then it was most likely her.

He came over and pulled up a chair and sat down opposite her. "So how much have those little turds taken?"

"I have no idea … and I can't say I particularly care."

"You don't care about your career, all the years you've dedicated to this bank?"

"What does it matter? They're going to close this branch. I can't see them employing me anywhere else."

He felt that someone who had stopped caring was more of a problem than someone who still felt passionately about something. There were no longer any buttons to press. "And you want to

spend the rest of your life as an accessory to armed robbery? That's going to be pretty hard to live with."

"They weren't armed."

"So what happened to Ms Greehan? Did they kidnap her? A hostage to keep me at a distance?"

"Of course not. Don't be stupid."

He heard heavy footsteps on the wooden verandah. Then Dennis Walsh came in, glanced around, and said, "Good! One witness is always better than none. Where is she?"

"I don't know."

"Bullshit! Bring her out to her car, George. We might as well start with the obvious. Bring your keys, Ms Elliot, and your conscience—if you have one."

He glanced round the bank as George shepherded Margaret Elliot out the back to where her car was parked.

"Open the boot."

The assistant manager had started to shake. Stadler took the keys from her and opened the boot. It wasn't hard to see someone had been carried in it. Blood had leaked into the piece of felt covering. And a shoe had been caught and left in one corner.

"You're up the creek without a paddle, Ms Elliot. George, you'd better charge her with kidnap for the time being. Handcuff her and she can come in my car. Then belt her in. I'll need directions from you, Ms Elliot, and they'd better be spot on or we'll drive round and round till you give in and do as you're told."

George Stadler nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He didn't like the way Dennis Walsh did things but he knew if it had been left to him he would not have thought of checking her car, even though a car was indicated in the absence of four people from the bank, trying instead to cajole her into giving him something to work with.

But as she was fastened into Dennis's car, he felt a further sense of unease. Did she really know—and if not, what kind of threats would Walsh subject her to once they were well away from town? But Margaret Elliot had given up. It was too late to pretend she didn't know anything. And she felt she had been left to hold a very demoralising baby.

She directed him. He drove. They went north out of town and then headed slightly east. After they'd gone nearly fifteen kilometres she told him to turn off into a narrow side road, then off that on to a rough gravel stretch. It eventually took them into an open area in the scrub alongside the road. Local people referred to it as a picnic ground but it had none of the accoutrements and was rarely visited. The road itself might only receive one or two vehicles a day.

She inclined her head. "She's down there."

"She'd better be." He hadn't asked the question 'Is she alive?' He wasn't sure if he could control his rage if she said 'no'. He took the key out of the ignition and got out. There was a faint track down through the thick scrub, filmed with dust, towards the dry gully below. Was this the way Margaret had gone down or had she driven through one of the rough tracks into the bushland and down the slope? He had walked for nearly five minutes, calling at regular intervals, when he saw the strangest sight his life had yet offered.

She had tried to remove the brown tape wound round and round her head by scraping it against a tree trunk and trying to bite the stuff that formed an effective gag. Her face was bleeding. And unable to either get her hands or her ankles free she had been struggling to take tiny steps on her knees, frequently overbalancing and trying to wriggle along the unyielding ground.

"You're alive!"

It was the only thing that mattered in that moment. But, much later, he found himself thinking that she had more stoic courage than anyone he had ever known. How long would it have taken her to reach the road? Hours? A day? And how long before someone came by? But for now he simply reached down and scooped her up. She tried to speak but he couldn't make out the words.

The way up was steep and the day had grown warm. He was sweating when he reached the layby and lowered her gently to open the back door of the car.

"I'm … I'll make a mess … there." It came out faint and hoarse.

He realised he was smeared with blood and dust. For a minute he wondered if she had other injuries then he realised she must be having her period and hadn't been able to change. It took him several minutes to settle her into the back of the car with several old rugs from the boot and the string cut from her hands and ankles and a bit more of the tape removed from her face.

He didn't try to talk on the journey back to Garramindi. Not least because anything he might say would probably be better not said. But the desire to let fly some foul language at the woman handcuffed beside him stayed clear and bright all the way back to the station and the charging and placing of Margaret Bernardine Elliot in the town's one small cell.

"I'll get her to Buckton Hospital now, George, it's closer than Winville. I don't think there are any major injuries. But that's a nasty whack on her head."

"Okay. Thanks, Dennis. I'll come and see if she feels up to an interview tomorrow. Get a line on those kids. I've rung Winville about the robbery."

"Then ring the hospital for me and tell them I'm on my way." Garramindi had neither doctor nor hospital, the best it could offer was a nurse at the once-a-month CWA baby clinic.

Usually Sergeant Walsh enjoyed his times driving round his 'beat' but now the route seemed to stretch out forever into a hazy brown horizon. Nevertheless, when he finally drove into the hospital courtyard in the late afternoon it was to find Godfrey Waddell and Sister Martin standing beside a waiting gurney.

Fiona, under the impact of shock and pain, had grown increasingly limp and clammy on the drive. They lifted her semi-conscious on to the trolley and Waddell wheeled her away up the ramp.

"Don't worry now, Dennis. We'll take care. We've got Dr Davis on standby. We'll ring you later. Oh, and by the way, don't forget to soak it in cold water first to get the stains out." She pointed to his blood-stained shirt. Then she turned and walked away briskly to catch up with Fiona and the trolley.

It was Matron Heidenreich who rang him a couple of hours later. She was the chilly old-fashioned type of director, disliked and feared by many people, but always sympathetic and helpful where he was concerned. She was slated to retire in two months. He hoped they would get someone with an equally strong commitment to keeping things up to scratch.

"She'll be fine … but every bit will ache for a few days. And she'll look a sight for a week. But there is one thing I would suggest when she's well enough. Take her back to the site where she was dumped. It's as much psychological as physical. The terror of being abandoned in a totally unknown landscape. The mental anxieties tend to stay even when the bruises and cuts have faded."

"Yeah, I do understand that." He knew Fiona still tended to see any bushland as something faintly alien and sinister. "But I wonder if Margaret Elliot would've gone back later to rescue her."

"She says Margaret said something like 'I'll come back and bury you when you're dead'. Margaret was apparently talking to herself as she thought Fiona was still unconscious, I think. I know Margaret. I knew her mother. I think those two youngsters just wanted to grab the money and scarper. But I can well believe that Margaret hated Fiona. Though she might've had second thoughts when she got back to town. It wasn't only the surface things, I think, like style and success and promotion. She saw Fiona as having the one thing she had always wanted."

"And what did Margaret want?"

"A man who would come when she asked him to," she said drily. "I gather you went out to Garra when Fiona called a public meeting and met Margaret there. She'd be no slouch when it came to picking up on … what they now call body language. Margaret has been trying to get Hilton Browne to leave his wife and marry her for I don't know how many years."

"But Fiona didn't know I was coming to that meeting. It was Sergeant Stadler who asked me to come."

To that Evelyn Heidenreich said an enigmatic "I see."

Afterwards he wondered how she had known about the bank robbery but it wasn't hard to solve *that* puzzle. The evening news, television and radio, was already running it as a headline story. It probably helped that Brett was a dishy young man and that Julie had a lot of long blonde hair …

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"No, she checked out last night," Sr O'Brien said with faint asperity. "Said she was perfectly well and needed to get back to work."

"Can't be helped."

Fiona Greehan might seem the gentlest most biddable person but Sergeant Walsh was slowly learning that it camouflaged considerable stoicism and strength of mind. His initial impulse was to ring George Stadler in Garramindi or even leave the office to the tender mercies of Constable Briggs and head out. But there wasn't a lot he could do there, it would mean bumbling round on someone else's patch, and Fiona might not treat this sudden solicitude in the way he intended it.

But by late Thursday afternoon he decided to throw such concerns to the wind and make the drive. If nothing else Stadler could bring him up to speed on the hunt for their home-grown-version of Bonnie and Clyde. But Dulcie Campbell said immediately he came to her door, "Oh no, Fiona isn't staying with me any more."

"Do you know where she is?"

"At the pub."

"I wonder why. I'm sure she'd be more comfortable here."

"She didn't want me to be bothered. In case there's more trouble. But I don't think the pub is the place for her. It's pretty rough. I s'pose Miriam means well but it's not a nice atmosphere."

"Isn't she some relation to young Brett?"

"Oh! His mum, yes. But I don't s'pose she knows where he's gone."

"Well, thanks for that. I'll try and persuade her … if she's there."

"You do that, Sergeant."

But Mrs McFarlane said she had no rooms to spare and didn't give out information on her guests. "I've had that many bloody people coming, asking stupid questions, you'd think I was running a railway station."

Miriam McFarlane seemed to think that was the end of the matter, and she probably wasn't well-versed in the sort of media people who had descended briefly on the small town to give it its couple of minutes of fame. "Well, if you *don't* know where Ms Greehan is, not even her room number, you can tell me where your son is."

"Not my business. If that stupid idiot wants to get himself in a right mess with that little miss … I'm not going to waste any sleep over it."

"No. But a lot of other people with a lot less responsibility for his bringing-up *are* wasting a lot of sleep over him. So it's about time you got started on thinking up a few likely places where he might be holed up."

"Sorry. Haven't a clue. Probably out there in that there cyberspace he's always talking about."

"Well, if it turns out he's somewhere you knew about—I'll see that you're charged as an accessory—"

"You wouldn't dare—"

"Try me." For a moment there he thought she was going to take a cautious step back from her confident position. But then she turned, checked the clock, and said briskly, "You may not have work waiting, sergeant, but I do. This place is bursting at the seams. She's likely still at the bank. She works all hours."

But the bank was in darkness. He parked and sat for several minutes. She might merely be walking back, shopping, talking to someone … So maybe it would be better to call in briefly on Sergeant Stadler and then call it a day. But he was reasonably sure that Miriam McFarlane did have some idea where her son and prospective daughter-in-law might be. And if there was no love lost between the mothers it might be possible to insert some kind of wedge …

George groaned when his unwanted visitor said it would probably be worth leaning on both women at regular intervals. "Trouble with you, Dennis, you can never leave well alone. This has gone to CIB and they're welcome to it. But, soon's I see you head into town I know, odds on, it'll mean more work for me. And I've got enough of the stuff waiting already. And since when did I answer to you anyway?"

"You don't. And it doesn't have to be every day, George. Just keep an eye on them. And have you had any contact with Hilton Browne?"

"Poor old sod is dying. Kidney failure I heard. I'm not going to heavy him."

"Well, either he is the most incompetent bank manager between here and Cunnamulla—or he's in it up to his neck. Either way he can't wash his hands of the problems."

"'fraid he's going to wash them, Dennis … no matter which way the tree falls. But I'd say the real problem was always—he couldn't say no to Margaret when she wanted a job for her daughter straight out of school. I don't know what Patsy is saying to everything now but I doubt if it's any too complimentary. I heard she threatened to leave him way back then. If she had and if he'd married Margaret … then he couldn't have employed Julie and the whole place wouldn't be up shit creek now." He pondered on this for a minute or two, then said more energetically, "Still, water under the bridge now. So how about heavying John Goodrick if you feel like doing a bit of your usual … "

He hesitated, then let the sentence hang. Many people claimed that Dennis used a combination of threats and physical intimidation. He had seen a mild demonstration of it himself—but kept an open mind. Nor did he really object to Dennis handing out advice with a free hand. He knew he was a plodder. He probably had the 'nose' that comes with experience but he also knew as well as his colleague did that he hadn't seen the bank situation was much more than a bit of poor accounting, favouritism, sloppy customer service, bad banking practice, and a lack of accountability. If it had been left in his domain the bank would've closed with only a few plaintive cries that they were being denied a necessary service … and hundreds of people would've been left whistling in the wind for any sort of compensation for a very clever little scam.

"I intend to."

But John Goodrick was even more evasive about his son's likely movements. "It's not like he tells me things, mate. If he did, I would of warned him off. Told him it doesn't pay. Bank robbery always brings the big guns out in force." This appeared to imply that Dennis Walsh was very small beer. An idea to which he sometimes agreed wholeheartedly. When he wanted to get action on something people further up the hierarchy either didn't appear to care tuppence about, like stock theft, or were trying to keep buried for various reasons he was always reminded of his unimportance. But he kept his usual clear and narrow focus.

"Did he keep in touch with you? Or any of your family or friends?"

"Not much. Sounds like he was getting too big for his boots, from what I heard around the traps. Anyway, he was never my responsibility."

"Still your son, Mr Goodrick. Set up a vicious little scam to defraud the elderly and pocketed maybe twenty thousand. Had his boss abducted and left to die. Pinched a further ten to fifteen thousand dollars from the bank and scarpered. Not your problem? I think you'll find it is very much your responsibility when the big TV networks come sniffing round. Best story in ages."

John Goodrick, unlike some of his relatives, wasn't averse to publicity. Just not this kind. "Did he really get that kind of dough?"

"Yeah. And not a cent flicked your way, mate. Bad luck about that."

George Stadler had said with great relief that the two youngsters hadn't been able to get into the bank's small strong-room because Fiona Greehan had changed the combination that Friday afternoon and left the new details in an envelope for Margaret under a couple of papers in her out tray. Had anything happened to her over the weekend Margaret could be assumed to find it. In the event Fiona had come in early, set up the stations on that Monday morning, checking the way all three of her staff kept things organised in the hope of finding that elusive clue to secret accounts or notes to their means of siphoning money out of regular accounts, then relocked the vault. Julie and Brett had been in too much of a hurry to think of looking through her papers—and Margaret was not there to advise them. They had taken every skerrick of available cash, down to five-cent-pieces, but missed the best haul.

Several people, on learning this, including George Stadler, had said, "Be thankful for small mercies."

Dennis Walsh was inclined to think that they had underestimated Fiona all the way down the line. Now, he found himself wondering if it might be possible to play on John Goodrick's sense of

simmering grievance. What was the point of having a son, even a largely-ignored one, if said son showed no hint of generosity towards his old dad?

"You think of somewhere—you let me know."

"Might."

"By the way, I hear old Bernie isn't well. S'pose you're praying hard for him to drop off his perch before the first payment on the motel land comes due."

"Well, you can't say that Bernie's much use to anyone. And he still gives the nurses a hard time."

"He does. Just make sure he dies of natural causes. Then you can relax."

Walsh turned and walked away. Goodrick Constructions worked out of a very small office over Buckton's florist. There was something about the space with Walsh gone. More of it, perhaps. But John Goodrick sat back in his chair and thought for a few moments. It wasn't nice to dob in your only son, not nice to dob anyone in, and the fact that it might encourage Dennis Walsh to look the other way for … not for long but long enough maybe …

Case No. 5: Pain

Dennis Walsh set the phone down next morning with a bemused expression. "That beats just about everything."

"They've found those kids?"

"No. But I'd lay you fair odds that John Goodrick is out there doing some hard thinking … on our behalf. No. I've just been invited to go to the ballet … if I can spare a weekend."

Constable Briggs had only been giving half his attention to the conversation. He knew that his boss had asked Winville to put traces on the phones of the pub in Garramindi and of John Goodrick, both home and business; they had not been enthusiastic. These were hardly devoted parents. But Dennis had managed to convince them that these were a much more dangerous variety of parent: aggrieved ones. Even a couple of thousand would've been acceptable. But then no amount is truly enough in such circumstances. Brett and Julie may have, intuitively, understood that.

Now he said, "Ballet! You?"

"Yeah. Sounds bizarre. But there it is. I don't think I'll embarrass them with my philistine presence."

"You should go. It would be … something different. Who is inviting you?"

"Sister O'Brien." Guy Briggs was surprised. Like most people round town he knew there was something between the sergeant and Ms Greehan, he wasn't quite sure what, but unlike most people he thought it showed good taste in his otherwise boorish superior. What was in it for Ms Greehan was more problematical. He couldn't begin to see Dennis Walsh as some kind of New Age Casanova. And yet … slowly … he was beginning to glimpse qualities beneath that tough uncompromising and sometimes distinctly unpleasant exterior. "Don't worry. She doesn't fancy me. She and Ms Greehan are planning to take a trip to Brisbane and fancy my company … or need protection. I don't know which."

The relationship between Walsh and young Constable Applegarth had been more that of mentor and youth; that between him and Constable Turner fairly close to equals in terms of experience. Guy Briggs fell between these two poles and their relations, even if slightly improved, remained an uneasy blend of the space between.

"It should be interesting."

"That could be an understatement. I gather they've both got mothers there as well. Anyway, where have you got to with the Winville stuff?"

"I *think* there might be a connection with that level-crossing smash. It left a lot of bad feeling around. In the beginning I thought the two kinds of killing were too different to be anything more than two events in the same timeframe."

"And?"

"I thought we were looking at a pervert, at sex crimes. But all the children were killed in the same way. It was the disposal of their bodies which differed slightly and which made people think there was some sort of maniac around. I'm sure the kids didn't suffer. Only their families. But I still don't see a link to anyone … or a motivation."

"It'll come. If there is one. There were a lot of people connected to the smash in one way or another. Keep on with the papers … run 'em right through from the date of the smash … or even a few days before it … right through past that later death. Look for any other kind of crime, even something quite small, that might've been sparked off by suppressed anger. Someone with an axe to grind. And go and have a yarn with George Hickman—and remind him to run that bit about the dead greyhounds as well. Someone has to know where they came from. But you'd better go round to the Co-op first. Make sure it wasn't an accident, some fool with a forklift or something, before you go running after vandals. Seems an odd thing for them to want to do. No one gets to see their pathetic little messes in there."

Someone had ripped open several bags of laying pellets and corn over in the warehouse section of the co-op. Some people bought in bulk from Winville but smaller farmers and people round town bought locally. The warehouse was a dusty musty rather dark place given over to items too large or uninteresting to be displayed in the shop area.

"I don't suppose you've had time to think on my stuff?" Briggs sounded diffident. It was pointless to hope for anything. He knew only too well that no fellow officer would admit to an unsafe investigation, a biased one, a blatantly unfair one; and no sergeant in his experience wanted to hear a very junior officer setting himself up as judge and jury.

"If you're telling me the truth—then it is a clear case of corruption, incompetence, and dishonesty. You'll need to set it all out clearly, times, dates, people, actions, then it had better got to Mr Fitzgerald or whoever he recommends, with a copy to the Attorney-General in Brisbane. I'll write a supporting letter if I think all your evidence stacks up." He turned back to his desk, picked up his teledex and flipped through it, before punching a local number in. His constable understood the conversation to be at an end, collected his cap and the car keys and went out.

But Constable Briggs sat a moment in the car before turning the ignition. It was all he'd ever asked for; just someone to listen, someone to treat him as a reasonably intelligent human being. And now … it was ridiculous to get in this state, with the sudden desire to wink away embarrassing tears and stop the trembling in his hands. Maybe, at the end, Dennis Walsh would say he hadn't made his case. If it came to that, he felt he would try to accept that he might've been chasing rabbits … but he still felt sure that what he'd always seen and known and believed was the truth. A man had gone down on planted evidence.

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It was getting late when Dennis Walsh finally put the days' work aside and put a couple of fingers up to massage his temples. Might as well pack up for the day, he decided. Wayne Booth had pleaded ignorance when tackled about using an unregistered brand. It was the brand his father had used. Not good enough. But it would probably wangle him past any likely charges. And not good enough his claim that, now that he had an irrigation permit, it was worth buying in cattle from further west and fattening them. He had thought of something more intensive, like vegetables, but it was too hard to get the labour. And the cattle did well there on the creek flats. He said he bought some cattle locally and some through an agent … who turned out to be a well-known local stock and station agency … and that it was quite rare to buy in stock unbranded … though a few always got missed along the way. That might be all there was to the situation. No point in turning molehills into time-wasting mountains. And yet, when it came down to the wire, Walsh was more inclined to believe old Herb Wilkins at the saleyards with his lifetime of experience than Wayne Booth who had a local reputation as a sharp dealer. There was still something there not quite right …

But it was one of those situations, what George Stadler described as him making extra work for them all. He didn't blame George. A one-person-station made work. You didn't have to go out and conjure more of it up. He went on vaguely sitting there debating his next possible move to look more closely at Booth's operation. As well as selling through the yards here the farmer had a direct arrangement with a number of Downs buyers, pubs and restaurants, supposedly so they could claim

it was humanely-killed meat that hadn't stood round, dehydrating, in country saleyards. Beef to Order. But such an arrangement could also be a cover for suss cattle slipping directly through into the meat market, unquestioned.

Best to deal with the unregistered brand issue … and go on digging quietly. And, sometimes, a slap-on-the-wrist-type charge was enough to bring someone to their senses if they were only trying something on, not in up to their neck …

The bell he had installed to tinkle as people came in gave its warning. Fiona Greehan opened the door. Although she was as perfectly turned out as always nothing could hide the mess her face was in, cut and scratched and bruised. Her knees were hidden behind a longer-than-usual skirt.

"What was it? Ten rounds with George Foreman?"

"At least I would have people with wet towels in my corner to pick me up when I hit the canvas—" Smiling was obviously still painful.

Dennis came round from behind his side of the counter. "Try me instead."

It never ceased to be a special kind of comfort; to creep in and rest on his chest and feel his arms close round her. She saw very clearly that it didn't do her confidence, or her professional CV, any good to keep needing this kind of comfort. She probably was now seen as irredeemably accident-prone, a walking disaster, a Calamity Jane of the banking world, the sort of person you suggested might not be *quite* what your branch needed … or deserved. And yet there was that other side of it. He smelled faintly of cattle and dust and sweat as he had come back from talking to Herb Wilkins and Herb was deeply permeated by the smells of cattle and dust and sweat. But she knew now she would never want him to smell of aftershave or wine or expensive leather …

"Would you like a cuppa," he said eventually.

"Made from what Mavis calls 'dubious milk in a dubious frig'? Yes, why not."

She accepted the mug he poured for her. "And what did you say to Kath O'Brien?"

"I said she needed her head read. But my constable says I would find it an interesting experience. And he doesn't see why I wouldn't want to go somewhere with two nice women—*and* their mothers."

"The mothers are optional … though I'm sure they'll beg to come. Perhaps you could bring your mother too—"

"A bit tricky. She's in Townsville."

"At least you admit to having one. There is some doubt locally … but I suppose you *have* had your fill of mothers lately."

"Don't worry. The dough will get found, along with Bonnie and Clyde, though I assume they are spending it as fast as they can. Your name will be … cleared. Did anyone come asking to be reimbursed that day?"

"One woman. She was very apologetic. She said she wouldn't ask—but that she was hard up. Margaret paid her fifty-seven dollars from her own pocket—rather than admit that the drawers had been cleaned out. Now she says she wishes she hadn't. But Sergeant Stadler came round and formally charged her so it hasn't been the most pleasant of weeks—"

As she had already been charged with abduction it sounded as though that had been dropped and Margaret allowed to walk free. "What for—precisely?"

"I *think* it was for failing to render assistance to the victim of an accident … but I don't know. Not abduction." It might have something to do with local feelings. Margaret was one of them. Whereas she was the trouble-making outsider. And she had always felt, vaguely, that Brett did have some sort of hold over his prospective mother-in-law. Was she compromised by knowing about his clever little fiddle?

She wasn't sure how she felt about the lesser charge. Not that she wanted to end up in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the world's most abducted person. But she also felt a very human desire to see Margaret experience just a little bit of the horror and pain she had been put through—instead of merely ringing her hands and saying 'kids these days—what can you do?'

When she finally handed the mug back to him she said casually. "What are you working on now? And can it wait?"

"Wayne Booth. He appears to have been using an unregistered brand on some unbranded cattle he got from who knows where."

She nodded. It wasn't the kind of case she would even *pretend* to understand. But she said cautiously, "This is only the very smallest of ideas, Dennis, but I think his son has a property out near Longreach."

"Has he now. Do you know the son's name?"

"Not off the top of my head, no, and I'm afraid I can't tell you the exact circumstances."

"Fair enough. I assume the son's name isn't Booth?"

"Possibly not. Or I would remember it."

"Not to worry. Someone's sure to know."

It was a temptation to invite her home with him. But there was no guarantee the kitchen was tidy or anything in the frig more exciting than a few chops. "I'd like to take you somewhere to eat—but I think, just maybe, you might prefer to take things easy."

"I will—if you'll think seriously about coming to Brisbane … if you can spare the time."

"I'll cut you a deal. I'll think about coming if there's a real chance to spend some time alone with you. I've got a case to look into there. I might be able to justify a bit of time away."

It would be helpful to get to see the court transcript for that case. And there was a far trickier problem. He wasn't sure how to tackle it without drawing attention to himself …

She stood up and put her bag over her shoulder. Then she reached out to give him a quick kiss. "Dennis, thank you for coming that day. It's the one thing that helps me cope with it all."

"I'm not sure that you should thank me. It was my suggestion about disconnecting everything and removing it which seems to have sparked them off."

"I know that. But it was my choice to take your advice. And I knew the people involved … to some extent. Sometimes I even feel glad, a bit glad, that it *did* bring things to a head. I think I would otherwise always have had that particular kind of failure hanging over me, always wondering what it was I didn't see, what I didn't manage to put together … "

After she'd gone out he returned to his own problems. 'What aren't *I* seeing?'

Then he picked up the phone again and rang Ashley Turner. Constable Turner now worked with the Missing Persons Unit. He thought she would probably be good at it. But when she answered he said, "This has nothing to do with missing people, unless you can wave your magic wand and find the two from Garramindi." She said she'd heard something about them. "So what can I do for you, Dennis?"

"Can you run to two favours? Both better kept very quiet. In fact, don't do it yourself. See if you can find a third party. I'd like a transcript of the trial of Graham Canter. And I'd like to know who were the officers who worked the case. Anything about them. Their reputations. That sort of thing. But I don't want your name in any way connected to any of this. I think they might be the sort of guys you don't mess about with."

"Could be. I'll see what I can do for you, Dennis. Everything otherwise going on well in Buckton?"

"It depends on well. Getting by. Pretty much as usual."

"For someone who listens to a lot of gossip—you aren't much chop at it, are you? Still, so long as you invite me to your wedding I won't complain."

"You've been watching the wrong soap opera. Nothing like that out here."

She laughed and promised to get a transcript in the mail as soon as she could. But 'soon' wasn't his immediate thought when the material turned up and he was faced with the prospect of wading through hundreds of pages of un-gripping questions and answers. He put it aside to take home in the evening and force himself to make a start.

He had scrupulously avoided making suggestions to Guy on the Winville material. But the obvious one stuck out a mile. The more people insisted on talking to him about mothers the more certain he became that Des Blinco and Doug Towner had either overlooked the obvious … or had deliberately suppressed or falsified the evidence …

Mothers seemed to be everywhere. Just not the one he had been stupid enough to put an impulsive unguarded question to …

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"You'd better take it and read it too," Sergeant Walsh said a few days later to his junior.

Constable Briggs took the bulky transcript with suddenly nervous hands. "And did you … think … I might be right?"

"Not from reading this. I'd say it's ninety-nine per cent sure the perp would've gone down on the other evidence, even without your suss bit of cloth. Some of it is circumstantial. But it builds to a pretty strong case. But don't take my word for it. Read it yourself. But I'm prepared to believe you when you say you didn't see the evidence that later turned up … and that you were heavied by Maitland and Gross. They make a habit of it, it seems. You can go ahead and do me a report and I'll do a covering letter. I'd say the verdict would still stand. But men who get away with planting evidence and perjuring themselves tend to get cocky … "

"Thank you." Guy Briggs wasn't an effusive person but he had the feeling of an immense weight lifting. Every morning he had got up to struggle with the bleak weight of depression, of wondering whether despite his family's urging he might not be better to cut and run, to leave this career and go and become a nurse or a jeweller or a tailor or sell computers or install aquariums …

He put the pile of pages aside to take home with him. He didn't particulary like living in Betty Cronk's flat but at least it was light and clean and private and he could get his reading done in peace. "I finished going through all that Winville material and I've been through the papers in the library, more than two years worth, and I think there just might've been two people involved."

One up for Narelle Sullivan, Dennis thought but didn't say. "Anything else?"

"Yes. But I don't know if it's important. All the children had been given something which contained strychnine, alcohol, and strong painkillers, all except the last one where croton oil had been used instead of strychnine. But it was misleading—the way it was presented. And because the young man pleaded guilty all the other evidence was merely tabled, none of it was put to the test. So reading the material it just sounds like maybe a spoonful of brandy … with a couple of Panadol crushed into it and dissolved, something anyone might have in their bathroom."

"And?"

"I rang the laboratory in Brisbane and asked if they still had their full analysis. I got to talk to the woman who had done the work on the stomach contents and blood—and she said it was pure alcohol, not as in rum or brandy, and that although the description 'painkillers' was correct it was a higher-strength dose than you can buy over the counter. It would've required a prescription—though of course the young man could've helped himself to someone else's medication. But I got to asking 'whose medication in that case?' and that question never got answered. So I tracked down Adrian Clay—"

"Where is he now?"

"In Toowoomba. He teaches English at the Boys' Grammar there. I told him we were looking at the case. He was adamant that his son didn't kill those children, that the idea was preposterous, but Neale himself kept insisting that he had. I got the impression that even if Neale wasn't angry in the way that people suggested—his dad certainly is. Anyway he said they'd never used anything but the ordinary chemist shop tablets and he didn't think any of the family had ever bought pure alcohol to use in anything. If Neale really had got hold of such things—then he must've found them somewhere else. So I guess we're no further forward."

Dennis Walsh turned to stare at him. "You can't see any more possibilities then?"

Put like that the best answer seemed to be a cautious, "One or two … maybe."

"Such as?"

He floundered through his mind. "Well, the doctors there would know if they'd prescribed strong painkillers. It wasn't morphine. So it doesn't suggest someone with a terminal illness. And maybe it'd be worth checking the rest of the evidence more closely—"

"It's always worth checking the evidence closely, every case, doesn't matter what, and more so if the Three Stooges put it together, no offence to Greg. But doesn't it strike you that Neale Clay sounds like the classic case of someone covering for someone else?"

"Ye-es, I guess you could read it that way. But everyone says he had no friends … and his family would surely know if he was covering for one of them—though I guess they couldn't admit that to anyone … "

"All the more reason then for him to feel very protective or … something … towards someone who was always nice to him."

"But we haven't found any such person—so far."

"We will. But what about the papers—did you find any news stories that suggested anything?"

"I found the death notice for Colin Beattie. He was described as 'dying suddenly' in the Death Notice column but there was news of the inquest a couple of weeks later. Should we get details of the inquest?"

"If you want to. But we have probably milked Colin Beattie for all he's worth. I'm sure he knew more than he told his wife … and more than anyone told the inquest. But if he had a grudge—then I'm certain it was against Des Blinco, not against a small child."

For a moment he didn't see the significance of his words. Then he repeated it slowly. "Against Des Blinco."

"But—you're not suggesting that he killed a child to make Blinco look stupid? That would be bizarre." Stranger things might've happened but not in Winville. Surely.

"No. But I think he knew or suspected who had killed the child. And he laid it out so as to suggest the previous deaths. Then he went along to the public phone box on the road above the picnic grounds and rang the police. Then he simply went home. It's in those notes. They never found the man who rang in. Could've been Colin. But Des and Doug didn't do a better job this time around, they were so bloody busy trying to make out that this was an accident and couldn't be connected to the previous deaths and therefore they didn't have to worry about re-opening anything. They went through the motions. They got an open verdict at the inquest. They stressed that this was an inquisitive child who might've found something."

"But she wasn't laid out the same way as any of the others."

"But she *was* laid out. The person doing it didn't necessarily know how the others had been done. And I'll guarantee that Des moved the body. He couldn't do a lot as rigor mortis was setting in … but doesn't it strike you as odd that Des was the first on the scene? Stefanie takes the call, passes it on, Des goes out and leaps in his car."

"Yes, I wondered if that was usual."

"Even if it was … it doesn't stack up. Why didn't he get someone to go with him, put the team on alert … why didn't he radio in instead of driving back and organising everything himself. Doug might not be Einstein but I assume he can alert Forensics, arrange for a doctor, put the whole thing in motion even before Des gets back."

"There is another thing I noticed, in the paper I mean. Des had announced his retirement and the paper ran a small paragraph about two weeks before the death. He's described as 'popular' and 'dynamic'. They give a date for his farewell bash. And then there's another paragraph two days after the death to say he has postponed his departure by a month. He is quoted as saying he wants 'to clear the decks for his successor'. It was actually six weeks before he finally packs up and leaves. There's a photo of him but none of his wife. His early retirement is given as being due to her chronic ill health."

Dennis Walsh nodded slowly. "I s'pose they couldn't say she was away with the birds."

"So what do we do now?"

"*You* can set up interviews with Mary Pacey, you'll need to ask Mavis Barnard at the service station for her address in Dalby, and with all the Clay family. Best to get the whole family in one go if we can. We'll have to go down one evening. Don't make it a Friday or Saturday." It was tiptoeing across Doug's turf but these people had moved. It was only his patch in the broadest sense …

"What are we going to ask them?"

"*You* are going to ask them to tell us their story from go to whoa. Then we can look for the gaps."

Guy Briggs wasn't absolutely sure he would be able to pick up on any gaps but it was like learning on a driving school car—there was some comfort in knowing someone else had the other set of controls in front of them.

"And with Mary Pacey you need to get some sense of her relations with the men there. Was she sacked? Did she resign? All the background before you start thinking that maybe they wanted someone easier to push around there. If she's anything like Mavis then we are probably looking at a strong mind and a strong conscience." It struck Constable Briggs as an odd way to look at it. But it gave him a better idea on how he might structure his questions.

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Mary Pacey lived in a small weatherboard house on the Chinchilla side of Dalby. She had a small sunroom at the back and looking out over a yard she had rather cleverly turned into a miniature garden, small citrus in big pots, vines over the carshed and fences, a bird bath, descending stacks of shelves crowded with pot plants. She was brisk and short, about sixty, with an inquisitive sparrow-like quality about her. Probably just the sort of woman Des and Doug would not have wanted typing up reports and taking phone calls.

"It broke my heart," she said when she'd offered them chairs and a beer apiece. "Those dear little children. I would've worked around the clock if it could have helped the families. But Des always sounded very confident. He kept saying 'this isn't Brisbane, this isn't Sydney, there's only so many men to check'. I asked him one day how he knew it was a man and he said it was a paedophile. Women killed children but in the family home. I said we didn't know where these children had been killed. It worried me that he always made his mind up on things long before he had any real proof. He encouraged Doug Towner to be the same. I'd type everything up for them. But there were gaps in it you could just about drive a truck through, all those assumptions. I can say that now. And I was almost glad when they sacked me. I hated being a part of something that wasn't being done properly. And I used to think—if I can see the gaps and the guesses—then surely they must be able to."

"So what grounds did they use to get you out of there?" Guy Briggs said.

"They were able to requisition all sorts of new equipment. There's a small laboratory there, in the station, but when I started there it was about one miscroscope and a Bunsen burner. The case gave Des a real chance to demand better equipment. And he also got in a computer system and other office equipment and he basically said, sorry, you're not up to scratch. We haven't got time to send you off on a course to learn how to work everything. So we're getting a new secretary. I knew I could've got on top of it all in a few days. A good secretary keeps updating her skills as new things come in. But to hear them talk you'd think I was still writing everything out with a quill pen! So I said to Des, I'll go quietly if you give me a good reference. And when he gave it to me I said to him, at least now I'll be able to get a job with a firm that isn't a poor imitation of Abbott and Costello. He got angry about that. But in the end I decided to retire and come and live here and just take on a bit of relief work. It's been much more pleasant."

"So did you leave just before or just after Neale Clay came in and confessed?"

"Just before. I was sorry about that. The Clays seemed to be nice people. I had trouble seeing their son as a murderer. And I never believed it when they implied he was making up some kind of sweetie in his back shed to feed to those poor little kids."

"Do you know what he meant by 'sick lollies'?"

"It's not hard to give kids lollies … if you're the right kind of person. If I went down to the playground here and asked the children if they'd care for a toffee I'm sure some of them would accept. If I was dirty or rough or looked like the men in posters of people they shouldn't talk to … well … "

"Yes. Would children have been scared of Neale Clay, do you think?"

"That would depend. He could go around looking pretty morose and mournful … but if something sparked him off he would start giggling and sometimes he couldn't stop. I don't suppose children would be scared of him when he was like that."

"We've been told he didn't have any friends. Did you ever see him with anyone?"

She considered this and finally said, “Perhaps not friends. But I think he felt quite comfortable with older women. They were sympathetic, I would think, and didn’t tease him and asked him nice questions about himself. Possibly they reminded him of a grandmother or something.”

“And did anyone ever ask him who his special person was that gave the lollies to the children?” The image came to Guy Briggs of Neale finding it funny to see children start to reel and stagger. How long from when they ate the lollies to when the symptoms started? Not long, probably. Strychnine worked on the nervous system and worked fast. The alcohol would’ve made them woozy. Strong painkillers might’ve made them sleepy.

“No. Not as far as I know. But Des was largely focused on Colin Beattie and those hippie youths with the old bus and their hair all in a mess and down to their chests. They got casual work around the farms.”

She told them some of the things Des had said about Colin; which seemed to suggest that Colin had not been charged over the level crossing smash because Des wanted to get him for the children. And if he was in custody when another child died … then his beautiful case went up the spout. Though if Colin truly had an unbreakable alibi then he was never going to be a good fit. Unless Des decided to play the ‘copycat card’ much earlier on.

“Tell me,” Sergeant Walsh said as they finally got up and went to the door, “did you ever see Neale Clay with Annette Blinco … or hear of any sort of connection between them?”

“I never saw them together. But I did hear that Des wanted to charge Neale much earlier, before the deaths … just one of those things boys do, put a ball through a laundry window, I think, and he said his wife talked him out of it. She said, couldn’t he remember being a boy long ago, and it would be better if Neale just paid for a new pane of glass. I don’t know the details. Speaking personally I think Des never grew up anyway, he was always skiting and boasting and eyeing off every woman he saw. There was something a bit juvenile about him. But it didn’t make him sympathetic to any real teenagers. I think he got a lot of pleasure out of sending Neale to prison for life.”

“And you, yourself, did you feel that Neale had done it?”

“No. I don’t. I went to see him front up to the court here before they sent him to Brisbane. You could see he had absolutely no idea what was in the sick lollies he was supposed to have concocted and fed to those children. If they said he’d hit them on the head or throttled them … then yes, just maybe … ”

“I see what you mean by gaps,” Guy Briggs said politely.

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It was a longer drive to Toowoomba and Constable Briggs tried to sort his thoughts and questions into neat rows. The trouble was—once he got talking to people he often lost his thread or got taken up and down stairs he hadn’t factored in. It didn’t look good to be scrabbling through his notes trying to find where he was with his prepared lists of queries. But he could see quite clearly where Dennis Walsh’s thoughts were heading now. It would explain a lot of things, not least Des Blinco’s apparent inaction and obfuscation. But was it realistic? People *would* feel absolutely safe if they saw their local CIB chief’s wife sitting peacefully at a picnic table. Perverts might come round the area but only when she’d gone home again …

Adrian and Moira Clay and their two grown-up sons, Jonathon and Simon, had collected at their Herries Street home to meet the two policemen. They gave the impression of a clever bookish family which had never quite come to terms with the fact of Neale’s confession and imprisonment; even possibly of Neale as a person. He seemed such an unlikely son for them to have.

Mrs Clay had made sandwiches and shortbread and asked if they would like something more substantial. She could easily do them some soup. But they said, or Guy said for them both, they hoped it wouldn’t take long.

“If you could tell us about Neale right through that period and up to his confession. Did he have any work in that time?”

They spoke of Neale almost as though speaking of an unfortunate stranger. He came and went. He had his own key. He was a quiet young man. He liked listening to Country and Western … They had never had any trouble with him.

"Didn't he put a cricket ball through the window in the Blincos' house or something?"

"Oh that!" Simon laughed. "It wasn't Neale really. It was me. But we used to tease him a bit. We said he had to go over and say it was him."

"And did he?"

"Yes. He usually did what we told him to do. I guess it was a bit mean. But we always felt a bit embarrassed having him for a brother. So I suppose we took it out on him sometimes."

"So what happened?"

"I don't really remember the details. Old Blinco got a bit shirty but I think his wife calmed him down and in the end Neale paid for it."

"Did this kind of thing happen a lot? Neale taking the blame for things you did?" Guy Briggs had the sudden horrible feeling that maybe the other two brothers had done it and made their older brother take the blame.

"A fair bit. But it didn't seem to bother him. And we go and see him, that sort of thing."

"And when the deaths of the children took place—how did Neale behave? Was he any different to his usual self?"

Mrs Clay shook her head sadly. "No, we never noticed anything. That's why we absolutely couldn't believe it. I know Neale was a bit … what they now call intellectually challenged. His IQ was about eighty-five. But I couldn't believe that he would hurt anything, a child, because he was really very tender-hearted. He was always very upset when a pet died."

"Now that is a strange thing." Jonathon seemed to live on a plane where ordinary everyday conversations flowed over him. But they did not doubt that both brothers were clever, sharp, quick to see things …

"What was?" Guy Briggs had a fairly confident belief in his own intelligence—or he'd had before joining the police.

"When it came over on the news about those two boys, Sam, I think, and was it Trent—that died together, and Neale said as he was going to bed something about them being just like Pretty and Sue. They were two white mice we had. We'd sort of grown out of them. But they both died quite suddenly. And Neale had taken them out to bury them. He always buried any pets that died. Even the ones we got the vet to put down. He would make a big production out of it."

"Yes, I remember now," Simon added. "It was almost like—if he set them out beautifully they might come back to life. He even made a little wooden cross one time for a guinea pig that died of old age."

"And I said it wasn't appropriate," Mr Clay said drily, "that animals didn't need all that sort of mumbo-jumbo."

"But if it gave Neale a way to cope … " His wife sounded as though she had said similar things in the past.

"Well, I imagine it did. But he had to learn to face up to the world some time. Not be sooky."

"Would you mind running through any of your dead pets that you can remember—and the way that Neale insisted on laying them out."

"It's a while ago, Sergeant Walsh, and it wasn't something we encouraged."

But Simon and Jonathon conjured up a couple of memories. The cross certainly. And a budgerigar laid tenderly in a shoe box with a rose cut from a bush in the garden. And an old dog placed in the grave in the yard lying on his back with his front paws crossed on his chest.

"Get out the photos of the children," Walsh said to his junior. Then he passed them around the family. "Do they suggest anything to you?"

They all seemed taken aback and slightly wary. At last Adrian Clay said as though the words cost him an effort, "Are you saying, Sergeant, that our son *did* kill all those children?"

"No. I am saying that we think he laid out all those children after they'd died."

"So who did kill them?"

"We don't know for certain. Did your son ever have anything to do with Annette Blinco?"

"Not that I know of—" Adrian still seemed unable to process his sense of shock and disbelief.

"Yes, he did. Remember how he would sometimes run errands for her or a bit of shopping. She would occasionally go down to the place by the creek. It was nice there. And one time he said

he had carried a picnic basket for her. She was quite sick and she really was a bit … " Mrs Clay touched her forehead. "They treated her for all kinds of things. Arthritis. Migraine. They even said she'd had a stroke. And then, later on, they found she had some kind of growth that was pressing on something. I don't know the details. She went away. Then she came back some time later. She was very frail and she hardly ever went out. But I did see her one day sitting there at a picnic table. So she must've still gone there occasionally."

"How did she die, do you know?"

"They said she took poison. But we don't know. That was after they had sold the house and gone from Winville."

"Are you saying, Sergeant, that Annette Blinco had something to do with those children's deaths?" Adrian Clay had grown very set-faced and intense. The whole family seemed to have taken on a watchful stance …

"I can't say for sure. But, yeah, I think it's possible. Whether it was done accidentally or whether she resented other people having children or whether she really didn't know what she was doing—"

"You mean," the Clay family did not need markers to follow the trail, "Annette was planning to kill herself and she gave the … what they called 'sick lollies' … to the children she met down by the creek."

"It's possible."

"But why would Neale own up to something he hadn't done?" Simon said. The question sounded strange … coming from him.

Moira Clay blinked away the tears which filled her eyes. "Because he was a shy lonely boy who was the butt of everyone's teasing and practical jokes. And Annette Blinco was a shy lonely childless woman who gave him attention and kindness and probably made him feel special."

"He was adopted, wasn't he?" Sergeant Walsh didn't sound moved.

"Yes." Moira looked across at her husband. "We thought we couldn't have children and we felt sorry for Neale. And then about five years later the twins suddenly turned up. We were thrilled. There's no point in pretending we weren't. I think Neale always knew from then on that he would be the one we'd taken pity on, not the one we'd hoped for. We tried to treat all the boys equally. But he was a hard child to love and get close to." She turned away to hunt out a tissue and wipe her eyes.

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"How did you know Neale was adopted?" Guy Briggs wanted to know later as they got on the road again. "There's nothing in the records."

"I didn't. But Blind Freddy could see he looked nothing like any of that family. It seemed to be worth asking."

Guy Briggs felt his own sense of failure. The thought had never occurred to him. But another thought had followed on from that one for his boss. Wayne Booth had said categorically that he didn't have a son. So had Fiona Greehan misheard or misunderstood something? Now Dennis Walsh wondered if the 'son' was an adopted, fostered, abandoned, or in some way unacknowledged son. Or did he merely use the term 'son' to refer to a young relative. It wasn't a major issue. Wayne Booth had been hauled over a barrel for using an unregistered brand. He would undoubtedly take things very quietly in the near future. Maybe that was a victory of sorts. But, when he had some more time to spare, Dennis Walsh thought he might go digging for that … young man who wasn't a son …

"What do we do now?" Guy Briggs said cautiously.

"Mrs Blinco is dead. But if her husband had even the *slightest* whiff of doubt and still went ahead and charged a young man on the basis of a confession and a desire to plead guilty … I imagine the Clay family will be getting straight on to a lawyer, if not to Neale, but how we handle it … hmmm, that's a tricky one, so just write up your notes and we'll have a chat to Greg Sullivan. But for now, I think we can sleep on it. I doubt if Neale Clay is more unhappy in prison than he was out of it."

On the way back to Buckton Dennis reached over and switched on the conventional radio. It was full of excited talk. Bank robbers on the run, the recently-beloved Bonnie and Clyde of a raft of news stories, had been captured in a house in Ipswich. Only a few hundred dollars were found on them.

"I wonder if the house had any connection to the Goodrick family?" Sergeant Walsh said casually.

"And I wonder what they spent all that money on?" Constable Briggs was following a different line of thought.

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Country Casebook: Book Eight

Case No. 1: The Wild Side

Sergeant Dennis Walsh, incumbent of the small Queensland town of Buckton, wasn't sure what to think when he received a panicky call one late afternoon and set out to a farm about six kilometres from town.

Luke Molloy was a well-known local farmer with four hundred hectares of ripening oats—and a brand-new combine-harvester to do the job for him. He, unlike other farmers, had a lucrative contract to sell oats and lucerne directly to several large racehorse training establishments. He prided himself on the quality of his produce. But his usual calm slow manner had deserted him.

"I don't know what to think, Sergeant, but there's something in there—and it isn't *furry*. And whatever it is, I seem to have killed it. It seems to have pink skin. I can't believe a child would crawl in there. But if you could come and have a look before I try to clean out the mess—well, we'd be thankful."

If not a cat, dog, possum, fox, hare, bird of some variety … But Dennis Walsh felt there was no point in speculating. It would be a stray animal. Or it wouldn't. Small children did occasionally climb on tractors, gets into bins and tanks, hide in old cars, turn old machinery into cubbies … but there weren't any children on the Molloy farm.

Instead he let his mind trail back over his recent weekend in Brisbane. He had returned last night to start work first thing of a Monday. He didn't like to leave the station to his constable, Guy Briggs, who was improving slowly but did not bring to the job what his boss regarded as the right attitude. Sometimes he rather wished Guy Briggs would simply go away and write the brilliant 'police procedural' he was convinced was waiting to be written … though whether by him or someone else was a point he rather skated over.

He had spent Saturday night with local bank manager Fiona Greehan after taking her, Sister O'Brien from Buckton Hospital, and the sister's mother, a buxom woman called Emmeline O'Brien, to a performance of 'Les Sylphides'. He had enjoyed it—for about the first twenty minutes. Then it had begun to seem pretty much more of the same. But when they all wanted to know afterwards what he thought of it he had been more diplomatic than usual and said, "It was—interesting."

"Don't you just love the way they float around," old Mrs O'Brien had said enviously; floating never one of her talents.

"But you would've made a dancer," Kath O'Brien said to Fiona. "You've got the right figure for it."

Perhaps she did. But he preferred her figure when it was curled up beside him; her mother having gone away to visit a sick friend and leaving the house to Fiona's sole occupancy for several peaceful days. But Fiona had been sent by the Bank of the Darling Downs to have a full medical today; her future career not hanging in the balance but a feeling among some of the bank's diehard older male management that young women were not the best people to send to country branches. Fiona had done her best to foil a nasty scam at the small Garramindi branch … and had suffered in consequence. The irony, in Walsh's opinion, was that the longtime male manager, currently on extended sick leave, had apparently allowed the fraud to operate with impunity.

"They say I can return to Buckton on Tuesday if I pass my medical—or I can offer to finalise things in Garra before the branch closes or I can apply for the assistant manager's position in Winville when it comes vacant in two months. I'd like to just return to Buckton and take up the reins again. But I know Brian has been hoping they will make him permanent."

Brian Collyer had been boosted to acting manager in Buckton. He would probably do a good job. And Fiona was sympathetic. He was a married man with children at school in Buckton. But she saw very clearly that Brian would not make way for her, if their positions were reversed; it probably would not even occur to him to consider the possibility.

"So you've said you'll return to Garra?" Dennis said casually.

"Yes. I know there's no hope of getting them to reverse the decision and keep the branch open. But I'd like to get everything resolved and leave things the best they can be left. Dulcie said she would be happy to have me back. And with Julie and Brett out of the picture … "

Now he wondered, as he drove, whether she had passed her medical. So long as she retained her room in Raelene Perry's flat in Buckton he felt reasonably sure he would not lose her. But it was no good pretending things could slip back into the pleasant way they'd been … most of the time. Two such different people could not expect to understand each other all the time. He wasn't good at putting his deepest feelings into thoughts, let alone words, but to have Fiona as a lover, as a friend, had subtly changed his outlook on many things. His subordinate, and a lot of people round town, would probably claim that they hadn't noticed, that he was still a pretty unpleasant person to get on the wrong side of …

He turned in over the Molloys' grid. It was an attractive place to visit. The Molloys, Luke and Janine, were progressive people who had created almost a model farm. They had planted trees in every spare corner and along the roadside verge. They had installed solar panels. They had even got themselves hooked up to the internet and now studied long range weather forecasts and new research on soils, fertilisers, types of machinery, advantages and disadvantages of hybrid varieties, and much more.

Their old harvester had finally ceased to be a viable proposition and Luke had driven his new machine all the way from Winville, starting out in the early hours of this morning, and stopping briefly in Buckton to get himself a drink and a sandwich and pick up a few things his wife had ordered.

Now he took Sergeant Walsh round to show him the problem. "Janey, soon as she saw it, said it'll be too big to get through our gateway. But I said, no, it won't and I drove straight in there and just ran it up the outside row. Like a kid with a new toy, you could say. And then I drove it round the back way and in by the tractor shed. And she came over and said, what's that there? And we could see what looked like blood dripping on to the ground at the back. She got a plastic container and brought it over and we were certain it was. So I got under there, to try and find out what was inside. I couldn't see properly so she brought a torch and I shone it down there." He pointed. "And I could see all this mess of guts and what looked like pink skin. I really started to get the wind up then, I can tell you."

"But you didn't hear anything?"

"No. But then I don't know if I would with all the racket it made. And I had my muffs on."

His wife came over and stood beside him. “It can’t be a child, *surely?* Because how would it get in? You only stopped for a couple of minutes in Buckton.”

“Well, say twenty minutes at the outside … and it surely couldn’t have been there since Winville? I got on the road early. I certainly didn’t see any kids hanging round.”

“Okay, well, let’s try and get a bit of what looks like skin out. That’ll tell us what size of problem we’ve got.”

Dennis Walsh eventually went to work with a rake and managed to hook out a piece of the unfortunate creature. He brought out the hanging strip of skin, now with dust and straw clinging, to show them.

“Well, that beats everything!” Luke Molloy reached out to touch the piece of bristly pinkish hide. “But how the dickens could a *pig* get inside my new harvester?”

“He obviously didn’t leap, climb, or fly. So someone put him … or her … in there.”

“But—that doesn’t make a whole lot of sense either. There aren’t a lot of dead pigs just sitting round Buckton waiting for some idiot to put them in a passing bit of farm machinery.”

“Where did you park in Buckton?”

“Well, I drove in the main road from Winville and then I realised I would need to avoid the main street. I parked back near the rear of the cricket grounds and walked up to get a drink and go to the toilet there behind the shops. I guess I was there maybe fifteen, twenty minutes, at the most. And then I cut through the back there and round by the bridge. I s’pose you’ll say I shouldn’t have gone through town but the side road that cuts through past the nursery is pretty bad going. There’s potholes there you wouldn’t believe. And I got a permit from Winville to drive it home.” And Buckton with its wide, often empty, streets was used to farm machinery passing through …

“Was there anyone hanging round, maybe taking an interest … or any sign of Dave Barry or his van?”

“You think this is one of his pigs?”

“It seems like the first place to try. A live pig would’ve tried to … God knows what … but this strikes me as a pig he’d just killed. It can’t have been dead long or you wouldn’t get any dripping. Sounds like a stupid thing some teenagers would do for a laugh. But there is just a small possibility someone thought it was a way to hide a nice bit of pork … and they might’ve planned to sneak in tonight and try to retrieve it. They probably expected you to park the machine for the night and get on to something tomorrow. Go in and give Dave a ring and see if he’s missing any pigs. He might like to come and scrape this one out for you. Otherwise he might have trouble believing.”

“*I* have trouble believing.” Luke Molloy still sounded vaguely gob-smacked. He went away but as he turned at the kitchen door the disbelieving look was still there. He was back in about five minutes.

“You’re right. He was doing three pigs for a big wedding, spit-roasted, all the trimmings. And he was called away for a few minutes just before he got on to scalding and scraping … and came back to find himself one down. He reckons three boys including Damien Scully were hanging round the parking area … but he never thought of them going for a pig. They would have a hard time explaining it away if they took it home.”

“That young man … ” Dennis seemed about to say something unprintable. “Just as well Dave saw him. He seems to get a kick out of getting other lads into trouble.”

Even so, it wasn’t proof. And it was hard to think what material evidence might be waiting. The other boys might crack … just might.

“You’ll want to get on to a paddock tomorrow?”

But Luke said he hadn’t planned to start harvesting for another week.

“Right oh. In that case just get it out as best you can. We may have to take some of it if Dave has trouble convincing his customer of what really happened. They might think he’s helped himself and come up with some weird excuse. And I’ll see what I can get out of Damien and his mates.” The only quality Damien seemed to have that might be the saving of him was this sense of irrepressible mischief. If only someone could boot him into the right lane it might even prove to be an advantage. How was problematical … but Walsh was usually an optimist … and he avoided

thinking on how Damien might be corrupting his two younger brothers, still at high school, and, touch wood, still more interested in sport than mischief …

*

Dennis Walsh walked into the station to find his constable on the phone saying, "Yes, we'll be there as soon as we can. Don't panic. Oh! Here's Sergeant Walsh! Do you want to speak to him before we come?" He listened then handed the phone over. "Two dead bodies," he said with something that was composed of horror, awe, even a form of suppressed excitement. It was an unattractive blend but he had come to Buckton in the belief that day would follow day with nothing more exciting than the occasional traffic misdemeanour or a missing cow or a drunk and disorderly farmer.

Sergeant Walsh felt he'd had enough panic for one day and he took the phone reluctantly. "Mr Binnie? So what sort of dead bodies are we looking at?"

The rather breathless explanation at the other end was to the effect that Owen Binnie had found two bodies shot to death in the old farmhouse up the back end of his property. He thought they had been dead for several days. He thought they had been shot. He didn't know what to think. "I think I need the big guns," he said, shaken out of his usually phlegmatic approach to life. "No offence, Dennis. But you'd better come round by the back road. That's the easiest way to bring people and equipment up there."

"You know what this means," Dennis Walsh said flatly as he put the phone down.

"I guess it means DI Towner … and you're none too popular with him at the moment." That was an understatement. Towner was being accused by the Clay family of sending their son to prison rather than being willing to look at the part his previous boss had played in the tragedy of five dead children in Winville years ago. Towner blamed Dennis Walsh. He had a habit of blaming …

"Can't be helped. Ring Winville and tell 'em what's happened. Then we'd best get out there and make sure it's not some sort of bizarre hoax. Tell 'em we'll confirm as soon as we get there. They can start assembling their gear."

Owen Binnie took in youths who had spent time in various juvenile institutions and trained them to milk cows and handle stock. Some people did not like the thought of 'naughty boys' roaming the countryside with impunity. Other people thought it was very decent of him to give the lads a chance. Dennis Walsh wondered if some of these boys, using skills they might've picked up elsewhere, were playing some sort of bizarre trick on their host.

The Binnies had lived in the old weatherboard house set on stumps, about half a kilometre from their modern brick bungalow, up in the little stony patch of ironbarks on their southern boundary. But the family had finally been able to afford to buy more land on the other side of Parsons Road and build their present home with its mod cons and pleasant garden and outlook across the slopes to the flat country further west. Owen Binnie had also erected a neat unit able to take four youths, just beyond his milking yards. He got good results with most of the youngsters he took in under a training scheme—not least because he treated them firmly but with a belief they had a right to some comfort and privacy and respect. Most of the boys responded with alacrity. Only the occasional one refused to try to learn, to fit in, even to keep a civil tongue in a teenage head.

But the bodies, when they drew in alongside the road fence and got out, were very definitely real and very definitely dead. "We're going to have to walk very carefully here. Chances are, someone saw or knew about this old deserted house near a back track. So they probably came in from the road rather than across paddocks. I'd like to have a good look around before I get Towner treading all over everything. Walk back there and climb through the fence and radio them to confirm. Then get the camera. I don't trust them with a crime scene."

*

No one had ever dared say to Detective Inspector Doug Towner from nearby Winville CIB that his crime scene etiquette was seriously inadequate. Or no one that he would listen to. Sergeant Walsh had done a very thorough and wide-ranging search along the road edge and up around the old house by the time the Winville car made its way along the winding road. Towner with DS Greg Sullivan got out of the back seat. Their junior DC Ali Deane then ran the car a little further along and walked back.

"What do you make of it?" she said quietly as she came past Dennis. Constable Briggs had followed the two men into the yard and up the stairs.

"I think Doug is going to make another ballsup, as per usual. But I've done a thorough search around and I've got photos of a couple of footprints. Talk to me later if Doug misses them." She gave him her quick grin and went on up the weathered grey steps and on to the creaking verandah that ran along the front of the old house.

Doug Towner had had time to look in and make a couple of exclamations, including, "I didn't believe the bastard! He finds dead bodies the way other people find Easter eggs."

Greg Sullivan had gone rather pale. It didn't matter how many violent deaths he got to witness he never got over the habit of turning queasy and uncomfortable. But then, unlike Towner, he had managed to retain a belief that human life was precious and no one deserved to die in a hail of bullets.

"I think it's going to be a long night," Dennis Walsh said to the sinking sun.

But Towner came down the steps a lot faster than he'd gone up. "Right! Let's get things moving! We'll want the works. Those two look like they were on their way to a hundred-dollar-a-pop dinner when they got sidetracked." He reeled off instructions—which he could've given as soon as Dennis had confirmed the deaths were real, not a clever hoax—then turned to Walsh. "You'd better start a farm-to-farm first thing in the morning. Someone must've seen or heard something. We're looking at some heavy weapons. The poor sods are only hanging on to their heads by a whisper. Better get me a decent map of the area too. Greg, get everything taped off. It won't be long before the stickybeak brigade turn up." It sounded decisive, clear, covering every base … but Towner had made no attempt to keep the ground unsullied. There wouldn't be much. This was a stony little knoll. But Dennis Walsh maintained that even hard ground could yield something useful. Towner hadn't read from the same manual.

When the two Buckton men finally drove back to town Guy Briggs was saying he was sure he was going to learn a lot from watching this investigation up close. His superior was tempted to say something sarcastic. But in the end he let the moment pass.

"So what did the bodies tell you?"

Briggs shrugged. "They looked to be nicely dressed, well off, but it doesn't seem the sort of place they would come of their own choice. Yet it would be quite hard to carry them up there. The guy looks to be quite a big man. Do you think it was some kind of secret meeting. Something they didn't want anyone to witness?"

"Could be. Anything else?"

But his constable had mainly taken in the blood and mess and wasn't sure what he might read in to that. "We won't know, will we, until they move the bodies and maybe get their identities. I didn't see a handbag or briefcase but there might be something, a wallet or keys, and then we'll know." He used 'we' in a curiously confident way. But then Towner and Sullivan were not half as terrifying as some big city detectives he had sought to query before being sent to Buckton …

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"Okay then. Forget them for a while. We've got to go and see Damien Scully about stealing a pig." Dennis Walsh showed no further interest in the dead couple. It struck his subordinate as very strange. How could a dead pig be seen as so important in the face now of a major crime? Maybe even a nationwide man-hunt? Dennis Walsh, he sometimes thought, had very odd priorities. He had spent hours on the question of someone trying to set an old pile of wooden crates on fire behind the Co-op. If anything he had given that more attention than he appeared to be giving this new horror. But it was easier to go along with things because any suggestion that some crime wasn't 'important' always got him into hot water …

Damien Scully was probably hoping that no one would see his latest stunt as 'important'. Certainly his parents preferred the sort of life in which Sergeant Walsh never found reason to intrude. So it was with something between a groan and a sigh that Mrs Scully looked out the front window and saw Walsh and Briggs get out of the police vehicle.

"Damien! Come in here. What's going on?" Six months ago she would have defended him with maternal tooth and claw; now she was gradually and privately beginning to think a serious bollocking by Sergeant Walsh might actually be a better idea.

"Nothing. Who says anything is going on?" He followed her pointing finger, then turned and ran out of the room.

She yelled at him to come back but achieved nothing by it. And to open the door and say, "I don't know where Damien is," might be strictly accurate but it didn't go down too well.

"Then you might like to go and hunt him out. We haven't got all day to waste." Sergeant Walsh did not precisely sound sociable.

"What's he done?"

"Just go and get him. Then we'll discuss it."

But she couldn't find Damien and returned several minutes later looking flustered and upset.

"Scarpered, has he? Clear sign of guilt." Sergeant Walsh shrugged. "So how d'you want to play it? We'll keep coming back until we get to see him and probably charge him. Or you can go round to the butcher's shop and reimburse Dave Barry for one stolen carcass and a lot of stress and worry. Your call." He showed no sign of being in a hurry.

Put like that it seemed simplest to pay; after all she and Damien's father usually did end up paying. "I'll fix Dave Barry." She sounded sullen.

"Okay, mind if I use your phone? I'd better tell Barry what to expect." And when he got on to the butcher he said, "Dave, Mrs Scully will be coming round in a few minutes to pay you the cost of a replacement pig and a bit extra for all your worry and agro. You'd better get busy with some sums. And you'd better get a padlock for your van. No guarantee Damien won't try that stupid idea again. Mrs Scully can reimburse you for the padlock too."

As the two men returned to the car Mrs Scully flung a vicious glance after them and said 'you bastards!' under her breath.

"I s'pose it's par for the course," Dennis mused on the way back to the station. "She was a Goodrick. They all pinch anything that's not tied down. But I wonder if a day will come when she finally jacks up and throws Damien out of the family home? There must be a limit to how much they're prepared to take from the little squit."

Guy Briggs wasn't terribly interested in the fate of Damien Scully. But he did want to know what they would now be doing about the double murder in Owen Binnie's old house. "Can we go back up and watch them?"

"If you want. Take the spotlight that's in the shed. I'll guarantee Doug is going to be up there mucking round with a couple of torches."

"But—don't you want to come?"

"No. Two people shot in an empty house. I"ll guarantee Doug has already decided that it's a love triangle case. Or a kidnap gone wrong. Or the Mafia. Or Owen Binnie's boys. And once he homes in on one idea—that's it, he'll stick with it through thick and thin. So all we can do is hope that by some lucky fluke he's picked the right one first up—"

He went into the station and brought Luke Molloy up to speed. Of course it might not be Damien. Presumably some of his mates sometimes had equally stupid ideas. But Damien liked to promote himself as the 'tough guy' in any relationship; even as he manipulated other people to get them into trouble. It hadn't worked in this instance for the simple reason that Dave Barry had not recognised the other boys and Damien had not stayed around to dob them in …

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Owen Binnie looked tough and fit, that was what the lifelong seven-days-a-week work of dairy farming had done for him, but it struck Sergeant Walsh that he was looking rather tired and dispirited when he called into the farm next morning. Constable Briggs had been sent off to call at the farmhouses beyond the murder scene, a list of questions with him. For once he showed some enthusiasm. Possibly he imagined himself solving the crime singlehanded; 'yes sir,' someone would say, 'I heard a car on the road. I heard it stop. Then I heard the sound of gunfire. The time, as I happened to look at my alarm clock, was exactly 2.15 a.m.' It was unlikely he would spoil his

moment of triumph by asking hard questions like: why didn't you call us? Country people didn't, of course, they took shots in their stride. But Guy still equated shots with crime and gangs.

The Binnie farm was in two parts. The road, once a stock route, through the middle had been there before zealous councils surveyed and built more roads and permitted subdivisions. Owen used the area round the old abandoned house for his dry stock and had his house and dairy on the newer more extensively cultivated section.

"I still don't believe it," he said straight off to Dennis Walsh. "It doesn't make sense."

"It doesn't. But why in particular do you say that?"

"Well, they're not … not country people. Their hands. Their feet. Their clothes. What would they be doing here? And why in my old house? D'you think someone wanted to dob me in?"

Damien came to mind … and went away again. "How did you come to find them? Do you go up there often?"

"No. I hadn't been up there in six months. One of the boys here has landed a job at the butter factory and he asked me if he could maybe move in there until he found a room or a flat in Buckton. I said it would be pretty rough but if he didn't mind he was welcome to it. I said I didn't keep the place locked. There's nothing in there but the old stove and a bath, no furniture. So he and one of his mates went over to have a look around. He came back looking pretty green around the gills. I went over and had a look and rang the station."

"So you and at least two youths went in? Which way did you come?"

"Up the back way. I left the ute there by the gate into the back yard. By the old chook shed."

"You didn't wander round the front?"

"No. You can ask the boys but there'd be no reason … "

"You looked in from the verandah window or you went into the room?"

"Went in, I'm afraid. Just down the hall from the back verandah and opened it up. I didn't go inside. The smell and the flies were pretty fierce. But I didn't really believe the boys. I thought it might be a possum or a stray cat that'd got in there."

"Okay, I'll need to talk to everyone here. But has anyone else ever enquired about the house? Living in it, salvaging it, moving it, taking windows or doors, anything like that."

"My brother did think of dismantling it and re-using the best timber and posts … but that's … gosh, it must be nearly twenty years ago. He decided it wasn't worth the effort. My wife and I did think of taking it apart for firewood but then we decided to go for an electric heater, we're not getting any younger, and wood's a fair bit of work, chopping and carting and cleaning up … "

"And did you hear anything? Shots? Vehicles? Yelling?"

"Not a peep. But it's a fair distance … and some timber."

"What about any of the boys you've had here? Have any of them taken any special interest? Nipped up there to have a smoke, maybe bring a girl, just get away from you for a few hours?"

"Not that I know of. They'd mostly rather go into town when they've got free time."

"Right. Well, round 'em up. And I'd better have a quick word with Cathy while I'm here."

The youths weren't happy about being questioned. But then it was their previous brushes with the law which had brought them to Owen Binnie's farm in the first place. The two sixteen-year-olds were nervous and inarticulate but said they hadn't heard or seen anything. The slightly older youth gave a clear rundown on what he'd seen and where he'd gone when he went over to look at the old house with the idea of staying in it. He, too, was adamant that he hadn't been round the front. But he said he had opened the doors along the hallway.

"They'll find my fingerprints, won't they?"

"Very likely. Are they already on file?"

"Guess so. They'll say it had something to do with me, won't they?"

"What did you do to get into trouble?"

"Pinched a motorbike."

It probably suggested a different motivation and attitude. But without seeing the details Dennis had no intention of making assumptions. "Did you use a weapon?"

"Nah. Just grabbed it and took off."

"So what did you think when you looked into that room?"

He seemed surprised to be asked what he thought rather than what he did. “Not much. Just that someone hated those two, really aggro … really wanted to waste them. Maybe make it hard to recognise them.”

“Did you take anything from the room?”

“Hey, what is this? I didn’t go in—”

“I said did you *take* anything. Yes or no.”

“No. I didn’t. And you can’t say I did.”

“Did you *think* of taking anything?”

The youth with his spiky hair and surly expression was silent. Dennis waited. Finally, the young man shrugged. “Yeah, those rings the old bag was wearing.”

“Did you touch her?”

“Of course not!” He seemed shocked by the idea.

“So why did you want to go and live in that house? It’s not much closer to town than here in the bungalow.”

“Because I went round town and no one wanted me. And I can’t afford to stay in the pub. I just wanted a room and things but everyone says, we don’t want someone like you.” He sounded angry at the rejections he’d received, but there was something beyond that. Something hurt and lonely.

“Right. Well, come and see me when you finish up here on the farm. I’ll find you somewhere to stay.”

As Dennis left the farm ten minutes later he was still pondering on the rings the dead woman was wearing. Was the image of those two people seated, legs straight out, on the floor and propped against the inside wall, where the sitting-room adjoined the hall, sufficiently off-putting to keep all their belongings safe from these boys? Had the killer or killers taken any of their belongings? Or had someone later on helped themselves to a handbag, a wallet, some jewelry?

At least, even if the shots had damaged their dental evidence the rings might be recognised by someone …

But the most puzzling thing was … these looked to be seriously well-off people. So why had no one raised a hue and cry? Had they told family and friends they were going away for a couple of weeks … and come here instead … But he thought the lad was probably right. Whoever had killed those two people had hated them. This wasn’t a domestic tiff, a sudden brawl, an argument over … This looked like careful pre-meditated powerful hatred.

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Doug Towner actually looked quite cock-a-hoop when he called by two hours later on his way back to Winville. The bodies had set out on their journey to the cut-and-slice slab. A swag of bullet casings had been bagged up. The house had been photographed within an inch of its life.

“They even took maggots,” he said with a grimace. “Don’t know what that’ll tell ’em. And they can have it as a job. But they reckon it’ll give ’em a line on how long since those bods got wasted.”

Dennis Walsh found a kind of amazement in listening to Doug Towner speak. Did he really make so little effort to keep up with such things as research into maggots, the life cycle of? And yet there was a question. Had flies been able to get into the room before someone opened the door and let them in? There was a ventilator with wire over it opening on to the front verandah and the wire was rusting and it was probably a handy spot for a spider to set up shop …

What about cracks, holes, gaps?

It was ninety-nine per cent likely the shootings had occurred late at night. In which case the flies would not get busy, probably, till next morning. But the thought of Doug so casually discounting a useful line of enquiry …

“Any line on their identities?”

“We got on to people s’posed to be missing. Nothing to fit these two. I reckon they’d run off. Hubby comes after ’em and let’s fly.”

So that was the direction Doug’s thoughts were traveling in. The love triangle. Except—how many frustrated and jealous husbands had something like a sub-machine gun casually to hand.

"Any line on the weapon."

"Ejects. All probably from the one gun. We should have a line on make and model by tomorrow."

"What did you make of the crow?" It was a curious place to hang a dead crow, on the segment of fence one along from the house, hanging by a small piece of wire twisted round one claw.

"Nothing. Farmers do it all the time."

"And the footmarks?"

"Half the bloody district's tramped round the place. I'm not going to go down that road. Sure as eggs any they turn up'll turn out to be your big hoofs."

Doug went out still chortling. Dennis got out his own notes. Not big enough for his feet. And there was something just faintly odd about them. He probably needed to go back and have a more careful look when the team had finished … if they hadn't obliterated them …

The next person in was Guy Briggs and he said gloomily: "No one saw or heard anything."

"In that case, we might do a little experiment of our own one evening."

"What sort of experiment?"

"A visibility experiment."

That road didn't get much traffic. But how much warning would people parked towards the crest get … how much would they need … and how much would a car passing by there at night actually notice …

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They went out before dark; Dennis in the police Ford, Guy in his Monaro. The house was now cut off by tape round the yard but the team had packed up as the day waned. The one bit of information they had been faxed was that fifteen spent shells had been found and that the two victims appeared to have been shot at very close range as there was no spray of bullets into the wall behind them.

Over the next hour they tried timing travel and sightings, they tried easing off the road in various places, even traveling along further and turning the next corner into the dirt lane towards Gus Mortimer's farm. They tried for sound by banging a starter's pistol. If any one wanted the ideal place to carry out a crime then the old house was almost a black spot. But had they had that in mind? Or had they believed the old house would stay unvisited for weeks, even months? But even if the bodies had been found long after they'd rotted down to bone and hair they would still have been easily enough identified by clothes, jewelry, hair, shoes … unless someone planned to come back and remove things …

Whoever had shot them wanted a quiet place to do the deed but wasn't particularly worried about the deed coming to light. So—a very confident someone …

And yet there appeared to be so many clues. A day, two, three, a week, and there would be a confident crowing from Doug Towner to say the case was wrapped.

"I wonder if we're looking at a local connection," Dennis said next morning. "If I wanted to take people out that would actually be the ideal spot to do it in. Or did they just get lucky? But I still think they played safe and did it late at night, say between one and three in the morning. They couldn't risk much later because there's people round there getting up to milk. They couldn't risk too early—*if* it might be a Friday night when it was done—because someone might be going out, dinner, a movie, there was something on at the high school I gather. You might like to check that out. See what time it finished and if there were students coming into town with their families along that road. But I think we'll leave it with Doug. He sounds confident. And we've got enough other stuff to be keeping busy."

Guy accepted that. But just as he was going out, Dennis called him back. "See if you can get a line on that crow. I don't s'pose it's got any bearing but just see if any of the kids noticed it. Might give us a line how long it's been hanging there."

He didn't fancy talking about dead crows, and it would undermine the seriousness of his questions, but he added a note to his list and went out. But either Buckton High school had very unobservant students, or they spent their time traveling in talking, reading, doing homework, mucking around, or just generally avoiding looking out at fences and paddocks and trees …

"Or," Dennis said when he heard this, "the crow wasn't there on Friday evening. Someone hung it up over the weekend."

But it was Owen Binnie's boys who were givng him more worries; many people were not very sympathetic at the best of times—'we've got our own lot of louts so why the heck do we need to be importing more of the little sods'—was the gist of it. But the town's attitudes had hardened since people began hearing about the bodies and the boys finding them. Even people who might once have said they believed kids deserved a second chance were now drawing their heads in.

Dennis rang a couple of families round Buckton he knew occasionally took in boarders. All turned him down flat. "Sorry, Sergeant, but I wouldn't really feel safe/I don't want to be murdered in bed/you're asking a bit much/why can't he stay on at Owen's"; that kind of thing. One woman said, "If you think he's so decent why don't you take him?" To which he'd responded, "It looks like I'll end up having to do just that. Not much Christian charity round Buckton it seems like." He even tried the motel to see if they would do a reduced rate only to be told they were a commercial operation not a charity. He thought of the pub but thought he would want to know first whether alcohol had played any part in the young man's 'spree' on a stolen motorbike. He was about to accept that young Bradley Hopkins would have to move into his spare room for a while when he thought of someone else.

Janine Biggs had been aunt to a young woman, Mariana Dixon, killed in a bizarre bit of horseplay a while ago. Walsh had wanted the young men involved charged but the final decision had been a caution. Not ideal but the youths seemed to have been so horrified by the fruits of their stupidity that they had all led fairly subdued lives since then. Ms Biggs had been devastated. It wasn't her fault. But she blamed herself with a bitter and enduring self-laceration. Presumably she now took in the younger members of the Dixon family (and watched over them like a hawk) but she might be willing to take a chance on a young man who gave every indication of trying to get his life on track.

Her first response was a firm "No, I couldn't take a stranger in." He said simply, "Why not? He seems a fairly clean and decent youth willing to do the right thing."

"He's been to *prison*, Sergeant Walsh. I am not having jailbait in my home."

He thought of trying to cajole her. But if young Bradley decided to lapse, if the lure of excitement and risk proved too strong …

"I know he's been to prison. He's done his time. He's worked hard for Owen. He's landed a job at the butter factory. It may not be the best environment to put him into. Which is why coming home to you and your home might offset any stupid ideas those men try to put him up to."

At last she sighed and said, "Alright. I'll give him a try. If he's okay after a week he can stay. Tell him to come and see me and we'll discuss the details."

Several people that she spoke to later tried to talk her out of it. "You're mad. He'll kill you while you sleep." "He'll steal your car." "He'll … " But having made her decision she felt it was worthwhile following through. "He may do all those things. But I said I'd give him a week and I'm going to give him a week."

Even so, attitudes rapidly hardened round town. Even Bill Borrie vaguely discussed with his staff at the Coolibah Hotel the idea that they might discourage any of Owen's boys from coming in. But as he couldn't point to any damage or trouble they'd ever caused he let the matter drop again. As Emma Doig said later to George Johnson, "I guess he thought it would be more trouble to keep them out than let them in." This was most likely the bottom line but they had all noticed Bill getting vaguer and a little confused at times. They all hoped it was a temporary thing. Bill might not be the most decisive person in town and he sometimes ran late in doing up their wages but they all enjoyed working for him and didn't fancy a new owner.

If anything positive could be said to have come out of the tragic case of the two murdered people in the old Binnie farmhouse then it was probably the affectionate almost mother-and-son relationship which gradually developed between Bradley Hopkins and Janine Biggs over the ensuing months.

Case No. 2: At Home

"Would you like to come for a drive?"

"To solve the world's problems?"

"No. Just a drive. Bit of fresh air. Get away from gossip."

"I've decided that it simply isn't possible to get away from gossip. But, yes, I'd love to go for a drive. Do I need to bring anything?"

Ten minutes later Dennis Walsh drew up outside the unit Fiona Greehan shared with Raelene Perry. She came out looking summery in a pink-checked top and white slacks and carrying a white straw hat.

"We could always go to the races in Winville instead," he said as he took in her outfit. She shook her head. "No. And anyway, it's Sunday."

"So it is. Still, I won't take you anywhere you'll get dirty then. No crime scenes. No mud."

"That reminds me—you said there were some nice spots along the creek in Garramindi. The only place I've found is awful."

"No. You've got to drive about five k's out of town. Or come back down this way past the bridge. I'll show you someday, if you like."

This time he headed out of Buckton going south-east. Being Sunday afternoon the road was deserted. Dry white grass still billowed along the roadside and across the low hills. The flatter cultivation was now a ripple of dull gold. Here and there the gaunt grey skeleton of a dead tree broke the expanse. Along the roadside an occasional ancient box with a large lump on its bole gave slight shade and dropped twigs and bark.

"Do you find it beautiful?" she ventured to ask. "I always long for something greener, richer, more tropical."

"I don't see the point in always hankering after something you haven't got. And yeah … I do like it." He pulled into the verge and got out to stand and look round from the highest point the district offered. She came round to join him. There was a wind blowing, not cold but with something dry and withering about it. "You can see a long way from here."

"Yes." She wasn't sure that that made it any more scenic. A patch of streaky cloud lay across the eastern horizon. A crow came and perched on a dead branch nearby.

"They found a dead crow hung up by one claw from the fence near the murder house." He turned and pointed in the direction of the old Binnie house though it wasn't visible from here. "They're trying to decide if that is significant or not."

"But it must be—surely—or why else would someone do such a thing?"

"Farmers shoot crows and hang them up—to scare off other crows."

"I see. Does it work?"

"Not being a crow—that's a bit hard to say."

She laughed at that. "But it seems to me it *must* be significant."

"Maybe. But it's a bit hard to believe that someone brought two people out here, shot them, then went out and shot a crow and hung it up as some kind of warning or message."

"Maybe they were shooting crows and they missed?"

"No. The people were shot where they were found."

"And … do you have any ideas on why they were murdered?"

"Not my case. But they don't have an identity yet. That'll probably make everything clear. Where they came from … whether they had a local connection. They're trying to pin it on the boys who work for Owen Binnie but that doesn't seem to be a goer. Still, early days … " The case had already generated quite a lot of unpleasant publicity for Buckton. And Owen Binnie's old homestead had been dubbed, inevitably, 'The House of Horror'.

"Did they ask for your advice?"

"The day Doug Towner asks for my advice … no, he said I should be keeping a closer finger on the pulse of the district … "

"But *anyone* could come in the back way. How are you expected to keep an eye on everything?"

He nodded. He had said something similar, plus a few expletives, to Doug. But Doug was still confident of a quick arrest and he let it flow over him, almost unnoticed.

She didn't really want to talk about death. It still frightened her: the thought that death can come so quickly, so unexpectedly, even at the hands of a most unlikely person. She was still here. She felt much better. The bank had okayed her to keep working. But sometimes she woke up in the night and felt she couldn't breathe, couldn't speak, couldn't see … and with it came a terrible sense of being alone and not knowing which way to try and escape. But this place was soothing in a strange way. Too big, the horizon too far away, too dry. And yet there was something about the way the wind ran through the dry grass on the slopes, setting up a shining creamy-white sea of ripples, which suggested a renewed sense of freedom …

A car turned on to the hill road and ground its way upwards. It pulled into the opposite verge as there wasn't much room next to Dennis's car. Dora Binnie got out. "Is something wrong, Sergeant?"

"No, Mrs Binnie. Just enjoying the view."

She was a little nuggety woman with short straight iron-grey hair. She gave a brief glance around. "Well, it's not much of a view, if you ask me."

Fiona bit her lip to stop herself laughing. Though whether Mrs Binnie longed for somewhere green and tropical was the question … "Where would you prefer?" she asked.

"I said to John I want to retire to Toowoomba when the time comes. That'll do me."

She had pulled in rather than drive past Sergeant Walsh as she knew she had a broken rear light (and the boot was tied down with baling twine) but now he showed no sign of getting into his own car and driving away. After a bit more inconsequential chat she resigned herself to the worst and got in and drove away again.

"So she was hoping I wouldn't notice."

"What are you going to do?"

"Suggest she get it fixed."

They drove a long loop round to join the Dinawadding road and then come quietly back into Buckton. The town seemed fast asleep except for some activity at the cricket grounds and someone playing with a noisy remote-controlled car along the footpath. The wind whipped a raft of litter across the playground of the convent school.

"Would you like a cup of tea?"

"I'd like something more, something different—but I know for certain someone will find a reason to come around and knock on your door or ring you up—" She said it lightly. It was a fact of life. She might even learn to accept it with equanimity.

He ran the car into the shed at the end of his yard and they went into the old station house. It always seemed to have a curiously tenantless air about it. He might call it home but he seemed to regard it more as a nomad might see one waterhole. Useful. But not something to be *possessed*. It had never bothered him, he hadn't even noticed it particularly, until he began to ask Fiona around and then its lack of warmth and welcome seemed to hit him squarely.

"Like those fairy tales where the bloke wants to know if the girl really cares for him—or she just fancies his palace. The more you put up with things … the better I feel … and yet I don't really want it to be a case of you just putting up with things."

"No. But when you're at the mercy of other people … and if you did turn your life into something nice and domestic … "

"Doesn't fit, does it."

"I don't see why not. Look at the house next door. It's a bit old and shabby but really it's quite a friendly sort of place."

He unlocked and she went in and put the kettle on. But they had hardly settled down to a packet of cream biscuits and some raisin toast when there was a sharp knock on the front door. Fiona gave him a wry look as he got up and went down the hallway.

Jenny Roberts, whose mother had lived next door till she died, was standing there. "I've come to make a complaint, Sergeant Walsh."

He didn't want her inside. He didn't want to stand in the doorway. He didn't want to hear complaints of a Sunday. At last he said curtly, "You'd better come in then." With luck Fiona's presence would indicate to the woman she wasn't welcome here.

He introduced the two women. "Yes, I know of you," Ms Roberts said coolly. "But I won't keep you both from … your tea. But I did think you could keep a bit of an eye on mum's place, sergeant. The vandals have been getting in and making a mess—and here it is right next door to you. It wouldn't take you out of your way to keep an eye on things."

"If I see someone there behaving suspiciously I will check it out. If you make a formal complaint I will respond to it. But I am not your private security, Ms Roberts. So you can hire someone, you can put a tenant in, you can come and live in it yourself or do more to sell it."

"I can't live in it myself. I've got a business to run in Toowoomba."

"Your choice."

But as she listened to the two of them a sudden impulsive idea popped into Fiona's head and she said, "I don't want to interrupt—but would you mind me enquiring how much you're asking for the house?"

Ms Roberts turned to Fiona then back to Dennis with a sudden unexpected spurt of anger. "So *that's* why you're happy to let the place go to rack and ruin! All that rubbish strewn around! So I'll have to bring the price down and your lady friend can buy it! I didn't think you'd stoop so low—"

Fiona had sometimes read in books of a 'menacing presence' but now she wondered if the authors really knew what they were conjuring up. It wasn't that Dennis was violent or rude. It was the terrible sense of suddenly being helpless and puny in close vicinity to a live volcano. He took a step towards Ms Roberts. She took a step back. But that was the only perceivable aspect of it. And yet Fiona felt alarmed. And if *she* did—what of Jenny Roberts—

Fiona hesitated, then said, "But without knowing your price—"

"I've got eighty-five thousand on it. And it's worth every penny. Now, if you will excuse me. I will make a formal complaint tomorrow."

She turned to go back along the corridor. Dennis followed her out. It might have made Ms Roberts walk a little faster. But then there was the murmur of words at the door before she heard it slam and Dennis's returning footsteps.

He came over and sat down. "You don't trust me, do you?"

For a moment she simply sat and looked at him. It was an unexpected question, an important question. Maybe more important to him than it was to her. And she wasn't sure how to answer. "Yes, I do trust you, Dennis. I would trust you with my life. My safety. My reputation. Everything I own. My family. My friends. Even my best sherry glasses."

"So why were you sitting there trying to decide how best to dowse me with the soothing bank manager treatment?"

"Yes, I know. But I suppose it's the *threat* of violence which is almost as daunting as the real thing. I start to get all knotted up inside. I know she was out of line—but I still can't help preferring to calm things over."

"Then just say so. I don't want you to pretend things are okay if you don't think they are. But I don't use violence. And if I call them names your mother would not approve of—well, they can mostly cope."

"Are you sure you don't use violence? Not even pushing and shoving?"

"Who's been telling you that?"

"People talk. Like that old man who shot himself. People say you made such awful threats to him that he couldn't take it … "

"He shot himself rather than face going on trial for the murder of Mary Tripp. No one here bothered to attend the inquest in Winville. But it's all there on the record."

"But … he seemed such a harmless old man … "

"And I don't? His father employed her sixty years ago. She stole the design for a new kind of hydraulic pump from his business and passed it to a rival business—run by the father of her fiancé. He'd stewed on what he regarded as an act of betrayal for all those years. But it wasn't any of Buckton's business. If they wanted to think I was a monster—I wasn't going to lose any sleep over it."

She got up and came around to him and put her arms around him and rested her head on his. "You shouldn't take it so calmly, when we all malign you, but I suppose people do behave a bit better if they really think you are the dragon waiting to pounce."

"Do you malign me?" But he didn't really want an answer. Not just then. Because, somehow, she found herself cuddled into his lap and content just to have his arms round her and a kiss that tasted of tea and toast. And then, as if on cue, the phone rang and he reluctantly accepted there would be no more peace for them and he might as well go and see what Ms Roberts was complaining about before heading on out to see what DC Ali Deane had found in Owen Binnie's paddock.

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She was waiting some distance up the road when he arrived. He was angry with Ms Roberts. Her claims of vandalism involved two branches torn off shrubs on the far side of the house and some rubbish thrown over the front fence. It didn't show Bucktonites in a particularly attractive light but it was hardly going to send prospective buyers running away in droves. He had removed the two branches and suggested she trim the bushes back a little. And he had brought the rubbish back to check it later. It might give a clue to its original owner. Or he could get Guy Briggs to check it …

But DC Ali Deane always got to see Dennis Walsh in the best light. It wasn't a conscious decision on his part. Just the vague knowledge that Doug Towner gave her a hard time with endless little digs, suggestions she make tea and run errands, and an unwillingness to delegate anything but the most menial of jobs. And the regret that he couldn't get her here, or someone like her, as his junior. Guy Briggs might've improved slightly but it was still a matter of two radically different people, ideas, attitudes, and backgrounds, thrown into over-close proximity.

"Come and I'll show you what I've found down the paddock, first off." The bodies had now been removed to Winville but Winville's tape still closed off the house and the room was sealed. Closed in by the dark-trunked trees on the stony knoll it was a grim house in the late afternoon. The grimy side windows still caught the late sun but shadows criss-crossed the bare yard. It was hard to decide why someone had chosen to build here. But it was that idea of not using the flattest most fertile land for houses and sheds. And this road had once been a main route into Buckton before they built on flatter ground further north. Did the perpetrator remember the house from traveling this road months, even years ago … or was it purely chance that the person or persons had happened upon this deserted house?

"Did anything strike you about the bodies?" Dennis said as they climbed through the fence further along.

"Almost as though they had been placed there in a certain way … and their hands seemed to be reaching out to try and touch … But maybe that's being fanciful … "

"You think it might be a crime of … "

"Yes, go on, Dennis. You can say it."

"Say what?"

"The big P word. Passion."

He grinned at that. "Mightn't go quite that far. But something in their personal situation … jealousy … and yet they're not young. Forties at least."

"And it's not possible to have passion in your forties? Come on, Dennis."

"I was thinking of jealousy. It always strikes me as a juvenile emotion."

She thought but didn't say that he might think differently if someone else made a play for Fiona … but then again he would probably accept it. The only acceptable lover being the one there

with him from choice … no manipulation, no pressure, no mind games, no possessiveness, no emotional blackmail …

They waded through the dry spiky grass, past the house, down the far slope to the edge of the timber. "This is what I wanted to show you." 'This' being signs of a small campfire among the exposed rocks.

"What did Dougie say?"

"Nothing. Too far away to be relevant."

"So why do you think it's important. It must be over fifty metres … "

"I'll show you." She walked on down a little further. In front of her was a huge meat ants' nest with a dozen smaller outliers.

He nodded. Anyone coming up from the farm side would avoid the area. He tossed a small pebble into the midst of the large mound and the big red-and-black ants swarmed out. But anyone coming down from the road, and especially in the dark, would probably not know that this hazard lay a few steps further on. The fire had most likely been fed by paper and lighter fluid, or something similar, then several dry clumps of grass had been pulled up and added.

A smallish lump of something had not been fully consumed and was now half-hidden under a mound of scorched earth. There was the mark of a boot heel. Whoever had put it here had pressed everything down into the dirt and ash.

"Did they know the house was truly deserted? Did they know Owen rarely comes up here? Did they think the bodies might lie here undiscovered for weeks, even months, and a shower of rain on this would hide everything pretty thoroughly? Or were they in a hurry, in a panic, just thought … or wanted to dob Owen's boys in … " He took up a small stick and gently teased the lump out. "Plastic?"

Deane nodded. "It's only a guess … but I wondered if it might be something like a video? Right colour. Sort of. Let me get a couple of photos then I'll bag it up."

She covered the area thoroughly. "The heel isn't clear but it might be something like a Maranoa … something that has a definite sturdy heel … "

"Could be. A country person taking some very large grudge out on two city people. Two country people. I don't think one person got them both up those stairs."

"I know. But riding boots are worn in the city now. Elastic sides are quite fashionable. You don't have to be a rider or anything to do with stock to wear them … "

He nodded. "Posed … as in photographed? Filmed? Nudes. Children. Porn. Divorce. Some sort of ransom. Wrong wife with the wrong husband. Party that got out of control. Some sort of kick out of boots and a whip. I'm only guessing."

"It could be. They're going all out with Missing Persons."

"It could also be worth checking if anyone has lodged a complaint about peeping toms, someone taking a film, refusing to stop when asked, even a ransom."

Ali Deane nodded. But they both knew that Doug Towner did not take kindly to suggestions from his subordinates. She bent and gently worked the shapeless bit of grayish-black material into a plastic bag. "I should come back and sift it, shouldn't I?"

"Remove the whole area to the depth of, say, half a metre. It might give you a clue to whether they used an accelerant. If they did then they came prepared. Though they might've depended on lighter fluid … "

"And bag it—how?"

"Dig a trench along one side, like a soil profile. Then work, say, a sheet of tough plastic or piece of flat metal in underneath the whole thing. It'll be hard going. And you're going to have to tell Doug sooner or later. If he still says it's irrelevant—let me know and we'll do it. I don't want you in trouble."

It was a strange thing: many people found Dennis terrifying, she even sometimes felt that her boss was uncomfortable with him which might explain his constant carping about someone he only saw occasionally, and yet she thought that working with Dennis would be a very positive experience. He might not understand spectrum analysis or the intricacies of DNA. But he seemed to

find the natural world all around him a fascinating and revealing place. And he seemed to take an unexpectedly caring attitude, slightly paternal though not obviously so, towards her.

"I wonder," she said cautiously, "if there's a different message in the way they were sitting when they were shot. I'm not quite sure what I mean. But … their hands … they were equally responsible … for something … they were some kind of partnership … "

"Anything is possible … nearly anything. What was the other thing you wanted to show me?"

She nodded. "Your boot marks. Doug says they were left by one of the people that came by before you called us. They might be. But they're in an odd place. Not someone coming in the gate and up the stairs. It could be someone taking a wide loop round to the back of the house. But I wondered if they picked up the dead crow along the road and walked over to hang it there. A symbol of sudden death maybe. Or they saw something hanging there in the shadows and walked over to see what it was."

"Could be."

"It's only very faint. I wondered if I was jumping to conclusions. Doug is sure it is something to do with a relationship gone wrong and I don't like to contradict him. But there's something about the marks. As though one foot, one boot, is slightly different to the other. Tell me if you think I'm clutching at straws but I just wondered if one boot was slightly built up, a surgical boot of some kind, maybe someone with one leg slightly shorter than the other."

She turned to him with anxious eyes.

After getting down to look at the faint marks he said, "I think you might be right. I can't say for sure. But it struck me at the time, just something niggling. Did this person go round the back and burn something while someone else did the posing and the shooting?"

"Dennis, do you think those people walked upstairs under their own steam? I've been thinking of them carried up, maybe tied, maybe drugged. But maybe they walked up. If they were drunk or tranquilised or something … then just maybe it wouldn't make it necessary for this person to be very powerful. They went in, maybe they sat down themselves, maybe they were pushed or hit. Their heads are such a mess they may not be able to get a clear line on that."

"Anything is possible. But Doug is running with the angry husband thing, isn't he?"

"It looks like it. He doesn't want to hear any 'nonsense' about kidnappers. He says people don't get kidnapped in Buckton."

"That guy never fails to amaze me. People can get kidnapped anywhere. But I don't think this is a ransom type thing. I think it is an anger type thing."

She nodded. "I think so too." But they both knew it wasn't much good her going back to Winville and saying, "Dennis agrees with me."

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Rae, Kieran, Matt Holloway, Jon Dundas and Pauline Stratton joined Fiona in the town's one reasonable eating place, Domenico's, for dinner before she faced the long drive back to Garramindi. Pauline seemed pleased to be invited and she schooled herself to be pleasant and interested in their conversation. It wasn't really difficult. Rae had brought out the rumour doing the rounds that the two bodies found in the old house at the back of Owen Binnie's farm had something to do with gangland 'executions'; just what everybody read into this idea was a bit confusing. Drugs? Prostitution? Extortion? Links to the Mafia? Asian-style tongs and triads? It made for some lively speculation. But it was gradually borne in on Pauline that Jon spent more time looking at Fiona than she liked. She had blamed her sister for trying to 'steal' him. Now she wondered if he still liked Fiona better than he liked her. It made her a little sharper than she intended …

"So any news from the horse's mouth?" Kieran said in his laconic way.

"If you mean—did Dennis tell me what is going on—then the answer is no." Fiona wondered if she would share anything—if she knew anything. There were times when she thought she would rather talk about almost anything over dinner than dead bodies, crime, parasites, or the general unpleasantness of certain local people. The longing, sometimes, to discuss books, music, ballet, theatre, even travel or some of the better TV shows over a meal sometimes left her feeling frustrated and weary. "And, please, can't we sometimes discuss things beyond murder and misery. I know

there are dreadful things happening in the world but couldn't we sometimes talk about nicer things—"

"Such as?" Raelene said drily.

But Matt Holloway suddenly said, "Bravo! A voice for the population which prefers to discuss the new rugs Jack Alexander's just got in—or the state of the road to Dinawadding—"

"That reminds me—" Jon Dundas put in, "I heard on the grapevine that, all up, Japana is going to make around twenty million, conservative, out of selling their feed lots. And this from a company which got a little slap on the wrist and a fine of a few thousand dollars for growing some marijuana. There's a message in there, I'd say."

"What message is that?"

"Getting tough on drugs only goes over well if you can point to some scumbag doing the growing, or setting up a lab in his back shed, or some pathetic kid talked into carrying heroin into the country in a false bottom. Soon as it is a respectable business, major donor to party coffers, pillar of the local Chamber of Commerce and RSL branch … something goes a bit off course."

Pauline, not interested in drugs or policies, said, "What are these new rugs that Jack has got in?"

"Oh, I don't know if he has, but he probably has. I was just throwing out a different thought. Interior decorating. Or we could discuss real estate. Or the school fair. Or what Father Meagher said to Steven Rolls … "

"What did he say?" Pauline, the others realised, was a very literal-minded person.

"I don't know exactly. But Steve is looking much better. So whatever he said must've done the trick."

Fiona had a fair idea that it might owe more to Dennis than Father Meagher but she said instead, "Talking of real estate—what do you all think of the old Roberts house?"

"Well, apart from the location—it's rather a nice old house." Raelene wasn't in the market for a bigger house but she knew Kieran sometimes thought of selling his small cottage and getting something with a few more rooms. "And there's some nice old furniture in it."

"How much is she asking?" Jon said. He too sometimes thought that the small weatherboard he had found was not the most attractive of options.

"She wants eighty-five thousand … and it would need some repairs." Fiona had been vaguely mulling over the thought of the house for the latter part of the afternoon. But that *was* a ridiculous price.

"Even Mary Tripp's big house only fetched sixty thousand," Kieran said. "And I would say it's in better condition and has more land."

"Yes, I'd reckon the house won't shift at that price," Matt, who had a pleasant house in Winville, said cheerfully. "And it's always hard to sell big houses in small country towns at the best of times."

The trouble with this, and Fiona agreed with their assessment, was that it would be Dennis who would be criticised for not keeping a closer eye on the place all the time it sat empty and unsold. He probably would let Jenny Roberts' complaints flow over him, unheeded, but she found that she became more and more sensitive to such unfair criticism of him.

In the end she had to leave the others to drink and talk and eat; she needed to get on the road and it would hardly look good if Dennis had Constable Briggs out with the breathalyzer. Kieran said he also had some preparation to do and would drop her round to the flat as she had come with Rae.

As they drove away he said suddenly, "Fee, don't take them too much to heart. You know, and I know, that Dennis is one of the 'good guys'. But were you serious about the Roberts' house?"

"No. I'll probably end up in Winville when I finish up in Garramindi. And it *is* hugely over-priced. I think she's going by Toowoomba prices, not Buckton prices. But I couldn't help thinking that there is a need for more rental places here. For teachers and people who come in and don't really want to buy … or not immediately."

"Well, think about it. I know that price is much too high. But if Jenny Roberts would agree to getting an independent evaluation … " He left it at that as he drew up outside Rae's flat. But as she went to get out, he suddenly said, "Uh oh! You've got problems!"

She had left her car parked in the layby opposite the flat and now she saw that someone had smashed the back window. Kieran got out too and came over to look. Then he said, "Did you have anything sitting in the car anyone might've wanted? I'll ring Dennis." He went on into the flat, using his key, and turned on the front light.

All she'd left were a few papers and a small overnight bag on the back seat. So far as she could see they were as she'd left them; now sprayed with glass. It might be a case of mindless vandalism, even kids being careless with a cricket ball or a slingshot … it might … But she found her heart had begun to race with the awful possibilities …

Dennis turned up only a minute or two after Kieran came out again.

"When did you last look at it?" He obviously wasn't in the mood to waste words.

"When I came out and got into Rae's car … say a bit after six. I'm sure I would've noticed."

"And have you been having a problem with anyone lately?"

She hesitated. "Only Margaret Elliot. I'm planning to take out a civil case against her. For what she did to me. It has upset a lot of people."

That was an understatement. Even Dulcie Campbell, her landlady in Garramindi, was mildly shocked. It seemed like something too aggressively … American. Yet it was hard to imagine anyone actually coming all the way here to make their displeasure known. Though it wasn't only ordinary people. The police were not happy with her either, afraid it would muddy the waters of their nice clear-cut case against Margaret's daughter and prospective son-in-law for bank robbery. And the bank itself was not happy. It ran the risk of re-igniting anger over what had happened at the bank and making a quiet closure of the branch more difficult.

"Then I think you'd better leave the car here. I'll give it a good go over. You can borrow the station-wagon."

"No. Take my car, Fee. I can get a lift with Matt." Kieran and Matt were doing some on-farm demonstrations over the next few days. "If I get stuck I can take the wagon."

In a way she was glad. Kieran's car, a nearly new four-wheel-drive, would give her the illusion of power and protection. Kieran removed various items from his car. Dennis carefully took her papers and bag from the back seat, displacing the mess as little as possible. She was hesitant about leaving her car like that. But she had a long drive waiting. And there wasn't really anything she could do beyond handing over the keys.

Then both men watched her drive away. "I didn't know about this civil case business." Kieran sounded dubious.

"Neither did I. Not that I would've tried to talk her out of it. But I think Margaret Elliot is a nasty enemy to have … Anyway, I'd better check this car out and give George Stadler a ring. Would you mind just keeping an eye on everything here while I go back to the station and get my kit."

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It was borne in on Fiona Greehan over the next few days just what a hornet's nest she had stirred up. George Stadler came round to see her on Monday evening to tell her that Margaret had a cast-iron alibi for the whole time; she had gone to a canasta evening with a couple of friends and neighbours, and to tell her that Dennis had dug a bullet out of the back of the front passenger seat and sent it for analysis and that he had got quite a clear print off the car where someone had rested a hand while they tapped out most of the glass. He was busy doing a house-to-house along that side road.

"Nothing if not thorough, our Dennis," George said drily, which was a backhanded way of admitting that if it'd been him he would probably have put it down to delinquent youths and left it to the insurance company to sort out.

"But … if not Margaret … then who would … "

"It still might've been an accident. Kids out with a rifle down along the creek there. Got trigger-happy, forgot the safety-catch … whatever … then tried to make it look like general vandalism … "

"I hope so. I could deal with that. It's hard to deal with the fact that everyone is now sympathising with Margaret and treating me like some kind of monster."

"It's the way little towns survive. A sense of hanging in together."

Maybe. But she found she was dealing less and less confidently with both her work and the moments of renewed panic which, though they had subsided a little while she was in Brisbane, were overtaking her again. Maybe the case wasn't the right way to deal with the situation. But to back away now was to leave Margaret as the injured, even the victimised, party in the whole dreadful business of her abduction and abandonment.

And there wasn't really anyone here to talk it over with. George had been given his orders on what he could and couldn't do. Even Dulcie had grown a little distant. And working every day with Margaret to make sure every account-holder was contacted, every person who had any kind of dealings with the branch was aware of the impending closure and their options, was a species of nightmare.

On the Tuesday evening she sat down and rang her mother. Mary Greehan was a charming woman and she had done her best to raise a charming daughter, but warmth and fun and cuddles had never really been her style. Even so, she said immediately, "Of course I'll come and stay a few days, darling, I'll even put up with a country pub. But you could drop the case, you know. After all, you'll be gone from there in another couple of weeks. It'll all begin to seem like an unpleasant dream, best forgotten … " Her daughter had not argued with this assessment.

And Mrs Greehan was as good as her word, reaching Garramindi by lunchtime next day, and booking the best room the pub had to offer. Miriam MacFarlane was at first enchanted by the idea that this gracious obviously well-off woman had chosen to stay in her hotel. She was less pleased when she realised the woman was Fiona's mother. But it was too late to claim that she was booked out … and by law she could not refuse to feed and accommodate … but she thought she probably could make Mrs Greehan's stay less than pleasant …

Moving Mary Greehan to the noisiest room in the hotel was a start, on the grounds she had a long time booking for the other room. And the campaign provided her with considerable enjoyment over the next few days. It was soon all over town and although several people, including the Lutheran minister, did not actually approve no one intervened either to remonstrate with Miriam or to tell Mrs Greehan what was going on. The couple who ran the town's only café managed to serve Fiona and her mother in the slowest time on record and burn their dinner as well. Someone poured what looked like a bucket of very liquid cow manure over Mrs Greehan's white Audi.

Mary Greehan, after a lifetime of being treated with politeness and respect, found Garramindi even harder to deal with than did Fiona; and the dust from harvesting, carting, loading, gave her a terrible attack of sinusitis. In the end her daughter said gently, "Mum, I can't bear to see them taking it out on you too. It's only another week, I'll survive."

She hated seeing her mother reduced to streaming eyes and a runny nose and a general sense of misery. "I thought I would be a help and a support, darling—but fate deems otherwise."

"Mum, you are. You have been. You don't know how much I appreciated you being willing to drop everything and come all the way out here for me. But I suppose I do have to fight my own battles and make my own decisions. No one else can do that for me. Not really."

"Are you happy with the lawyer you've got?"

"Reasonably. He's not afraid of Margaret. But I think he's a bit uneasy about treading on police toes." She had found someone in Winville to put the case together for her. He had talked to George Stadler and to Sister Martin for corroboration of her story. He felt she had a strong case for personal damages. But then he didn't have to live with this atmosphere of growing resentment. Things, local people felt, weren't ideal in a normal world but at least they had jogged along reasonably well before Fiona came to town. Now people blamed her for almost everything; the branch closure, the bad publicity for the town, the arrest and charging of two young people, the general feeling of apprehension and downturn …

"Then at least let me pay all your expenses … and if you think he's not doing the best job possible, darling, let me find you someone better."

That was another thing, Fiona thought later, as she waved goodbye to her mother: that she had a degree of ease, wealth, comfort, opportunity, denied to most of the women in Garramindi. And instead of being grateful—here she was planning to take one of them to court to demand an unknown but probably large sum of money …

It wasn't about the money. She undoubtedly had more of the stuff than Margaret already. But unless she plastered posters all over town it was hard to tell people that. To explain that it was about some acknowledgement of the misery and fear she had been put through …

And Margaret clearly wasn't suffering. She had turned up to work yesterday in a new car, a brand-new Saab. She might well not want to drive round in something with bloodstains in the boot and unpleasant memories attached to it. She probably could afford to buy a new car on her regular salary … but …

She said it to Dulcie Campbell. "I see Margaret has got a new car."

"That's nice for her. And she probably deserves something for all that she's had to go through with gossip and worry—"

"Yes. And it can't have been very nice having to drive round in a car with my bloodstains in the boot."

Dulcie turned and stared at her. "I don't think that is in very good taste, Fiona, that kind of joke."

"I wish it was a joke."

But she realised she didn't want to talk about it any more, not even to try and convince Dulcie she was telling the truth. Instead she went to her room to lie down for a while. It was hard to deal with her feelings about everything, this town, her work, her future, the past, and still present a calm poised self to the world every day. Because she was coming to dread stepping out of this room into the hostile atmosphere of the town, of the bank, of the world …

She reached over for her mobile phone and rang Dennis at home. He could not make people like her, he might not even understand just how daunting she found this atmosphere of dislike and subtle boycott, but at least he understood what she had been through. And it was nice to hear him sounding absolutely normal. She had almost begun to feel that he too might resent her for being the comfortable sophisticated outsider demanding her pound of quiet motherly-looking flesh.

"When can I see you?" he said immediately. "Would you like to go and look at beauty spots along the creek tomorrow?"

"Yes. That would be nice. I'm going to go in to the bank for a couple of hours in the morning but any time after eleven. By the way, Margaret has just bought a new car."

"Has she now?" She was surprised at his sudden intensity. "Where did she buy it?"

"It has a sticker from Winville Town & Country Auto on the back window."

"Good. I'll pick you up then from the bank tomorrow."

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But it seemed to Fiona when she was in his car and the road stretched away flatly in front of them that he was going *away* from the creek. "Are you sure you're going the right way?" she finally ventured to ask.

He said it would only be a small diversion; he just wanted to check something out. For a few minutes she was content to take him at his word and revert to talking about other things, principally her car and the so far mysterious print on the back and the failure of anyone along that side road by Buckton Creek to see or hear anything significant.

But then, by that time of evening, a lot of people had drawn their curtains and turned on their TVs. "Surely a shot would sound … "

"You'd think so. But they used a silencer, I'm certain, over at the feed lots. And it's a big stationary target. One shot. People might investigate if it kept on. But one … they think it's the TV or something backfiring."

"Dennis, do you think it *was* an accident?"

"I don't know. Yet."

"Dennis … you're not going … back there? Where Margaret took me?"

"Yeah. I've been wondering how she managed to get you all the way down there."

"It doesn't matter. Honestly. I don't want to even go anywhere near it."

But he drove along, past the layby, until he came to a faint track. He pulled in and got out. "Come on."

"No. You go. I'll wait for you here."

"So much for psychology."

"Yours or mine?"

"Matron's as a matter of fact. I'll hold your hand. You'll be quite safe."

But the track led down quite steeply towards the gully below. Originally a ford across the wide gully perhaps. But now he could see where Margaret had backed down, then swung sideways into the growth of scrubby wattles and dry stumps of grass. Then the broken twigs and stems. It was worse than he thought. It looked as though Margaret had hauled Fiona out of the boot and literally rolled her several metres down the slope to where she'd been stopped by a more substantial trunk.

"There's your other shoe." It had come off and was now caught in a dry branch. "And there's where you tried to get some of the stuff off your face. It's a wonder you didn't scratch your eyes out."

"Dennis—please—I can't bear this." She had gone pale and he could feel her hand trembling. She knew she was beginning to hyperventilate. "Let me—I need to sit down." He helped her over to the nearest log and she sat and put her head down almost to her knees. This sudden awful dizziness. She had tried to block it all out; coming back to a confused consciousness in the jolting darkness of the boot, of Margaret and her words, the pain as the bigger woman dragged her up and let her fall into the prickly grass, not being able to see or hear properly, not knowing where she was, the dreadful sense of tumbling, uncontrolled …

He put his arms around her. Gradually the shaking stopped but she knew she was perilously close to the edge. Sooner or later she'd have to face the knowledge she didn't have the strength to go through with everything. The case. The job. They'd passed her fit. But she had been going backwards ever since …

It was shaming to give way to tears so easily but this last week had been harder to deal with than the business of aching all over and struggling to get back on her feet. "I don't think I can take much more … to know so many people hate me and just want me gone … even Dulcie … and I tried so hard for them all."

It came out sounding pathetic; a long drawn-out whine of self-pity. But he simply tightened his hold on her. He wasn't very good with emotions, his own or other people's, but he thought this was probably what Evelyn Heidenreich had in mind; a need for some of this misery to be aired.

"I know you did. And it'll all come right in the end."

"You must get so sick of me. If I'm not whingeing about one thing … I'm in some other mess."

He turned her head to face him then bent to kiss her. Several kookaburras perched on a bough nearby suddenly burst out in hoots of laughter. She scrabbled for a handkerchief but he said, "Just cry, just laugh, doesn't matter. There's only us here. And that pair of funny fellas up above us there."

Eventually, though, he stood up and took her hand firmly again. "Come on. We'll walk up again. Slowly." It wasn't hard to see where she had struggled that distance up the long diagonal of a cattle pad. Or where he had reached her. But he could see clearly now what a fragile state she was in. And there was still that question of who had damaged her car hanging fire. "We'll go and visit a more scenic spot, then we'll go on home."

It wasn't remarkably scenic, the little stretch of water on Prickly Creek, with a little copse of Moreton Bay ash trees leaning over the bank, and a little patch of close-cropped green in the curve of the creek. The trees reflected in the still water, their odd little patches of tessellated grey bark against the creamy white expanse of trunk, and she said generously, "Yes, it is nice. Very tranquil. But why do they call it Prickly Creek?"

"It was s'posed to be the furthest limit to the prickly pear in the district … and it was for a while because the pear didn't really care for open cultivation. It preferred to spread in lightly timbered country. But it did find ways to spread further west. Or people were stupid enough to give it a helping hand."

For a few more minutes they stood there. Then he said, "I've seen one of these trees that the kids had turned into the most marvelous climbs and swings. Would you like to see it some day, not today. And the blossom … but it's getting late now for it, just lots of little gumnuts opening."

"Like the gumnut babies."

It was nearly two when he drove into his yard and parked. "How about some sandwiches and some soup … or would you like a steak?"

"Sandwiches would be fine."

She didn't think much of the face that looked back at her in his bathroom mirror, stained and blotchy. She was tempted to try and cover everything with make-up but she had gradually come to realise that those things didn't weigh with him, that he really would rather just have her as she was. But she sponged her face and re-did her hair, if not for him then for her own sense of self-esteem.

"Have you had any more visits from Jenny Roberts?"

"No. But I got my constable to go through the rubbish someone had thrown into her yard. He hasn't forgiven me for that. But I think he learnt something from it."

"Such as?"

"That you can learn a lot from people's rubbish. We pulled in two people over it. Hardly a major crime. But it was a health hazard. And the strange part of it was that they'd gone round to look through the house as potential buyers. I don't think Ms Roberts will come here making accusations against you in the near future."

She smiled a little wistfully at that—if only other things could be resolved so easily; even if it meant delving into someone's nasty leftovers—and said, "She wants way too much anyway."

"And you don't want a house in Buckton—or has something changed?"

"It's hard to put into words." She watched him tip a tin of soup into a saucepan and add milk. "I know banks don't really care about people … but I really believed in the DD … that it was a small people-friendly bank which hadn't strayed away from its roots. I wanted to give it and everyone involved with it my very best. And then, since all this has come up, the closure, the way everything was dealt with … I feel … it sounds a bit over the top, I know, but it's been as hurtful as everything else. The underhand way they did things. They really did want to get it all done and closed off while I was there so there wouldn't be any local backlash against the bank because people felt Hilton and his staff hadn't been treated right. I feel a sense of betrayal. In a way that's worse than the other things. I always saw it as my career, a sense of something mutual, a shared commitment to best practice and really helping country people. Maybe it sounds a bit corny … but that was how I saw it. And now I don't know if I can bear to go on. Even if I say I don't want another country branch I have the fear of maybe being the person in head office who is told to cut costs by closing another branch. But I don't know what else I could do. I've spent fifteen years in this particular world … "

He stirred the soup while he thought on this. "But you could re-train, you could do other things. Buckton doesn't have anyone to teach piano, to teach ballet, maybe there are charities who'd be glad to have you work as some kind of adviser. Rural debt makes people … well, you know all this."

"Yes, maybe. But I just feel I can't cope with that on top of everything else. And I still haven't found where Brett and the others parked the money they skimmed off. I've been through nearly every dormant account now, everywhere I can possibly think of. I am going to walk away as a failure on that. They blame me for blowing the whistle on it. They say it's been more trouble than any possibly resulting goodwill … and they say I shouldn't be bringing a case against a fellow-employee. It makes the bank look like a place where employees are at each other's throats."

He placed a bowl of hot tomato soup in front of her. "My poor darling. I can't solve most of those problems. But I'll get someone for your car—even if it kills me."

"I think I'd rather have you alive." But her laugh sounded a bit shaky.

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At least no one chose to ring up over the next hour and they threw caution to the winds and went to bed for a little while. She had taken the decision after seeing the doctor in Brisbane to go off the pill; it was partly the feeling that her body needed a rest, that she just wanted to let it take things quietly for a little while, and partly that uneasiness over possible health risks as she got older. Rae laughed such things off but then no one ever knocked Rae around and she had taken a firm decision not to have children. Fiona sometimes wished she could see life with that kind of clear-mindedness. To know exactly where you were going in life …

And he made no complaint about using a condom; except that he said wryly later on, "I wonder what people do with them afterwards—apart from dropping them in parks and picnic grounds for little kids to find and say 'mummy, is this some kind of balloon?'—but what say I leave you to have a bit of a rest for a while."

She wasn't in the habit of napping of a Saturday afternoon; it had something dreadfully slothful and lazy about it. The first sign of age creeping up maybe. And yet it suddenly seemed a nice idea just to cuddle into his pillow and close her eyes. He went out and she could vaguely hear him on the phone; something about 'they' had to stop avoiding the hard bit and 'charge' Margaret with the 'real crime' and then something about checking with the car yard in Winville to find out how Margaret had bought her new car.

As she drifted off she had vague memories of Margaret always crying poverty. A second-hand VW or a little hatchback to replace her old Holden sedan maybe …

She slept for more than two hours. It was almost an embarrassment. Other people were out *doing* things … and here she was *sleeping* … and yet she hadn't been sleeping well in weeks. It was nice to wake up to find Dennis sitting there. "Would you like a cuppa … and I've got some buns."

"This is embarrassing. Sleeping! But it *was* nice."

She got up and dressed and he put a mug of coffee in front of her. "What say we go out somewhere for dinner? I've got Briggs to keep an eye on things. Not a very reliable eye but we might as well take advantage."

"That would be nice. Wherever you fancy. But I didn't bring any clothes with me. I could go round to the flat. I've left things there."

"Let me see what I can find."

For a minute she simply stared at him. The idea of *Dennis* keeping women's clothing on hand seemed absurd. Then she realised he must mean he still had something of his long-dead wife's. She wasn't sure if she relished the idea. But it might hurt him if she said no.

"Would it be okay if I used your shower?"

"You don't need to ask questions like that."

She heard him ring someone, say "Bill" and something about "a decent wine", as she stepped into the shower over the old rust-stained bath. It wasn't only Ms Roberts' house which needed some refurbishing but Dennis never seemed to notice the age and shabbiness of the place. Or if he noticed he didn't put any weight on the issue …

It turned out that it wasn't Bill Borrie he'd been ringing but Bill Carboni at Domenico's. Did she want to see Rae and Pauline and the others if they were eating out? And more so in the clothes Dennis had dug up from somewhere. The white blouse had ruffles and short cuffed sleeves and its colour had yellowed in its decades-long sleep in a long-forgotten trunk or drawer. The skirt was different shades of blue and gored to suggest something a late sixties woman might've gone out to dance in, someone like Petula Clark or Dusty Springfield … maybe a pair of white calf-length boots … And yet … when she put the outfit on, and it was slightly too big, it didn't look unattractive.

"I know it isn't what you would choose … but you do look nice." And Bill and Anna had given them a quiet secluded table opening on to the back patio and brought out a top Barossa wine. "It'll set you back a bit, Dennis, but you won't regret it."

They ordered from Bill's Australianised menu. She knew it wasn't the sort of food he generally ate, and he stayed safe with a pizza, but she found herself relaxing and enjoying everything. It didn't make the problems go away. But she thought she probably could pick herself up and soldier on.

And then Rae, Pauline, Vince, Jon, Joanne and Kieran came in. She smiled and waved—whilst resisting the idea to go over or say anything. And they, soon, cheerfully, sent any sense of intimacy packing. But she quashed the temptation to leave, it would feel like a retreat, and ordered a sherbet to follow her lasagna. Anna came and poured coffee and left them each an after-dinner mint.

"You'll never hear the end of it now," Dennis said calmly. "Sleeping with me, eating with me … what comes next?" She smiled at that. But it was quite true. There was no way back to pretending he was just someone she filled in the odd moment with …

And when they stood up to leave and she turned to say goodnight, Rae gave her a speaking look as if to say something like 'you might at least have left this place free of Dinny and his fault-finding … it's the one place where we could forget he exists … '

Bill came over as they were leaving the back room. "Come again soon. I'll do you a steak if you'd prefer … "

"Do you prefer?" Fiona said as they went out. It wasn't late and there were still a few Bucktonites in the video shop or getting hamburgers and chips in the little café.

"After two glasses of that wine it hardly seems the right question. I think I better stick to beer. I know where I am." It was true. A good wine was seductive but it also suggested that not to have another glass would be almost a crime, a waste of a bottle …

They drove home along the quiet street and went in. "If you would ever like to watch a video … I could buy or rent a machine. It wouldn't be any trouble."

"Some day. It's as though all those things can wait. The times when I just have you to myself and no phone ringing seem too precious to be squandered on … entertainment. Even the evening news … " There were times when she felt that it didn't make sense; this kind of desperate hunger not to let him go, not to do the things she had once done of an evening … and yet an end would probably come. If not an imposed end … then maybe the sense that this need had finally burned itself out …

She removed the blouse and skirt carefully; she would feel awkward if she damaged them, spilt something on them, and yet she had no real sense that she had stepped into another woman's shoes. She wasn't a substitute for Norena.

"I wonder if she knows … Norena … about us … if people can still know such things. I don't really know what I believe. But I'd like to think she has some way to know you're safe and well."

"And happy."

"Yes. Not actually watching over you … but somehow knowing that she hasn't been forgotten … just a sort of loving presence … " She wasn't quite sure how to try and present this idea; and maybe it was better left to drift away for now …

Because nothing else really mattered when she was in his arms and he was heavy and warm and powerful …

And to finally be back with the sense that this mattered more than all the problems clustering round out there in the real world beyond this tender make-believe one …

Except that he suddenly sat up in bed. "Oh Christ!"

"What is it?"

He said it flatly. "The wine. And I said you could rely on me … " He was clearly upset.

"I'm … I'm sure it will all be okay." She tried to get her mind round her own body's rhythms and work things out. "Don't go worrying … " And then the telephone shrilled through the house, cutting in on her attempt to reassure herself … if not him. He heaved himself up and went out to answer it.

Constable Briggs said brightly, "Sir! Winville's just rung. They've got identities for those two bodies. I thought you'd want to know straight away."

Case No. 3: Just Passing Through

For a blank moment Dennis Walsh tried to think what the young man was yammering on about. All he could think on was that he had given Fiona yet another thing to worry over. Then he said, "Right. So who are they?"

"People called Frank and Vicki Pettigrew."

"Husband and wife?"

"They're still checking. I can't find any Pettigrews in the phone book."

"There must be a local connection. Her maiden name. Friends. Went to school here. Something. That house is too far off the normal routes for anyone to casually drop in. Or else it's the perp who has a local connection. But run with what you have. Ask people like George Hickman. Not tonight. But when you're out and about."

For the first time since he had met Guy Briggs the young man actually sounded excited. That elusive fame and sense of satisfaction beckoned …

Dennis went into the bathroom and got a towel. The phone rang again. He went out. "Yeah?" It was hard to work up much enthusiasm for police work tonight. Briggs would have to generate enough enthusiasm for the both of them. It was Sergeant Stadler. "Now, this will surprise you, Dennis. Margaret bought that new car four evenings ago—*and she paid cash*. I had the devil of a job to get them to tell me what went on. And they've already banked the money. So no chance to check serial numbers. But it looks very suspicious. I don't mean she's on the breadline but she's never been one to splash money around … "

"It does, George. But then there's all that money they skimmed off floating round somewhere, who knows where. Buying a new car seems a bit obvious. Still, Margaret may well feel she wants to get some fast fun—in case she loses the case and has to pay damages."

"Yeah, well, I went round to see her. And she said she'd been saving up for ages and thought now was the time to buy, not sit on her savings any longer."

"Then I think you'd better see if you can subpoena all Margaret's bank accounts, everything to do with her financial situation."

"I can't do that, Dennis. She hasn't been charged with any financial wrong-doing."

"Then you can ask her nicely, first thing tomorrow morning, to let you look and if she says no, you can charge her with being a party to fraud. Something along those lines."

But as he said it he knew George probably wouldn't do anything. "Or … and this might be more effective in the long run … make sure everyone with a fifty kilometre radius knows that Margaret paid cash for a top-of-the-range imported car. That'll get people thinking … " This was more George Stadler's style. He would wander down to the pub, have a beer or two, and say casually 'Amazing what banks pay their staff when you come to think about it' … and then he'd be off and running, gently nudging the ball along …

"Might."

"Oh, and by the way, they've got names for those two bodies." No harm in running them past his counterpart. But George only said, after a long pause, "Doesn't ring any bells. I wonder what sort of business they're in?"

"Well, the woman had three-inch nails, give or take an inch. So I don't think she milks cows or grows cabbages for a living."

"Can't say I've seen anyone round here like that. Except that very elegant woman that turned out to be Ms Greehan's mum and everyone in town did their best to chase her straight back to Brisbane, gave her the worst room in the pub, I heard, and made her wait an hour for some burnt chops in the café. I don't think she'll be in a hurry to come back to Garramindi—"

Dennis hadn't heard this little side story. Yet Mrs Greehan could go away, reaffirmed in her opinion that her daughter was having to live amongst some out-and-out and very unpleasant yobs, while Fiona was stuck with the awkwardness and the embarrassment and the sense of boycott.

He was about to hang up when the thought occurred to him. "Does Margaret have any very close friends? The sort of people who might stop over in Buckton and damage Ms Greehan's car?"

"I s'pose she has friends. I can't say how close they are."

Yet it was hard somehow to link the damage to Margaret. Not her style perhaps? Or simply the distance … And there was the extra possibility that it wasn't really aimed at Fiona but in some way at him … one of the Mortons perhaps …

But he wasn't going to even think about the Mortons …

He went back to Fiona, wondering what she was feeling and thinking; it was so easy to fail someone, a moment's inattention and their life might be changed forever; and that she would forgive, never hold it against him, in some ways made it worse.

He unrolled the towel and sat down on the bed again. "The thought didn't occur to me earlier on … but d'you want to call me as a witness in your case?"

"Not if I can help it. People might say you're biased. But I've got a reluctant agreement, or my lawyer has, from George Stadler … and a firm commitment from all the hospital staff who saw me when you brought me in. That really helped me a lot, knowing they all said yes without hesitation."

"Well, I am biased. But it wouldn't stop me telling the truth … if you need me."

"I know. But there are times when I find myself wishing I'd just let everything go."

"And let Margaret Elliot get away with it?"

"People get away with things all the time. You know that."

"Yeah, I know that. But I like to focus on the ones that don't get away. That first call was from Guy. They've got names for the two people in Owen Binnie's old house. Frank and Vicki Pettigrew. I don't s'pose they're bank customers?"

"Not so far as I know. And the second call?"

"That was George. He says Margaret Elliot paid cash for her new car."

"Paid cash!" She looked at him in astonishment. And then the strange sense of seeing things fall into place in someone else's mind. "She always knew where Brett had parked the money … and she simply helped herself. It's even possible that he did it deliberately—so if he got caught he could simply point the finger and say 'no, it wasn't me—it was her' … "

"Uh huh. Though I think Margaret was always one step ahead of those little turds. And people felt *sorry* for her."

"But let's not talk about her any more. Come back to bed. You can feel sorry for me if you like. But I do feel heaps better now. I was a wreck this afternoon … "

"And if you find I *have* mucked up your life … you know I'll go along with whatever you decide."

"I think … I think I would prefer that we decide together."

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Constable Briggs called in to see George Hickman on his way back from an early call-out to a minor accident. Hickman ran the town's monthly broadsheet, a mixture of social news, agricultural information, coming events, births, death, and marriages, and some advertisements. It was hardly a mass-circulation paper, and it had not brought in any useful information on the shooting and dumping of three greyhounds by the side of the Rolls' farm. But Dennis Walsh took such things philosophically. Information could turn up months, even years later.

"Pettigrew?" George Hickman was getting on in years but his memory remained sharp. "Now let me think." He sat back in his tiny crowded office, merely a front room in his house, and closed his eyes for a while. "Doesn't ring a bell … no, I tell a lie … " But he returned to his somnolent state. "I knew a Pettigrew … but I don't think it was in Buckton. Now, that *is* odd. Because Ted Pettigrew was … I haven't thought on him in forty years." Constable Briggs was no longer hopeful that this was leading anywhere. But he continued to sit and wait while George rummaged round in his memory …

"Yes, now Ted lived in Winville for a while, before the war I'd say … and he had a business there. I am *pretty* sure he was a photographer, sold cameras, developed people's snaps, went out and did formal occasions, weddings, what-have-you … but he left there … when did he leave there … and where did he go … I think he went to Brisbane … he went to the war … and there was some scandal … was that Ted or one of his mates … " But at last he said more firmly, "I can't tell you more than that. I never had anything to do with him, just once or twice got photos from him to print. But the newspaper in Winville would know when he left town and where he went."

"Did he have children?"

"Can't say for sure. We weren't on first-name-terms. But he probably did. Most people did in those days. I'm pretty sure his wife minded the shop when he was out."

Guy wrote this up but he thought it was a long leap of faith to imagine that the long gone Ted Pettigrew had a son called Frank who ended up shot dead near Buckton forty years later. Dennis Walsh when he came in from yet another call-out to the supermarket carpark and read Guy's entry only said, "Give me strength! What sort of world does the moron think he's living in that he can ignore a good lead?"

But he knew the answer: when it came down to the wire Guy Briggs would find it more sensible, more diplomatic, and a quicker route out of Buckton to make it clear he thought Doug Towner's ideas on the case were better than Dennis Walsh's … 'And if I thought they'd send me a better replacement then I'd say run all the way with Doug—'; except that he didn't believe that Guy, for all the irritation he generated, deserved to be tainted by another of Doug's botched investigations …

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It was Dulcie Campbell who precipitated things in Garramindi. She told Fiona Greehan, most apologetically, that her sister was coming to stay, with two children, and she was very sorry but she would need her room. It was so palpably false that Dulcie delivered it in a way which suggested she'd spent hours trying to convince herself of the justification for eviction.

"I'll pack and leave now."

Fiona was not really surprised. She had sensed her landlady was gearing up for some momentous announcement. There was no point in arguing or prolonging the moment. She had debated two alternatives: to drive to and from Buckton every day for this last week or to move into the bank itself. There was a couch at the back of her small office. Probably Hilton Browne had rested there at times. And there was a toilet and wash basin. That would have to do and she would go home mid-week for a decent shower at Raelene's flat.

A For Sale sign now stood outside the bank. The real estate company, based in Winville, had accepted that another business would be hard to find here and was instead offering the house as 'Delightful Federation Home, Suit Keen Renovator'. There might not be a lot of keen renovators around Garramindi either but that was not Fiona's problem.

That she would leave on Friday afternoon without resolving the issues round the bank scam that Mrs Elliot and her daughter and prospective son-in-law had carried out was troubling but Fiona had come to accept that particular failure. There was no point in dwelling on it.

Late on the Tuesday afternoon an odd little incident occurred. Margaret was at the counter when Miriam MacFarlane from the town's only hotel came in. The two women dealt with a bit of financial business but it appeared to be incidental to their chat. As the bank was empty the two women stayed talking for some time. Although Fiona could not hear what they were talking about it sruck her that they were not as antipathetical as she had been given to understand from Margaret's talk about Miriam's son … and by extension Miriam herself. If anything they appeared to have quite a close and friendly relationship. Margaret might regard herself as a step up from Miriam, she might blame Brett for her daughter's troubles, but either the problems had brought the two women closer together … or they had always been close and had gone to pains to conceal it. Two women having children to men who failed to marry them. Maybe that was the link. Two women in some form of business. Two women who understood money. Two women in a very small town. They might even be related.

She wasn't sure where her thoughts were leading. But it was a moment which begged to be grasped. She stepped out of her office. "Margaret, could you spare me a moment? And perhaps you would like to join us, Mrs MacFarlane? I won't keep you long."

Margaret didn't look pleased but came in. Miriam, after a moment of surprise, took the chair that Fiona proffered.

"The bank will close this Friday afternoon, at the close of business, and we still haven't been able to find where Julie and Brett hid the thousands of dollars they managed to skim from customer accounts. I wouldn't like to suggest that they might've passed it on to their mothers … or indeed

their fathers. But I would like to ask you both to do some serious thinking … because I have now checked every dormant account, in fact every account in this bank … except for that of you, Margaret, and of Mr Browne. If Brett managed to pass the money through the system and into a secret account—then he is an extremely clever young man. I won't say you should be proud of him, Mrs MacFarlane, but he is certainly cleverer than I ever factored into the equation."

Neither woman responded to this, possibly because they were unsure just what Fiona was implying. She went on quietly, "Margaret, it is possible that you love Mr Browne so much that you wanted him to benefit to the tune of many thousands of dollars. But that would run the risk that his wife might very soon inherit that money. Or you might've taken the money yourself and spent it, cash down, on a very nice car."

"It's no crime to buy a decent car," Margaret said sharply.

"Of course it isn't. I have a nice car myself." This wasn't quite true. "A Mitsubishi. But my car doesn't have your blood in its boot. Whereas your car had my blood in its boot. I don't blame you for wanting to get rid of it as soon as possible."

"Did you really pay cash, Margaret?" Miriam wasn't sure if it was wise to stay here listening; it would, quite possibly, damage their friendship.

"Of course I didn't! I don't know what this pathetic woman is on about now!"

"Strictly speaking, it is no one's business but yours," Fiona went on, unruffled, "but Sergeant Stadler checked with the car yard. So why tell lies about it?"

"I always knew you were a sneak—the minute you walked in—I just *knew*. It was written all over your face. That smarmy little smile, thinking you're better than us all, and all the time carrying on with that turd of a copper from Buckton. Even Dulcie finally saw through your lies and realised what sort of a person you are."

"We are getting away from the point. We need to find that money. If you genuinely do not know what happened to it, Margaret, then I will have to make a report which will indicate that Brett and Julie found a way to hide it somewhere for when they finally get out of prison. It won't help their defence—but you leave me no choice."

"What do you mean?" Miriam MacFarlane took no nonsense from her patrons … but she was scrambling to take in the implications of all this. "Do you mean Brett will get a longer sentence?"

"It is possible."

Brett's mother had no problems with accusing him of a variety of things, from sloth, untidiness, failing to help his mother out, and being unwise enough to take up with Julie Elliot … She still found this last one curiously hard to decide on. Was Julie the best thing, or the worst thing, to happen to her son? But now she saw very clearly that it would be her son who would carry the heaviest side of the can. A curious considering look came over her face. Fiona was unsure how to interpret it.

Miriam stood up abruptly. "I'm not happy about any of this. But I do have work waiting." She seemed about to say something else then thought better of it. Perhaps.

Fiona also stood up. "You both realise what the alternative is, don't you? You, Margaret, were always the banker to their little scam, the one person no one would suspect, the very respectable assistant manager. The one with the knowledge to divert the money on into your own account."

"You're absurd! Of course I didn't do any such thing!"

Fiona saw no need to say anything more. And she still had no way to prove it. Margaret, she now felt sure, had always been more devious than the young ones understood, more devious than Hilton Browne knew, than anyone knew. And she had taken Margaret into her confidence before she knew Margaret was trustworthy. The money had been gone even before Brett and Julie made their break. And Brett had possibly not known, not till he tried to gain access to it 'on the run'.

She watched the two women leave, Miriam shaking her head vaguely. Then she closed her office door and rang Buckton station. She got Guy Briggs and simply asked him to pass a message to Sergeant Walsh to check whether Miriam MacFarlane could've been in Buckton the night her car got vandalised. Then she set the problems, related or not, aside and went on with routine work.

But her message galvanised his superior when Constable Briggs passed it on. “Never would’ve thought of her. But she might’ve come to talk to John Goodrick about their son who comes up for trial in a fortnight. No harm in asking.”

He went straight round to Goodrick’s small upstairs office. John Goodrick wasn’t wild about the unexpected visit but he saw no harm in admitting that Miriam had come to talk to him.

“D’you remember the date?”

“Not off hand, no. Should I?” Miriam still held a certain attraction despite the caked-on powder, two chins, and the first touch of grey in her hair. But he had been thinking of marrying someone else at the time … Miriam’s attractions had not been able to compete with a woman who appeared set to inherit twelve thousand hectares. But that woman had chosen to sell up and move; there was a forwarding address certainly but no welcome mat. And Miriam had later inherited the pub when her father, Dan Foley, died and she had married old Angus MacFarlane who died a year or two later and left her quite nicely supplied with a furniture store in Winville which she eventually sold in the belief that owning the only hotel in town was a better proposition. John Goodrick had sometimes made casual suggestions but Miriam had made it very clear no second chance was on offer.

“A Saturday night?”

“No. Can’t see her being away from the place of a Saturday night. Might have been the Sunday. A bit quieter. Yeah, that sounds more like it. Why?”

“I assume she came to talk about Brett with you?”

“Maybe. Why?”

“Just curious. And do you know if Miriam owns a weapon? A rifle? A pistol? Anything at all?”

“Probably does. Why?”

“D’you know if she has any skill with it, even just shooting crows or whatever?”

“Could. But you’d have to ask her.”

“So the date of her visit would’ve been the sixteenth?”

“Wouldn’t swear to it … but that sounds about right.”

Dennis Walsh wasn’t an easy man to read but John Goodrick had the uneasy feeling he had said the wrong thing. Though other people might well have seen her … “Why? What’s Mirry done?”

“I don’t know. She may not have done anything. But she may know more about that missing money that we’ve allowed for.”

“She doesn’t need money—”

“Same as you don’t need money. I hear Bernie’s getting no better. Could be a case of slow poisoning.”

“What could be?”

“His ill health. He’s not that old. But definitely seedy.”

John Goodrick wasn’t a terribly easy man to read either. But Walsh thought that Bernie Goodrick’s health might repay some investigation. He was due to receive a considerable payment since his nephew had finished building the motel on his land and been in operation for twelve months. John Goodrick might, quite understandably, see Bernie’s bank account as an unsuitable home for that money.

“Doesn’t surprise me. You can’t say Bernie ever looked after his health.”

“True.”

Dennis Walsh went away again. He had got a reasonable print from the car. But the idea of asking Miriam MacFarlane had never occurred to him. Now he went back to the station and rang George Stadler in Garramindi then faxed a copy of the print he’d got. “It’s possible she shot out the car window as she drove up that road by the creek—then she realised that it hadn’t shattered the window but just left a hole we might well find suspicious—so she simply drove up alongside the car, reached out, rested one hand against Ms Greehan’s car while she bashed the window with something to make it look like kids with a bat or a brick … Try her, anyway, George. It seems pretty likely she was in Buckton that night to see John Goodrick … and if she didn’t do it as

payback for Brett—she may've done it for Margaret." There was just room for another car to squeeze past between Fiona's parked car and the creek bank or she had pulled in briefly and gone over to Fiona's car.

George Stadler said he hadn't realised that Margaret and Miriam were friends. But then he said wearily, "I s'pose the kids brought them closer together." This might be interpreted in various ways.

*

Sergeant Stadler was beginning to think there would be no peace in his life until the entire saga of the Bank of the Darling Downs' branch in Garramindi had truly closed. But he went, conscientiously, around to the pub and asked Miriam to come down to the station with him and have her prints taken for her fingers and palms. She reacted angrily. "What the heck is going on, George? I haven't done anything wrong!"

"I'm not saying you have. But I can't eliminate you from my investigation until I have your prints to compare."

"Compare with what?" She put on a surly expression.

"Prints left on a car in Buckton."

"I haven't been to Buckton."

"Yeah. You have."

He thought of being more specific but he couldn't work up any enthusiasm for trying to nail Mrs MacFarlane. She seemed to find the long silence intimidating. At last, she sighed and said, "What are you trying to prove?"

"I'm not trying to prove anything. If your prints don't match … that's the end of the matter and I will destroy them again immediately. But I feel sure they will."

"It's Ms Greehan, isn't it? She's saying I bashed in the back window of her car."

"Now *that* is curious," George Stadler said non-committally. "That you should know what happened—when you say you haven't been in Buckton."

"Margaret told me."

"And how does she know?"

"You'd have to ask her."

"Just between you and me, I am getting bloody tired of all the trouble Margaret Elliot has made for me. I wish they'd let me charge her with kidnap and be done with it."

"Kidnap?" Mrs MacFarlane stared at him. "What do you mean—*kidnap?"*

"What I said. She abducted Ms Greehan and left her bound and tied in the gully at Six Mile Creek, after carrying her out there in the boot of her car."

"I don't believe that! You shouldn't listen to what that copper in Buckton tells you."

"You're forgetting, Miriam, I *saw* Ms Greehan before she went to hospital. So don't go telling *me* Margaret is some sort of saint. So far as I am concerned she is one of the most unpleasant women I have ever come across. Now, are you going to tell me what you did in Buckton?"

Miriam turned this request to and fro, debating cautiously as she did so. In the end she said tartly, "I don't s'pose it'll cut much ice to say Margaret asked me to do it. But although I blame that bank manager dame for what is happening to Brett … he still has to take responsibility for his own stupidity. I am not in the habit of taking things out on people. But I've got Gus's old pistols from when he used to go in for clay pigeon shooting … and I thought—what the heck, I don't mind to give Miss Greehan some extra trouble for all she's put us through—"

"All she's put you through!" He could not hide his astonishment. He was beginning to feel that the people he'd known, and in some cases liked, around Garra for many years were totally devoid of any moral sense. "In that case I will have to charge you. I can either come here and take your prints in front of your customers—or you can come to the station. Which way d'you want it?"

"I'll come." But her expression was one of deep resentment.

He got up and went out without another word. He had always thought that Miriam was quite a good sort in a raucous unsubtle way, and putting aside his feelings about her son, but now he felt that she was a suitable friend for Ms Elliot. It was a pity but the idea of spending time with her, in her pub, had now gone sour.

Miriam, though, had had a change of heart in the time between his visit and taking time out from her customers to walk a block to the small station. “Look, George, I’m sorry about it all. It was a stupid thing to do.” She gave him her nicest smile. “We can probably come to some arrangement.”

“No. I will take your prints and check. If they match I will charge you.”

Which he proceeded to do.

Sometime in the night several people descended on the bank and smashed all the windows and threw firelighters into the building. Miriam had an alibi. She was sitting over a late supper with a couple of reps for a large fertiliser company. And Fiona, though terrified by the sudden violence, managed to extinguish all the small fires.

Sergeant Stadler said, even though he saw in it an ongoing admission of defeat, that he could not guarantee either her safety or the bank’s continued safety from arson or vandalism.

Fiona rang Head Office in Brisbane, and their local insurer Farm & Life in Winville, then the real estate agency. She spent most of the next day clearing up the mess and packing bank documents into boxes for transport to the archives. She wanted to leave and spend the evening peacefully in Buckton but in the end she felt that it would make better sense to stay. There was a high chance that the vandals would be back.

George Stadler came round in the late evening and said he really didn’t like to think what would happen next. “They’ve gone mad,” he said gloomily. “I always thought Garra was a reasonable place, decent people, but I’m beginning to think I was off in fairyland all these years and not seeing the way things really are.”

“I know. I had no idea just how terribly wrong things had gone here. I just thought I would fill in, keep things ticking over, and instead it has been a nightmare. If the bank had been honest enough to tell me they were planning to close down this branch maybe I would’ve been a little more prepared. But I wasn’t told any of that.”

“And I still *don’t* understand. Is it just Margaret and the two young ones … or is it anger against the bank, and you as the person in charge, or is there something else here I am missing completely?” He looked rather woebegone and she found herself feeling vaguely sorry for him; though, looked at with a cold eye, he had suffered nothing except some extra work and worry …

“I wish I knew.” Maybe Dennis Walsh could resolve things, make some sense out of them, but she knew she could not even suggest it. “But I imagine things *will* quieten down once the branch is closed and I am gone.”

“It was never your fault, my dear,” he said wearily. “You did what you had to do … and got put through the ringer, Maybe someone will get careless and talk about things down the track. I don’t know. But I have charged Mrs MacFarlane with the damage to your car. It’s something … ”

Something. But it didn’t bring much sense of peace and respite with it. Fiona spent a wakeful night, waiting for a renewed assault on the bank. But nothing happened, or so it seemed, until she found two large dead rats laid out on the front steps next morning.

Thursday night the shed behind the bank was set on fire and it was only quick action from the man living on its far side and his garden hose which saved it from total destruction. When Fiona locked up after seeing the removal truck load the last of their office furniture and equipment and drive away, most of the material to go to auction, she felt drained. Kieran had kindly left his car at her disposal and she packed her few personal belongings and bags into it. Then she stood for several minutes to look around. Because she wouldn’t be coming back to Garramindi.

The small town was quiet and drowsy in the warm afternoon. Two children went past. A magpie perched briefly on the bank roof then flew away. Her sense of disillusionment and failure was so profound she wondered if it was possible to even consider continuing her career. She felt she would be physically ill if she had to go into another branch and take up the routine again.

If anyone took time out to watch her drive away wrapped in this sudden overwhelming sense of despair then she was unaware of their gaze.

*

It wasn’t hard to ask that the nurses made sure that Bernie Goodrick did not eat the things his relatives brought in for him. They had no problems in popping by and collecting the chocolates,

fruit and sweets, various family members were occasionally kind enough to drop in to the old man in the retirement annexe at Buckton Hospital. “Don’t want you spoiling your appetite, Mr Goodrick. I”ll just put these away so you can have them after supper tonight if you get peckish”; that sort of thing. And a thorough check of the wrappings. Sr Martin had passed on the instructions from Matron who agreed with Sergeant Walsh that it was worth the extra care. But she said frankly that she could not guarantee that something might not slip through. It would only take one sweet … and Bernie was not hospital-bound. He still went to the shops occasionally.

“Why not think of transferring him somewhere for a few weeks? A little holiday. People always assume that the retired and the elderly don’t deserve a holiday … but everyone needs a break now and again from the same surroundings, the same people.” Matron put the idea to Sergeant Walsh.

“Would there be guest houses, hostels, that kind of thing willing to take Bernie, do you think?”

“I know a very pleasant old place at Redcliffe … ‘Gentlemen’s Accommodation’ … I’m sure they would be prepared to overlook the fact that Bernie is not their usual kind of gentleman … so long as he behaves. And they aren’t expensive. Would you like me to book him in if he agrees?”

“Keep it very quiet. I’m not easy about this situation. And how can we get him there? Bus?”

“It’s my farewell dinner on Saturday week, just a very quiet little thing. I’m not much of a one for parties and I find cocktails much over-rated. I would like to invite you, Dennis, but I suppose you will say that Saturday nights are a busy time.”

“They are. But if you can tell me about what time you expect to get toasted—I’ll try to duck out.”

“Not before eight. The staff dining-room. But what I was going to say—I am not enamoured of the idea of taking him as a passenger with me to Brisbane. But I trust your intuitions. If you think his safety is at risk … then I think I can manage to take him with me and send him home again on the bus in a few weeks.”

“Ring me if there’s a problem with the guest house, if we need to change our plans, if Bernie jacks up … anything.”

As he drove away he wondered if he was over-reacting. Bernie had never particularly looked after his health. He probably deserved to have emphysema and a host of other debilitating conditions.

But Matron knew that Dr Leslie Davis had given him a fairly comprehensive medical and could not pick up on a specific problem. It might be the doctor’s own failure to treat a rather unpleasant old man with sufficient seriousness … but, equally, Dennis Walsh might be right in thinking that Bernie was being given something …

*

Never one to let grass grow under his feet, Sergeant Walsh rang Ali Deane in Winville to say, “Just a hunch, but a bloke called Ted Pettigrew lived there say forty years ago. He probably went to Brisbane. I don’t know what children he had but there might’ve been something in the paper there.”

“And you think he might be related to this Frank Pettigrew?”

“There are three points of interest here. He would have local knowledge. He was a photographer. And he was said to be involved in some sort of scandal, either when he was in the military or when he came home to Winville. I don’t have a line on it. But you might like to quietly fish around. Older people should remember him.”

“You know Doug is running us ragged here. The Pettigrews ran an agency. You know the sort of thing. They would book models, actors, magicians, singers … people who needed someone to organise the nuts and bolts in return for a commission. We’ve been told to check out everyone on their books—”

“I thought Doug was convinced it was an angry husband?”

“He is. But the order came from higher up. They want us to find someone who had a connection to the district if possible. But they also want us to find if there was any bad feeling, people who left the agency swearing they would get even, people who felt they were not handled

properly, people who say they missed out on assignments they should've got, anything like that. But Doug still swears that it was an angry husband … "

"That doesn't make sense. Why kill *both* the Pettigrews if *one* of them was carrying on with someone else?"

"I know. Still wish us luck that we can find a really good suspect on the agency's books."

"So—how many people on their books?"

"Past and present. Several thousand."

"Better you than me. But if you can find the time I still think Ted Pettigrew is worth a good look."

She did too. But to fly a hunch from the Buckton end would not endear her to her boss. And she couldn't very well ask Dennis to come to Winville and barge around asking people if they remembered Ted Pettigrew. It would reach Doug's ears in no time flat. And though she never underestimated an idea coming from Dennis Walsh she also felt it was very likely the perpetrator *did* have some connection to the Pettigrews via their agency …

The small lab in Winville was willing to give credence to her idea the lump of melted plastic might've been a video. But as it was not officially part of the crime scene it hadn't gone into the official stream with a priority tag …

A photographer.

A videomaker.

All in the family?

Case No. 4: Summer Time

Fiona went round to Buckton station soon after her arrival home. She had never particularly looked forward to driving into town after time away. It was home only in the most nominal sense of the word. But Garramindi had altered her view of Buckton. Slightly. Its failings were still obvious. But at least she understood and expected them …

And although she didn't precisely owe Dennis swift reassurance she felt it would be nice to be able to lay at least one small niggling worry to rest. She looked around for Constable Briggs. It wasn't something she could talk about in front of him.

Dennis Walsh came over to the counter. "Help you, ma'am?"

She smiled slightly. "Constable Briggs isn't around, is he?"

"No. He's around at the primary school." It had the feeling of throwing a lamb to a wolf, telling the young man to go round and deal with the latest complaint from the school principal, Nelson L'Estrange, but he had no regrets; the Nelsons of this life had to be dealt with swiftly and decisively, not avoided or postponed. "Did you want him?"

"Of course not! I just didn't want company when I came to talk to you about something private."

Dennis Walsh might not be Einstein but he had an enviable ability to home in on the meaning behind things. "It's bad news, isn't it?"

"If you mean—am I pregnant?—then the answer is no. You can relax."

He didn't respond immediately. It was hard to read his expression but she had the disconcerting thought that what she regarded as good news he genuinely regretted. But he just nodded. "That's fine then. I'll try to be more careful in the future." It sounded laconic, unimportant even, and she wondered later on if she had misread that sense of suppressed emotion. Or was it their surroundings? The stuffy little box that served Buckton as its station was hardly the place to share deeply-felt thoughts …

And more so when the door opened with some violence and virtually precipitated Detective Inspector Doug Towner into the room. Both Fiona and Dennis toyed with the thought he might have stopped to eavesdrop outside the door, that he had not realised the door was only pushed to as he lent a hand on it, not latched … and hoped, profoundly, that the idea was absurd …

"Thank you for your help, Sergeant Walsh." Fiona could sound brisk and businesslike when she chose. She nodded to Doug Towner and went out.

He watched her go and thought she had rather nice legs … and wondered why an attractive woman like that would bother with Sergeant Walsh … and said rather waspishly, "Still chasing skirt, eh, Dennis, instead of solving crimes."

"Yep. Passes the time."

"Then you'd better get back on to checking every farm along that road. I told you to do it—not shuffle it on to Constable Briggs."

"It's an odd little thing, mate, but I'm not here to do your donkey work."

"No. Last I heard you were here to keep your district safe. But as you've fallen down pretty badly on that aspect—a bit of hard yakka might go a small way to catching up—"

"As no one has seen fit to bring me up to speed on the investigation—doesn't seem much point to have me out there asking the wrong questions, not even much use me sending Guy Briggs back out either."

"Stop playing the fucking innocent with me, buster, and get out there and find out what strange cars have been seen around that road."

"Who says they came in a strange car? What's your evidence?"

For a moment Doug Towner simply stared at him, his face turning an unpleasant purplish-red, then he said angrily, "Don't come the smart-aleck with me! I tell you to do something—you drop everything and go and do it."

"Don't push it, Doug. You give me a list of queries you want asked—I'll do my best to follow up. But that's as far as it goes. And you've left it a bit late to go out there this evening—"

"I'm on my way to Garra. Got some other business to attend to. But I'm glad I dropped by. Always nice to know what's going on here. Or not going on as the case may be … "

He turned and went out without another word.

*

It struck Fiona Greehan as curious, even absurd, to be directed to the Small Claims court. Was it really a small claim? This struggle to get a whole life back on track? Her lawyer, Dale Kennedy, was waiting. Raelene and Kieran had also taken the day away from their work to support her, bring her to Winville, and sit behind her in the rather stuffy small room. She was grateful to them but it did nothing to remove the sense of niggling apprehension. If she lost the case she might find herself paying court costs over and above what she'd already paid Mr Kennedy to work on her case … if she lost the case Margaret would be free to act as the vindicated victim of a horrible smear campaign … if she lost the case it would become even more difficult to work in the district …

On her return to Buckton Brian Collyer and all her staff had seemed delighted to see her back; Brian saying that although it was good experience he wasn't sure that he really wanted to be the person who had to make all the final decisions. "Not while my children are still small," he said frankly. She assumed he meant he didn't feel he could give his full attention to his work. But over the next few days she noticed a subtle shift in his attitude. He had probably enjoyed the small increment in his power and prestige among the local community more than he realised. To lose it again was not as easy to accept as he implied …

Sister Jeannette Martin from Buckton Hospital came in, along with their wardsman, also Buckton's funeral director, Godfrey Waddell. They seated themselves several rows behind, unsure whether they were allowed to sit through everything or only their particular part in the proceedings. There was no sign of either Sergeant Stadler or Margaret Elliot. It was a long drive of a morning and Fiona saw no reason to begin worrying … yet. But time went by and there was still no sign of them.

Dale Kennedy ran several scenarios through his mind; the non-appearance of Ms Elliot might work to their benefit. But he knew how anxious his client already was; an adjournment would not worry him except for some minor re-scheduling but Fiona would find it hard to deal with. She had said as they came in "I have tried to psych myself up to stay calm". Now she looked at her watch and said, "How long do they normally wait?"

"We aren't responsible for the arrival of Ms Elliot … but Sergeant Stadler is our witness. If he doesn't turn up in a few more minutes I'll ring him and find out where he is. He might just be held up on the road. But Ms Elliot may well be trying some kind of bluff. Will we pursue her if she doesn't show … or simply drop the case … something like that."

As they discussed this quietly Dennis Walsh slipped into the back row and sat down. He knew Doug Towner had gone to see George Stadler but both men had remained tight-lipped on the result of that conversation. Towner had been the prime mover to keep the case against Julie Elliot and Brett Foley unsullied by any complications, even to the point of getting a colleague in Brisbane to try and pressure Ms Greehan into dropping her civil claim. So Towner wasn't too happy about this case going ahead. Whether he was capable of pressuring Sergeant Stadler to, in some way, help him abort the whole thing …

But just as Dale Kennedy was about to go out to try and get on to the station in Garramindi there was a rapid and unexpected development. The clerk came in and, after a swift glance around the suddenly expectant faces, said briskly, "The case will have to be adjourned. Police have taken Margaret Elliot into custody this morning on six counts of abduction, threats, and fraud. I don't have the details. But she won't be available to attend. I'm sorry about the inconvenience. If you would all vacate the court we will now—"

Even as the businesslike clerk continued speaking Raelene and Sr Martin were rising to leave; both aware of a sudden deep sense of relief. They wanted to support Fiona but they weren't sorry to be able to turn round and go home. Kieran stood up and followed Raelene out. Dale Kennedy also rose and went out with the clerk to discuss, briefly, the question of re-scheduling. The court would close for the Christmas break in a few more weeks. Mr Waddell felt vaguely superfluous as he stood up, looked around in his rather finicky shy way, then followed the others out.

Fiona, after that sudden flood of overwhelming relief—so it would no longer be up to her to pursue Margaret, to try and convince people she was not simply acting out of revenge or greed—found a different emotion replacing the first flight of euphoria. A kind of deep resentment. They had had all those weeks to act. Why this minute? And she had spent thousands on legal help to mount her case. Now there would probably be no way of recouping any of that. She could not dismiss a terrible feeling of being deliberately out-manoeuvered, of the hurt and humiliation of being left out of the loop. Again. Why had they left it till this last minute. Why had they wanted her to look like the bride abandoned at the altar. She struggled with a wave of confused emotions …

Someone came and sat down beside her. She felt she could not look up, let Dale see her struggling to keep the tears at bay; all she wanted was to be left alone for a few more minutes …

"I'm sorry," Dennis Walsh said at last, "they should've warned you. I should've. But I didn't trust Doug to follow it through this time."

She looked up then, the shimmer of tears, the heartbreak of a situation she had become powerless to control. After all her wasted time and money there was only the vaguest chance of justice somewhere down the track. She could see very clearly now what they had done. Margaret would be out of the way while Julie and Brett went on trial … and then the charges would quite likely be unostentatiously dropped. It would cost her more time and trouble and money to remount her damages claim …

Once again she would be the pawn in other people's agendas.

"I've been out-flanked, out-manoeuvered, out … everything." She said it flatly. Dennis was part of the opposing camp. He might appear not to be part of the all-in solidarity of police culture … but when the chips were down? He must've had *some* inkling of what they were planning to do …

She turned to pick up her handbag and briefcase and stood up. "If you will excuse me." She struggled to sound cool and brisk. "I will now have to go and pay six thousand dollars for my part in this farce."

He wanted to detain her, to say something which would somehow magically make things right for her. But he saw very clearly how Towner had out-manoeuvred him. And he wasn't sure that Fiona was in any mood to listen to any excuses he might make. Nor was there any comeback. Doug Towner would quite rightly say, "You kept asking us to charge that Elliot dame. So don't come

belly-aching about it now." But it was increasingly unlikely that Fiona would want to try and bring a new case against Margaret Elliot some time in the new year …

He got up heavily and went out of the now-empty court. All the people involved in the case had dispersed. He went on out to his car. Then a thought occurred to him. He got in and drove two blocks to the small office of the *Winville Courier*. Normally, if there were any kudos on offer, he was content to leave the Winville officers to beat their own drums and rouse up editorial interest in their own cases. But this was a different situation. The victim came from Buckton. The defendant came from Garramindi.

He went in and asked the girl at the front desk who doubled as the classified ad person if there was any chance of seeing the editor, John Daly. Times like these he knew he had advantages ordinary members of the public struggled for. Of course he could see John Daly. Go right on through …

Daly was a grizzled man in his sixties who still believed in liberal use of the red pen. He, like George Hickman in Buckton, saw no reason to think small country newspapers should be totally boring. He asked his small staff on the weekly for lively engaging writing. He didn't always get it but the paper had quite a good reputation. He was thinking of retiring. His desk these days usually contained a few brochures and pull-outs on coastal real estate. He wanted somewhere quiet and not over-priced. He had been searching for his perfect retirement place for years …

"Sergeant Walsh! How can I help you?" He had heard stories of various flavours round the traps on Buckton's senior man, some negative, some hinting that Dennis Walsh was a man worth cultivating.

Walsh said, "Can you spare me five minutes? I'll try and keep it snappy."

"Jump right in." Daly pulled up a spare chair and sat back in his own swivel chair to listen. The sergeant moved firmly through the complicated shenanigans which had overtaken Garramindi and its bank branch. He sketched in today's aborted case and said that Margaret Elliot had reportedly had six charges laid against her. He gave various possible contacts.

"What exactly are you asking me to do?" Daly finally put his pen and pad aside.

"I am not *asking* you to do anything. If the story doesn't interest you … well, I'll get on my way. I've got my own work waiting."

"Oh, it *interests* me all right. But I depend on Doug Towner for some inside guff at times. I take it the timing was his choice."

"Sure to be. Towner tried to pressure Ms Greehan into dropping her case. When she refused to do that it looks like he hunted round for another way to spike her guns. She spent at least six thousand dollars to bring this case to court. Now she is pretty well left in limbo."

"I gather she is quite well off. Bank manager and all that."

"And you think *that's* a good enough excuse? She was just trying to do her job and do the best she could for all the people who had been cheated by the bank in Garramindi. And she ended up being physically, verbally, and financially abused. If you think that's okay … enough said."

None of the gossip, John Daly realised, truly captured this side of Dennis Walsh; this sense of something grim and implacable. He could see the possibilities in the story. He could also see some quite large pitfalls. He finally compromised by saying, "Leave it with me. I'll see what I can do."

Dennis Walsh got up without another word and went out. Not for him any effusive thanks. It was only after he'd gone Mr Daly realised he had lost an ideal chance to get another perspective on the strange case of the two people found shot dead in an old farmhouse near Buckton. And Dennis Walsh might've felt he had a trade worth considering: a story on the Garramindi events in return for some inside guff from the Buckton end of the investigation …

He sat thinking for another minute then picked up the phone and tried to get through to Sergeant Stadler in Garramindi. Sergeant Stadler, though, was not answering his telephone.

*

George Stadler had set out for Buckton after charging Ms Elliot and sending her on to Winville. Doug Towner could do more to wreck his career than Sergeant Walsh ever could … but the thought of facing an angry Dinny Walsh … and he didn't like it that he had been used as a tool in someone else's agenda, something a bit sneaky and manipulative that didn't sit well. He knew

exactly what Towner was up to and even though it might simplify things he felt it was an underhand way to go about ensuring a conviction of two young bank robbers …

When Dennis Walsh returned from Winville it was to find George having a cup of coffee with Constable Briggs. "You've got some explaining to do, George," were his first words.

"It's not up to me to decide what to do, or when, not with Towner leaning on me—"

"Not that kind of explaining. I can see now exactly what game Towner is playing. But I think you owe Ms Greehan an explanation. She's just wasted all that money, all that time and trouble, so Doug can play games. I assume she's over at the bank. You might like to drop over." It might sound like a pleasant suggestion, Guy Briggs sometimes thought, if he tried to repeat something or pass it on later … but pleasant suggestion was not what George Stadler heard. He was a decent man and he sighed and said, "Yeah, I know, I know. But I dream of the old days before I ever knew you, Dennis." Constable Briggs permitted himself a small unnoticed smile. He understood perfectly. And yet, curiously, he didn't really want to go back to the time before he knew his current sergeant.

A couple of minutes later Stadler was sitting in the office of the bank's manager. Fiona Greehan looked, as she always did, beautifully groomed but he felt there was something tense and anxious under her poised exterior.

"How can I help you, Sergeant?"

"No. It's the other way around. I'm sorry you got caught up with … certain people playing … politics. But I don't get given a choice on when, where, and how I charge people when the big guns come to town."

"This has nothing to do with Dennis?"

"I think they left him out of the loop on purpose. I don't know for sure. But I was told not to contact him. Margaret is being held in Winville … but I don't s'pose that's much consolation to you."

"If Margaret gets charged with what she did to me—then that's all I ever really wanted. But if they got you to drop the charges back then … I don't feel very confident that they will see things through this time."

Janice Low came in with a tray and poured tea and passed Sergeant Stadler a biscuit. But after she had gone out again George Stadler said pessimistically, "You're probably right." He felt reasonably certain that it was the dropping of all charges against Margaret before which had given her the confidence to convince everyone she was the victim of Ms Greehan's spite. "But I think one thing has changed in Garra," he went on carefully. "People who believed Margaret are now re-thinking. They may not be more sympathetic towards you—but they do know that DI Towner would not have come to town if it was only Dennis making allegations. Everyone knows there's no love lost between those two. I just keep my head down when there's any chance they're going to have a bit of a stoush." Then he thought he probably should not be revealing such unedifying internal conflicts. Though most people, if not Ms Greehan, knew all this anyway.

After he had gone away, still looking rather weary and hangdog, she finished her own tea and went on with the afternoon's work. She could drop over to see Dennis when she closed up but for the moment she didn't want to even think any more on all this business. Even if Margaret was out of her sphere now there was still the case against Miriam MacFarlane, due to come up on Thursday, and the Garramindi publican would probably not take kindly to having to face court …

But people are always capable of surprising. She was just packing up to leave work a few minutes before six when she had a ring from Garramindi. It was Mrs MacFarlane on the phone. She said briskly, "I won't keep you, Miss Greehan, but I did want to apologise for all the stuff I've put you and your mother through. You know I really did believe Margaret. We've always got along. But I should never of believed all the stuff she told me about you. I've told George I won't contest the charges and I'll pay whatever is necessary to get your car fixed. But I'd also like to make it up to your mum. It was mean what we all did to her … and I'm not usually mean."

"Then I think you should write to her or ring her and tell her so."

It went a little way to soothing some of the pain. But she knew that she couldn't go back to her pre-Garra self. That person, and its degree of innocence, was gone for good.

*

It was after six when she finally dropped by the station. It had been a long day and she felt the deep need to go home and relax. But she had suspected Dennis of not playing fair, even let the accusation colour her reponse to him, and the thought niggled uncomfortably. He was on the phone saying to someone, "Get them to watch him like a hawk. Make extra sure he doesn't eat or drink anything they bring in, get him to wash his hands more often, and I guess we'll know … if he gets better." And then he said, "It really is good of you to take the old sod."

He hung up and turned to her. "How're you feeling now?"

"Not wonderful. But life goes on."

He opened his mouth to say something and the phone rang again. He said "Bloody heck!" and lifted it but after he'd listened for a minute he said, "I'm on my way. You've called the ambulance? Okay, stay calm."

He rang Guy Briggs and said, "Get back round here, pronto. We've got an emergency."

Fiona watched him hurriedly assemble some equipment, including a cone of 'witches' hats' from the storeroom, and she thought she wouldn't really like to be spoken to like that that. But it saved … misunderstandings … or did it?

"Can I help in any way?"

"Would you care to mind the phone? Just take messages. I shouldn't be more than a couple of hours."

"Okay." A couple of hours! Her mind revolted at the thought.

He hesitated, then reached out and touched her cheek with the back of his fingers. It was an oddly reassuring little gesture; more so coming from someone not given to little gestures. Then he was gone and she heard him out the front telling Constable Briggs to 'shift himself' and then the car driving away a minute later.

There was no room for thoughts of Fiona, of failed cases, aborted cases, when they reached the Burleigh turn-off. The place appeared to be a scene of carnage. "Park there!" It didn't take Walsh long to sum up the situation. Constable Briggs felt daunted and overwhelmed. Where to start? The ambulance had beaten them by a minute or two and the two officers were already checking people, with the back doors open, and stretchers waiting.

"Go round and get a quick take on the situation from them all. Then radio Winville. We'll need a traffic bod to check—"

"What shall I ask them?"

It always bothered Guy Briggs that he could not think quickly on his feet. When it came to writing reports and letters he felt he managed quite well. But he fumbled to come up with clear incisive questions.

"Just—'What the bloody heck happened here?'—you're not Shakespeare. So get going." Even as he spoke he was going towards the vehicle that had caught the brunt of the incident. A car turning off to Burleigh had obviously been traveling too fast and had fishtailed in the gravel verge, caught a glancing blow to an old stump there, then hauled round on to the side road but on the wrong side and smashed head-on into an old farm utility. The car traveling closely behind it on to the Burleigh road had run into the back of the car at the centre of the mess and pushed it away on to the other side of the road. The old utility had caught fire. Its driver, an elderly farmer called Terry Mitchell, had managed to jump clear before his engine went up in flames. But he had had his old cattle-dog-cross tied in the back with a strong collar and a short heavy chain. The dog, naturally, had tried to leap from the tray. Mr Mitchell had managed to undo the collar but too late. The dog now lay, scorched and limp on the roadway.

"Throttled him," the old man said gloomily. "No way for an old dog to go."

"More likely a heart attack." Throttling would've been a slow business, even at the end of that chain and in that moment of panic. At least heart would've been a less traumatic way to go. But as Dennis looked down at the old animal sprawled out there the thought came to him: was the dog actually dead or just shocked into a comatose state. He bent down and placed a hand on the still warm body. It was only a tiny chance, and he hated the thought, but he got right down beside the dog and lifted his muzzle slightly and proceeded to give him mouth-to-mouth, interspersed with some gentle pressure on the mangy old chest.

Terry Mitchell watched him, his mouth dropped open in astonishment, then he came round the other side and said, “Tell me what to do.”

While both of them worked over the old creature, forgetful of the other waiting problems, Guy Briggs went on conscientiously jotting down what the four young people involved had to say for themselves. Then he watched them finally helped in to the waiting vehicle for the trip to Buckton Hospital. All of them were up and about though shaken and bleeding …

It was Terry Mitchell who suddenly shouted “He’s alive!” Then the old dog opened a rheumy eye a crack, before allowing it to fall closed again. But in another couple of minutes he made a groggy attempt to rise.

“I don’t believe it! I just don’t believe it.” Afterwards the old man was grateful that it was Dennis Walsh who saw him with tears in his eyes … not that young whippersnapper of a constable. “I didn’t know you could do that sort of thing. Bloody amazing.”

Walsh turned away to hawk and spit. “Not recommended. Don’t know when the bloody old sod cleaned his teeth last. But I reckon he’ll make it. Get Vince Bromby to check that it’s only his coat got singed.”

Mr Mitchell wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry. Instead he looked down at his old dog and ran a calloused hand over the scruffy head.

“What d’you call him?”

“T-rex. My grandson named him. I just call him Rex.”

“Have you got someone who can come and pick you up?”

“I’ll get John Binnie to come round to my place instead. I was going round to see him. We play cards, have a bit of a yarn, now and again. The dog likes to come with me but I’ve got … I had some eggs on the front seat for Dora … ”

“Might be better if you give it a miss tonight. Constable Briggs will need to take a short statement from you. And looks like your hands got a bit burnt.” The old man looked down at his hands in surprise. Then he nodded. “Go and get in the back seat of the car. He can run you into the hospital and take the dog round to Bromby.” As he spoke he went over to the police car, opened the rear door, let them in, then set about blocking off the road on both sides of the accident. It would inconvenience people on the Burleigh road, though there wasn’t likely to be many wanting to get by, but people on the main road could still get through. He gave instructions to Guy Briggs.

“And who was driving?” He pointed to the car partly sandwiched between the other two.

“Damien Scully says his girlfriend was driving, that he let her drive.”

“Like fucking hell she was! You’ll need to get another statement from him. And tell him perjury is a serious offence.”

Guy Briggs drove away a couple of minutes later. He wasn’t sure whether to try and chat with the old man and his dog or maintain a formal silence until he had managed to get a brief statement. He always agonised over such small details. It wasn’t only that getting things wrong could bring down a painful rebuke. It was a kind of bone-deep sense of doubt. It wasn’t shyness but more a profound sense of unease with people, any people …

And it would be a long night. Of course there was no point in trying to write about police and crime and mystery without understanding the inner nuts and bolts. But sometimes he toyed with the idea of giving up on writing procedurals and writing fantasy instead; swords and sorcery and creating court intrigue might be a doddle compared to what went on in the police …

Dennis Walsh was also considering fantasy as he went to and fro to search the road for the skid marks, the way the cars had left grooves in the loose gravel, the way that the impact had caught Terry Mitchell’s car, surprise that it had burnt out so swiftly, and something about the third car. Who were these young people in a car he felt reasonably sure he recognised? Family? Relatives? And could he finally prove that Damien Scully was not only a menace on the roads (and elsewhere) but constantly tried to get other youngsters to take the rap for him. Prick that balloon once and for all.

It was getting dark. But he continued to stand there looking round at the scene. The girl with Damien might not be so keen on covering for him, or scared enough to say what she was told, if she

realised Damien would be leaving town—in an ambulance, in a paddy wagon, even under his own steam; it didn't really matter—and with luck not coming back again …

In the equation too was Damien's dad, Chad Scully, who had been stupid enough to let his son ride roughshod … was it that Chad was frightened of his son, as sometimes seemed to be the case, or had Damien cleverly enlisted his mother, other relatives, to outflank his father … or both?

It seemed far-fetched to wonder if Damien might also have played a role in those deaths up on Owen Binnie's farm. They, meaning Winville, had certainly homed in on those lads that worked there but they had decided, apparently, the only connection the boys might have was to help themselves to something from the crime scene and even that idea wasn't showing much energy when it came to getting up and running. He didn't peg Damien as violent. If that pig had been alive he would not have thought of killing it and putting the carcass in Mr Molloy's just-bought New Holland header. He would always get someone else to carry the gun or the chisel or the blame …

Two officers turned up from Winville an hour later. "Thought it was a matter of dead bodies all over the place," one of them said, with a faint sense of relief. Ray Gould didn't get to see many serious accidents around the area and he was always deeply grateful to other people for taking away the human factor (if necessary in an ambulance) and leaving him to worry about speed and angle of impact …

The two men basically agreed with Walsh's assessment of the sequence of events. But in the end they said the problem could be safely left till the morning. It wasn't a highway, a bridge, a level crossing, just a quiet side road.

"Just before we pack up for the night, I think we've got two small problems," Dennis said. "Damien Scully is saying his girlfriend was driving his dad's car. I very much doubt that. And I am a bit uneasy about this third car. I'd like to know who owns it—and if the young people had permission to drive it—before we wrap everything up. There's just a small chance it was stolen."

Constable Briggs drew into the verge again and came over to join them. The area was now more clearly marked off and the old utility stood as a wreck squarely in the headlights of the other vehicles. He had done all he'd been asked. He only hoped he would not be put on to writing up the details at this time of night. Betty Cronk complained if he stayed up late, came in late, left lights on. And he didn't like the way she snooped around, always trying to get him to talk about what he was currently working on, yet maintaining the sanctimonious view that she alone of Bucktonites did not gossip. It could be worse. But he sometimes debated on the possibility of moving. Of course it would make for bad feeling. But there must be more relaxed places in which to live and write …

It was very late when they got back to Buckton station. Fiona had long since given up and gone home, leaving the front light on and pulling the door closed. She had left a note in her neat writing: 'As at 9.10 p.m. 3 messages.' None of them sounded urgent, the last one being from Mavis Barnard at the service station, and Walsh debated briefly on whether to try and catch her then left the problem to be solved, with luck, in the morning. It might just be Mavis wanting to invite him over to dinner … but she would hardly ask that that be treated as a 'confidential matter' … then again that might only be Fiona's more highly-developed sense of treating anything here as private.

But he detailed Briggs to fill in the basics now while he went to his list of numberplates, makes of car, other useful information he kept ready to hand. The third car was down on his list as belonging to old Mrs Grundy … and, so far as he knew, she had no grandchildren. Had she allowed young relatives, neighbours, children of friends to borrow it—or had she sold it recently or had these youngsters helped themselves to go joyriding? But he couldn't go knocking her up at this hour to get that question answered.

*

Mavis Barnard was always up early and it was no hardship for her to receive a visit from Sergeant Walsh before breakfast. "Dennis! You got my message?" She waved him towards a pot of coffee and a mug in the small office at the garage.

"I got a message. Fiona was being very discreet by the sound of it."

"I didn't like to give out any details, not when I may be way off the mark … and the less spread around the better. And I told the poor woman to go on home."

"So what is it that you wanted to tell me?"

Mavis was a fairly direct person herself but she found the question hard to respond to. “I am sure it is nothing, Dennis, it was just something I noticed. But I don’t like to tittle-tattle. And you know I’m not one to—to—”

“Mavis! For God’s sake—spit it out!”

He didn’t sound upset but she said in a rush, “Well, it was a car that came in here. I filled it up. Noel had gone on home. And I was standing here,” she mimed the action of filling a petrol tank in the side of a vehicle, “and I noticed there was a stain in the back seat of the car.”

“A stain? What sort of a stain?”

“At first I just assumed someone had spilled something, a soft drink maybe, but it hadn’t run backwards down the seat. It was like … someone had been sitting there … and … they had wet themselves.”

“Happens. Why did you think it was important? Whose car was it?”

“That is the odd part.” Mavis showed every sign of shying away from a direct answer again. “I don’t like to suggest … I mean … ”

“It was Buckton’s most respectable citizen—whoever that might be.”

“We-ell, yes, just about. You see … it was Father Meagher’s car.”

“And he doesn’t usually cart people round in the back seat of his car—or stop them going to the toilet or make them so scared they piss themselves—”

“That’s about it, Dennis.” She sounded relieved to have the whole thing put like that. “But I didn’t like to say anything to him. And it wasn’t very noticeable. Just that I was standing there and the light was shining in, maybe, just made it more obvious … ”

“Do you remember when this was?”

“It was three days ago. I couldn’t decide whether to tell you … it seemed such a small thing … and he seems quite a nice man … always in a rush but friendly enough … ”

“Okay. Thanks, Mavis. I’ll check it out. I won’t mention you unless I need to. Did Doug Towner come by and ask you and Noel if you’d seen any strange vehicles around the district?”

“No. Not to me. And I’m sure Noel would’ve mentioned it.”

If Towner was still expecting, still waiting, and it didn’t surprise Dennis Walsh, for other people to do the footwork for him then it didn’t seem necessary to run this query past him. Towner was now convinced that all the bullets recovered would solve the case. They might. But Dennis Walsh always began to worry when Towner showed his usual fixation on one aspect of a crime. The difference here being that the bullets, and the gun they were fired from, probably a Smith & Wesson .38 handgun, had more substance than Doug’s idea about an affair gone wrong …

It had led to lots of wild rumours about a gangland killing; the gossip that some kind of automatic had been used. Most farms had a rifle or two but very few had anything either more powerful or more unusual. It suggested the perpetrators had brought their weapon or weapons with them, had come here specifically to execute two … ‘stool pigeons’ was one idea floating around …

And unlike other crimes in the district it had led to excited debate untinged with fear; the person or persons responsible obviously weren’t local and had gone on to … wherever such people normally resided. No one felt personally threatened by the horror of the killings. It was clearly something to do with organised crime and they knew from experience that all their crime was disorganised …

Winville had said they would arrange for the vehicles to be towed when the investigation of the accident scene was completed. Guy Briggs could get more detailed statements this morning from all the people involved. Dennis Walsh hesitated then said ‘what the heck’ and went straight round to see Father Meagher. It wasn’t his case and they would be expecting him out at the mess at the Burleigh turn-off … but he wanted to give this car story a quick check, not have it cluttering up his thoughts for the rest of the day.

Father Michael Meagher and Father Colgan were sitting down to a late breakfast when he turned up on their doorstep. Their housekeeper, Carmen Cavanagh, brought out another cup and saucer and plonked it down before leaving them to talk.

“It’s about your car.” Walsh saw no reason to waste words.

“They’ve found the people? That *is* good news. They didn’t sound at all hopeful.”

"What people?"

"The people who stole it, of course."

For a moment Dennis Walsh felt they were running two parallel conversations. Then the whole thing seemed to slide sideways and coalesce. "Would you mind running through the complete thing for me."

"Not very much to tell you. I arrived in Toowoomba for the retreat late Friday, parked my car, went inside with my bag, and didn't give it another thought till Sunday afternoon when I suddenly realised it wasn't there. I rang the police. They rang me back about an hour later to say it was in a supermarket car park about two kilometres away. They asked me a few questions. Then I was allowed to take it and drive home. They thought it might be children, teenagers I mean, joyriding. It did not seem to have sustained any damage."

"You say—late Friday. Which Friday? What sort of time?"

"Just after six, I would think. We had a meal. Then joined for prayer and discussion. Two weeks ago."

"And what did the police say?"

"Not much. They said they checked their computer in case it had been involved in a traffic incident, a crime of any sort. But nothing came up. According to them."

"Did they check for fingerprints, check the mileage, that sort o' thing?"

"Not so far as I know. You could check. I spoke with two of them. A middle-aged man and a younger woman. They did tell me their names but I'm afraid I've forgotten. In the city. Neil Street. Not a suburban station."

"Well, if you'd write down the make, model, and numberplate for me."

Father Meagher got up to go for a notepad and pen. Father Colgan said in his dry way, "I wonder if you've seen the *Courier* this morning, Dennis? You feature … in passing." The old man passed the newspaper across from where it had been resting at the end of their table. Dennis Walsh took the paper and got up from the table. He wasn't hopeful of Daly delivering anything but it was always worth a try when something still needed to be flushed out.

There was nothing wrong with Daly's article about the Margaret Elliot saga … except for his take on Fiona. The implication that she was a spoilt rich bitch was unmistakeable. Daly likened her to 'Queen Marie Antoinette' playing at milkmaids while the poor starved; someone totally removed from the everyday concerns of most country people. Father Colgan, watching closely, thought the phrase 'swell with anger' was curiously apt. Although Dennis Walsh made no comment it wasn't hard to see that he was furious. And something else the older man felt which might be dismay, even despair, if that wasn't descending into melodrama.

Dennis put down the paper and went outside where he was joined a minute later by Father Michael. "Right, let's look at this car of yours." It contained no apparent emotion.

It was a red Hyundai, quite new but a little dusty.

"Have you washed it since then?"

"No."

"Have you touched the door handles to the rear seat?"

"No. At least I don't think so."

"And do you have any idea of the mileage increase?"

"Not really, no. I'm afraid I rarely look."

"Did you buy it new?"

"No. But only a year old. I'd have the mileage at that point written somewhere. I could probably average out my distances since then."

"You do that." There was a very faint stain as though something had soaked into the fabric covering of the left rear seat. It would not be noticeable to the casual glance. "Do you ever transport people in your car?"

"Occasionally. But I haven't since I got it back."

"Did you notice any sort of smell when you got it back?"

"Cigarette smoke certainly. I thought there might be something else. Food maybe. Perfume. I drove home with the front windows open and it's been quite okay since then."

"Then I'll have to ask Winville to do a thorough forensic examination as soon as possible. Can you use the other car?"

"Yes. Of course. But if Toowoomba wasn't worried … what are you implying?"

"I'm not sure yet. But don't touch anything. And you'll need to have your fingerprints taken just to eliminate them."

He couldn't really see Father Michael transporting people around, he gave the impression of an open and honest person, and yet there was something very slapdash about the whole response … Joe Blow might not receive five star treatment when his car disappeared. But a priest usually did. He wasn't sure if his unease was focused on that aspect or something less tangible. Though a car returned undamaged would have a lower priority than one bashed around, parts stolen, maybe involved in a hit-and-run …

"Could I use your phone to ring Winville … and to tell Constable Briggs to go on out to Burleigh."

"Help yourself."

Detective Sergeant Greg Sullivan answered and said to Walsh's request, "Towner isn't going to like it. He's still fuming that you haven't got any sightings for him to run with. But he says they've got fifteen bullets so that will solve the case. I haven't twigged to the significance of the fifteen but I s'pose someone will enlighten me."

"It does suggest the perp was very confident. If we're looking at a World War Two model like the 'Victory' then it only took six rounds so he had to re-load twice … and we might be looking at someone who souvenired a weapon after the war … "

"There's that," Greg Sullivan said without enthusiasm.

"And I've got a car. That should cheer Doug up. I want the full treatment soon as you can send Ray Gould or someone. And it's a car no one would query."

A priest out and about in the parish, visiting the sick, the newborn, the housebound, even maybe out late in case of accidents or illness. And if the car was seen parked away from a farmhouse people would simply assume the priest had stopped to take a leak beside a country road. Nothing remarkable about his presence. But it implied that the Pettigrews were carried from Toowoomba out to the Binnie farm … and that someone knew both of the existence of the old house and of Father Meagher's movements. The type of killing suggested sophisticated planning, organised crime, something serious, not an old .22 from someone's shed. But that might be deliberate so as to divert attention away from Buckton …

After Father Meagher had promised to dig out any documents to do with the car and bring them around Mrs Cavanagh came to the door to see Sergeant Walsh out. She said quietly as she held the screen door open for him, "You may have heard already. But people are worrying about the youngest Maxwell child. Diane brings him to work with her some days and leaves him home with his older brother other days. I don't like to tell tales out of school but … I don't think any child should have that many cuts and bruises."

He nodded. He had never felt comfortable with the Maxwells; husband, wife, children. But there were limits to what he could do to keep children safe around his area. "Do you know the child's name?"

"Alex, I think. Alexander. He'd be about five."

"And is there any pattern? What days she brings him. That sort of thing."

"I've never noticed him with her on a Friday. But I don't know if that is significant, or I simply didn't see him … "

"Okay. I'll see what I can do." The day was starting to get away from him. The hospital. A brief, but tough, talk with Damien Scully. Get out to Burleigh. And there was still that question of the third car involved in the accident. He had glanced at his notes last night when he was tired and wondered later if he had mixed things up. According to his notes the car was registered to a Mrs Grundy but when he'd mentioned it to Mavis she'd said immediately she knew for certain Myrtle Grundy had sold it to Bob Johnson, George Johnson's brother, only last week. George was the long-time barman at the Coolibah Hotel. Bob had been staying there for the last month and helping out.

Unless his brother was a very different personality it was unlikely the boys had been given permission to drive it …

Boys. Yes, of course. He knew he'd seen them somewhere. Owen Binnie normally gave his lads an evening off to come into town. In this case to go out to Burleigh with Damien and his girlfriend and have a barbecue, to do what they liked within reason. There was now strong local sentiment to the effect that the boys were no longer welcome in town. So where did Bob Johnson fit into this picture?

"Wait a minute!" He said it aloud as he reached his car. "Those kids are only sixteen. Bob would know they were under-age. If they pinched the car and went joyriding … then why the heck haven't I heard from George or Bob … or do they both start their day in mid-morning?" But he kept to his plan to go to the hospital first.

It was Sr O'Brien who came out to meet him. "Just the man I'm looking for. It's bad news, I'm afraid. Bernie Goodrick died about an hour ago." He promptly put Damien Scully and Bob Johnson to the back of his mind and said, "There'll need to be an autopsy then."

"Dr Davis says no, that he can attest to Bernie's heart being in pretty poor condition."

"How did he die?"

"He got very tired, didn't want to eat, didn't do much at all, and then he said he had pains in his back, and arms, even his legs. A bit nauseous. Classic heart attack case, according to Leslie Davis."

"And you were satisfied with that diagnosis?"

"Ye-es, I think I was. We have been very careful, Dennis. He hasn't been eating any junk. And the last couple of days he hasn't had any visitors."

"I see. But I'd still like to see an autopsy. I'd like to see some basic tests just to be sure … " But even as he spoke he knew he would not be able to come up with a good enough argument to get any action. John Goodrick had a very good reason to want Bernie out of the way. John Goodrick had virtually thrown his illegitimate son Brett Foley to the wolves—if the police hard behind him could be so described. John Goodrick had discussed the question of Brett's whereabouts with a curious weighing-up kind of expression. Throw Dennis a sop, send him off in a certain direction, divert him from looking too closely at … at what? He had always considered Bernie to be the trade-off in that look. But what if John Goodrick was up to some other thing, some scam, some cheat, which he didn't want observed any too closely?

Kathleen O'Brien said seriously, "I know. I'd like to know if there was any poison being fed to him. But I can't justify asking for anything. And we're getting a new nursing director on Thursday. I doubt if she will want to start her career here by rocking any boats."

He seemed to put Bernie aside for the moment. "I came to see Damien Scully as a matter of fact.'

"You're out of luck there too, Dennis. He went home late last night. Nothing on him but a few scratches and bruises."

"Okay, I'll catch him at home. Not to worry."

"*I'm* not worrying, Dennis. But you don't look too brilliant."

"I'm fine. But I don't s'pose Fiona will be when she reads the story in the *Courier*. Anyway, I'd better keep moving."

It was an understatement really. Fiona might express her gratitude to him now and then … but the simple fact was that what he did in hs public role he would do for anyone being attacked or abducted; even people he had good reason to hate like Cherry Morton. When it came to his relationship with Fiona he could not hide from the equally simple fact that he often made her life more difficult, more humiliating, more full of unnecessary worries … and he couldn't keep hoping she would always overlook such things …

And there were the more basic things. Asking a beautiful woman to find a battered old sod starting to run to seed an attractive proposition as a lover. (He did not doubt that her other, younger, lovers had been more exciting, fitter, nicer to look at, more innovative, less inhibited … a better deal all round.) Wanting her to overlook the lack of welcome and comfort in his spartan house and lifestyle. Hoping she would always accept the constant interruptions. As he got back into the car he

knew the list could be added to without difficulty. Even now Doug Towner was probably spreading salacious stories round Winville in which Fiona featured as the person crazy enough to even consider having a baby with him … if he wasn't reading out snippets from the *Courier's* article and erupting into snide laughter.

The day did not improve. Mrs Scully said her husband had taken Damien into Winville to be seen by 'a decent doctor' and wouldn't be back for several hours. And that he had a lot of girlfriends and she didn't know which one he was out with last night. She tried to imply that Damien, unlike certain other men around town, always had dozens of girls begging to go out with him. The only comfort in her tirade was the careless sideswipe at Leslie Davis. He hadn't much faith in the doctor either.

"Right oh. But you tell him from me, when he gets back, that if he has any idea of going on hiding behind this girlfriend instead of taking responsibility for his own wild driving, I'll take him apart and leave the bits lying about the yard. I've just about had it up to here with the little bastard always getting other kids into trouble then trying to weasel his way out of it."

Mrs Scully shot him an angry defiant look but didn't respond to this criticism of her son. He thought he might as well try the Maxwells. Chances were they were away for the day and he wouldn't be able to prove anything anyway …

But as he pulled out on to the side road again he noticed Buckton's only commercial organic gardener, Kaylee Williams, walking along the verge with two carry bags of flowerpots. On an impulse he pulled in in front of her and stopped to call out, "Would you like a lift?"

She looked surprised, then chuffed. "Okay. Thanks." She wasn't sure if he was purely being friendly or whether some hard questions on something were likely to follow. As he drove slowly through town and up her street he said, "Do you ever do any landscape gardening?"

"Not really. I'd like to. But there isn't anywhere round here—"

"It's my yard. I never seem to have time to do much with it. But if you'd like to give me a quote on putting in a front hedge, a few native shrubs and flowers out the front, maybe a bird bath—and a bit of a vegie patch out the back I'd appreciate that. We could maybe discuss it Saturday morning. But if you'd like to drop in any time and just see what might be done to brighten the place up a bit … "

"Okay. I'd enjoy doing that." After he'd dropped her off at her small market garden and she watched him drive away she realised she *would* enjoy doing something like that. But she would need a bit more guidance as to the actual plants. Were there things he particularly liked, didn't like, did he want something fairly formal or a bush garden …

Tackling the Maxwells was not something anyone, even a masochist, was likely to enjoy. But he put his own place to the back of his thoughts as he turned in the farm gate and drove up the long lane.

Diane Maxwell was a big woman, an Earth Mother type at first glance, but something tough and faintly sleazy at second glance. She had produced five children. She looked to be about to produce a sixth.

"I'd like to see your children, Mrs Maxwell." No point in wasting breath. He wanted to be done and gone and asking Bob Johnson some key questions …

"Then you're out of luck. They're not here."

"Where are they?"

"Wouldn't you like to know."

"I would. So spit it out."

She gave him a long considering look with something stubborn and still simmering with anger at the back of it.

"They're not here. They've gone to Winville."

"All of them?"

"Some of them."

"Where are the others?"

"At school."

"So what are they doing in Winville?"

"Wouldn't you like to know. But it's none of your business so you're not getting anything out of me."

"Suit yourself. I just want your little boy to be safe. Who dobbed you in?"

For a long pause she was silent. Then an idea occurred to him. "You thought I'd dobbed you in, didn't you? I might've—if I'd known sooner."

"It wasn't me!" The anger suddenly seemed to over-ride any other consideration. "I didn't know what he was doing!"

"Who was?"

"Johnny!"

For a moment he felt lost. Who the hell was Johnny? And then the second piece of the puzzle fell into place. Johnny Maxwell, her teenage son, the one said to be … but as he rarely impinged on the life of the town no one really knew exactly what Johnny was.

"You made the choices, Mrs Maxwell, to leave your youngest son with your oldest son."

"I couldn't take him with me all the time. They said I wasn't doing the job properly when I took him."

"Who said?"

"St Monny's. That Mary Davidson. Pick, pick, pick! What the hell am I s'posed to do? Give up the job?"

"Did she complain about the child?"

"She must of. The bitch."

"Okay. I'll look into it. But if the child is not safe here … then it doesn't matter what you did or didn't do to him."

As he drove away he felt a growing sense of disillusionment. What could he hope to do about a family like this; from generation to generation they would go muddling on, sometimes downright callous and cruel, at other times simply stupid, dirty, untidy, unwittingly careless. Everything about them was flogged, the land, the animals, the children, and there still wasn't enough money around to get anything properly fixed and back on track. Now they called it 'intergenerational dysfunction' but what help was it to give it a fancy name when it still came down to this business of trying to deal with the mess? And there would be another child to add to the mess in another month or two … He didn't blame Mary Davidson, if she was the one who had contacted the welfare people to get the children assessed, but what kind of gormless organisation kept encouraging people like Diane Maxwell to go on having babies when they couldn't give the ones they already had some love and care and security … It seemed to be about time to insist that Mary Davidson, Michael Meagher, even old Father Colgan, took some hands-on responsibility for this family …

When he got back to town and called into the hotel it was to be told by Bill Borrie that Bob had just gone round to the station to report his car stolen.

"Tell him it's out at the Burleigh turn-off with its front end mashed. Why the heck didn't he get on to me last night to tell me it'd gone walkabout?"

"No. He lent it to a girl. She spun him a hard luck story of how she needed to get to Burleigh to see someone and how she would never forgive herself if she didn't get out there to see this dying friend. I didn't hear all the details. Big sob story. Bob handed over the keys. When the car wasn't back when we closed up he thought maybe she'd decided to stay the night."

"With this mythical friend? She wanted to go to a barbecue, for crying out loud. Who was with her?"

"Another girl. Tansy someone."

He went back to the station. Guy Briggs had returned and was now reassuring Bob Johnson his car was safe, just a bit the worse for wear.

"How many girls, Bob?" Dennis Walsh wasn't in the mood for shilly-shallying.

"Four. Or so they said. I only saw two."

"Then you're a fool. They took Owen Binnie's delinquents with them."

Bob Johnson, normally a cheerful ruddy-cheeked clone of his brother, blanched slightly. "She was a very pretty girl, Dennis."

"I don't care if she was. She still pulled the wool over your eyes. You'd better talk to Noel Barnard about getting it towed. But none of that explains where the other girl got to. Did they drop her off somewhere?"

It obviously pained Mr Johnson to have to say he had no idea. When he'd gone again Guy Briggs was instructed to get home addresses, if necessary from the High School as they were possibly past students, for both Kelly Osborn and Tansy Somebody-or-Other. Kelly had been treated in hospital last night, then picked up by her father and taken home. But no one had thought to ask her which car she was driving or how she'd come to be on the road to Burleigh. And they hadn't known there was another girl …

*

Kelly, or at least her father who taught Maths at Buckton High, wasn't hard to find. In fact the whole family turned up in the lunch hour. Dennis Walsh was still smouldering but he only said, "Take a chair," to Mr and Mrs Osborn and to Kelly, "You'd better stand, young lady. You are in big big trouble."

"It was only for fun. I didn't mean to damage the car." She looked to be on the verge of tears.

"Have you got a driving licence?"

"Yes, I got it a few months ago. When Sergeant Ramsay was here."

"Okay. So why did you ask Mr Johnson to lend you his car?"

"Why shouldn't I?" She suddenly seemed to spark up. "He never leaves us alone if we go in there. Tansy and I just went in to have a shandy. But he comes over and says can he take us somewhere, all that sort of stuff. Not nasty. But he never understands we don't want to go anywhere with him. Damien asked us if we'd like to go to a barbecue earlier on, before he came over and started offering us more drinks. We thought that would be a good way to get away from him. We said we'd been invited and we'd have to get on the road if we were going to hitch a lift to get there. And he said we could take his car. He got out the keys and sort of dangled them and said 'how about a kiss' and I thought what the heck, it isn't like he's disgusting or anything, just doesn't get the message. So we both gave him a kiss and we went out and Damien was there with those two kids that work for Mr Binnie and he said what say Tansy went with him … and I could drive Bob's car and take Ben and Nathan. And Damien went really fast and he hit that old man head on … and I couldn't stop in time and we ran into the back of him."

She looked back to her parents, both sitting with disapproving looks on their faces, and then faced Sergeant Walsh again. She probably felt she was between a rock and a hard place.

"And this Tansy. Who is she?"

"Just someone I met. She works at the supermarket." The disapproving looks deepended. She tossed her red curls and said defiantly, "I like her."

"So where is she now?"

"I don't know. I guess she went home."

"Where does she live?"

"Out that way. She said she lived up Gardener's Road. I don't know which place."

"Right, well, let's get one thing clear. You were driving Mr Johnson's car with Ben and Nathan sitting where, front or back?"

"In the back."

"And Tansy got into Damien's car? Was he driving or was she?"

"He was. I don't think she can drive. She gets a lift into work with one of the men at the butter factory."

"So Damien was driving like a madman and hit Mr Mitchell head-on and Tansy left the scene of the accident and you came behind them and ran into Damien's car. Is that correct?"

"I guess so."

"What happens now?" Mr Osborn said after a look at his watch.

"Damien Scully is saying his girlfriend was driving his car when the accident happened. Were you or Tansy ever Damien's girlfriend?"

"Not really. I've been out with him a few times. Nothing serious. I don't think he knows Tansy."

"Are you saying," Mr Osborn said with an edge to his voice, "that the Scully boy is trying to say my daughter caused the accident?"

"Yep. That's about it."

It suddenly struck Dennis Walsh that it might now be possible to sit back and let the maths teacher sort out Damien Scully once and for all.

"And are you going to charge Kelly with anything?"

"Not unless the accident investigator from Winville has clear evidence that she was over the speed limit or a danger to the public. Personally, I don't think she should be in charge of a car. But with luck she'll soon leave town and do her next bit of smashing on someone else's patch. But what I am concerned about is this other girl. No one mentioned her being at the scene so she wasn't searched for. If she staggered off somewhere suffering from concussion or bleeding … God knows what shape she is in now."

It did not seem to have occurred to Kelly Osborn to wonder if Tansy was safe. Now she put a hand up to her mouth and began chewing on her knuckles. Walsh showed no sign of sympathy. "Well, you'd better go round and have a confab with Bob Johnson. If he is stupid enough to lend his car to a hopeless driver like Kelly here I guess he deserves to get it back in a mess. But you're not out of the woods yet so it might be an idea to go round and mend some fences in that area at least."

After they had gone out, all looking pretty glum, Dennis Walsh looked to see what likely places were out along Gardener's Road. If she had fallen into a ditch or a culvert near the turn-off it was likely someone would have found her. But what if she'd gone away along that gravel road or cut through paddocks …

*

The side road received very little traffic. It had some trees scattered along the verges and several visible farmhouses … including that old place of Graham Binnie's. He had left it to his brother John when he died. But his wife's son from her first marriage had turned up with a post-dated will which said it belonged to him and John only got a few family items. As there was no indication that Graham had ever had anything to do with the young man who was grown up before he even married Esther John had got Charles Mather on to having a closer look at the superceding will. Was it genuine? Could it have been signed under duress?

As most of the to and fro legal arguments had happened elsewhere it wasn't a problem for Buckton police—except for occasional claims by neighbours that they had seen lights in Graham's old house and wondered if the stepson had moved in. The farm was showing clear signs of neglect. The roadside paddocks were now masses of wild turnip with pockets of scotch thistles in the dips. And neighbouring farmers were none too happy with the clouds of thistledown floating in their direction …

"I wonder … " Dennis Walsh had rung the supermarket and found that they did have a girl there called Tansy Smith but she hadn't come in to work today. He nosed the police vehicle up the long rutty lane. But the yards and sheds and house all seemed deserted. The house had padlocks on all the doors but there was a window open into the kitchen.

He knocked and knocked. Then hunted round for something to take his weight and let him climb in that window. A 44-gallon drum by the outside toilet had nothing in it but some rusty water. It would have to do. But it was a struggle to get in and drop to the floor in the little pantry alcove. If the mysterious Tansy got in and out this way then she was a budding gymnast.

He found her in one of the dusty bedrooms; a little slight thin girl with frightened eyes. He wasn't surprised that she was lying down. She had cut her head open on something and bound it up with what looked like an old tea-towel but the blood had soaked through this and she had gradually sunk into what appeared to be a stupor under the weight of pain and shock and loss of blood. He went over and took her pulse. Still alive. He wrapped a grubby towel round her head, went back through the house and smashed down the old wood of the back door, then carried her out to the waiting car.

It was beginning to feel like a very long day.

Case No. 5: A Proposition

Kieran Dobbs tended to let life run quietly past him, enjoying his DPI work, his easygoing relationship with Raelene, his many friends and acquaintances. He got things done but he rarely came up with sudden and dramatic ideas. But one evening he said to Raelene and Fiona, "I've been thinking about the old Roberts' house. I just wonder if it would be worth buying."

"Not at her price," Raelene said drily. "And it would need some work done on it."

"I know. But I wondered if it would be worth chatting to Jenny Roberts. If she would accept an independent valuation, then a little sweetener on top."

"And you want to buy it for yourself?" Rae only sounded curious. Kieran's small cottage was crammed with books, equipment, some old bits of farm machinery he had collected (and more filled the yard and shed), paperwork, a spare bed for Matt Holloway or other extension officers and DPI personnel working in the Buckton area at times. He certainly needed more space.

"I thought of that. But I was also wondering if it would appeal to Fee." He turned to her. "Even if you rented it to me."

"It *is* rather an attractive old house. But I am not sure if I really want to own any real estate in Buckton … even if she would put a more realistic price on it."

"You mean—you *don't* want to live next door to the love of your life?" Rae put on an astonished voice.

Dennis worried Fiona; these last few days he had looked tired and distracted and his conversations with her were mostly short and rather brusque. She wasn't sure if it could be related to a case, whether it had anything to do with her, whether it had anything to do with the double murder which remained unresolved, or whether she was reading things into the situation that weren't really there.

"I am not sure what is going on there. Though it's nice to see Kaylee planning out a garden for him—"

"And Kay is a *very* attractive woman still," Rae said provocatively.

"She is," Fiona said without emphasis. "And her little girl is very sweet. They would be a ready-made family for him." Though as she had never shared anything about Dennis's dead family this made no particular impact on Rae or Kieran.

"Well, *I* certainly won't get in the way if he fancies her." Rae wasn't sure what was going on. But if it created a larger gap between Fiona and Dennis then it had to be a good thing.

"No, I know, and I am not going to play cupid … but if you ask me, Dennis just gets worn out. We come home, have dinner, put our feet up, watch TV. He's out there trying to sort out accidents and brawls and break-ins and people with lost cows. And on top of it he's got the Winville mob heavying him to solve that murder for them—" Kieran sounded wry.

"What do you mean—'heavying him'?" Fiona seemed to think the simple description contained something much more worrying.

"Well, I saw that Towner guy go in there and give him a blast the other day—screaming at him that if he'd done the proper house-to-house out there round the Binnie farm the case would be solved by now. You could just about hear him all the way down the street."

Fiona nodded. There had been some sort of ruckus over there the other day, she wasn't sure what, but she felt sure Dennis could give as good as he got. Though he shouldn't need to be arguing with DI Towner. What was the CIB for if not to take on the district's serious crime?

"But it doesn't make sense when you think about it. Dennis isn't a detective. Why does Towner … no, I suppose that is a silly question. I am certain it was Towner who aborted my case deliberately. He seems a malicious sort of man."

"But the real question is … how come they're making such heavy weather of that business? They know who the victims are. They know their business, their background. I assume they know something of their movements just before they died. I've even heard that they think Father

Meagher's car was used to transport the people, alive or dead." And then Kieran answered his own question. "I think the trouble is they've got too many suspects. Not too few."

"Yes, it's a big agency," Rae didn't sound terribly interested. "It operates in Brisbane and on the Gold Coast … and maybe other places."

"Anyway, we've got off the subject of that house. I really just want some thoughts on what would be a realistic price for it. I thought thirty-five thousand to forty max. What do you both think?"

Rae said that sounded reasonable. Fiona said she thought it might go a little more at auction. Perhaps forty-two, forty-three. "But I personally wouldn't pay that. The trouble is … she's dug her heels in now. Anything much under her price will seem like a come-down. An embarrassment."

"Would you let feelings get in the way of a business deal?" Kieran said curiously.

"I might. But do you mean—my feelings for Dennis or my non-feelings for Jenny Roberts?"

"I guess I mean your feelings towards a partnership deal if we could buy it at a realistic price. Whether you'd like to work out a deal with me."

"A two-way deal—or a three-way deal?"

But Raelene said cheerfully, "Count me out. I don't mind if the two of you buy a house together. Just don't plan on living in it together."

But she need not have worried. Jenny Roberts said only, "You want me to do *what?*"

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Sergeant Walsh got some of Tansy Smith's story from her at her bedside a day later; including the information that she was really Tansy Piggott, daughter of Graham Binnie's stepson.

"So why were you living alone in that house?"

"He said, my dad said, I had to live there if I wanted to get the house and the farm. He said if I lived there long enough then old Mr Binnie wouldn't have a leg to stand on."

"And you are nineteen?"

"Yeah. Nineteen and a half."

"And how long did he expect you to live there?"

"Just till he won the case. It's called unchallenged possession. That's why he put padlocks on all the doors … so no one else could get in, only me. But mostly I came in through the windows."

"That kitchen window was bloody hard to get in."

"I usually come in the window at the front. It's not locked."

He shook his head at the thought. "You came in that night that way?"

"I don't remember much about it."

"So why did you leave the scene of an accident?"

"I'd be in trouble if there was any publicity, things in the paper. I'm s'posed to keep a low profile until the case goes to court. Just live there. Just go to work."

"But you went to the pub with Kelly."

"I know. Dad will be wild when he finds out. And then those crazy boys. I kept saying to Damien 'Slow down! Slow down!' and he took no notice. When we hit that car and Kelly hit us—I just panicked and ran. I didn't even know how badly I was bleeding till I got home. I thought it would stop if I lay down. I felt so weak next day … and there was no phone there, it'd been cut off … and I just sort of gave up."

He found himself sitting back with a sigh. What to do next? "Well, just concentrate on getting better … and I'd better get in touch with your dad."

"No, don't." She put out a thin hand. "He'll be so angry … and I won't get anything."

"You're planning to go back there—soon as you get out of here?"

"Of course." She seemed surprised that he needed to ask.

"Leaving the scene of a traffic accident is not a major felony but you *have* given me a lot of trouble." That her life might somehow impinge on someone else's did not seem to have occurred to her. He wondered if she was so fixated on the possibility of gaining thousands of dollars from the farm that she wasn't concerned with wider issues. And would her father honour his promise to give her the farm? It seemed distinctly dubious.

*

Fiona went over after work one evening to say she had two tickets to an amateur production of 'A Christmas Carol' in Winville and would he like to come? He said without any sign of regret that she knew it wasn't his kind of thing and he thought she'd be wise to invite someone like Raelene Perry or Jon Dundas.

"Wise?"

"You know what I mean. Would you like to come in for a cup of tea?" He didn't sound particularly welcoming but she accepted the invitation.

As she sat down in his kitchen she said quietly, "Dennis, is something wrong? You look a bit … worried."

"No. Not wrong. I was pissed off with that business of Bernie Goodrick. Looks like the rest of the family will get away with murder. I couldn't even get an autopsy done. I was even more pissed off with that business of Tansy Smith. Sometimes I feel like leaving people to deal with their own stupidity and greed."

"You mean—they didn't want to pay Bernie what they owed him?" She hadn't heard anything that made much sense about Tansy Smith; just the claim that she'd been in an accident and went into an old empty farmhouse where Dennis had found her.

"Yeah. So near and so far."

"But they will still have to pay the amount to his estate. You still are liable for what you owe when you die. I mean your estate is. And people who owe you money usually have to pay it. Unless there's some agreement or exemption. The amount owing to him was accrued income, surely, and therefore it would still have to be paid. Did he have a will?"

"It seems not. Or they haven't found it yet. Or Charles Mather is in cahoots … Would that affect their liability?"

"I don't think so. It would still be owed to his estate—even if it later got distributed to the relatives that had paid it in the first place. But I would need to see any financial agreement drawn up between him and his relatives to know what the terms were. And who would be his next-of-kin?"

"John Goodrick, most likely … or maybe Dan. It doesn't seem to be my business either way. It just really riled me to think of them getting away with it."

"Dennis, I don't know the truth of any of this. But the others were talking the other night … and Joanne said she'd heard that Bernie was quite a livewire when he was young. I just wonder if there was anyone in his life … before he turned into an old sod and got so rude to everyone?"

"No idea. And if they haven't come forward there's not much I can do. But George Hickman might know. He tried to run a story about Terry Mitchell's dog and me. I said I'd never give him another story if he dared."

He seemed to become animated for a minute or two then to slip back into the deep sense of morose introspection which had marked him lately.

"Dennis, it was a nice story, I don't mean nice in its details, but nice in the sense that you care. About that old man, about his old dog."

"Yeah. I'm not bad. With dogs."

She was debating whether to query this, read something into it, ask him if something else was the matter, when the phone rang. She got the impression that the ensuing conversation cheered him slightly. When he came back to join her he said, "Sister O'Brien sends her love to you."

It might be a fraught area, she had been wrestling with the sense that Dennis had lost interest in her and while that might be a good thing in the long run, it wasn't very easy to accept. She said carefully, "I'm glad someone wants to send love. The last few weeks haven't been brimming over with it. But as some of my customers like to say—'at least I've got me health back'. That's something."

He stopped in the middle of turning away to get some milk from the frig. "It isn't what it looks like. I mean it is. But it's for your sake."

For a moment she was lost. What was he referring to? Then she said, "You *are* referring to you not finding a minute to spare me the time of day, that sort of thing."

"Something like that. You'll leave, you know. Go on to bigger and better things. I'll go on being just the old sod who lives and works here. It won't bother us too much if we've made a space.

That kind of guff. I've been trying to put it into practice. Just easing off a bit. It works okay when I'm flat to the boards. Which has been most of the time lately. It stops working when you're here and I still want you too much to even think straight."

For a moment she felt offended that he would try to change things without telling her, then she found herself remembering several traumatic moments in her own response to him. "I think I understand. I wanted to do that. When you came and sat down beside me in the court and I was feeling so angry because I thought you *must've* known what they planned to do."

"I didn't know. I s'pose I sort of guessed. I know the sort of stinker Doug Towner is. And you had every reason to be angry about the story the *Courier* ran. I asked John Daly to do a story on Ms Elliot and what went on in Winville … and then he made you sound … you know, pretty awful."

"But I didn't blame you for that. I know the way the media can twist things. And Dulcie Campbell wrote him a letter to complain. He didn't, or he hasn't so far, published it. But I guess the act of her writing it helped me deal with the way she evicted me on the most blatant of lies."

"And you forgave her?" He brought the milk over and stood a moment with a hand on her shoulder.

"I'm trying to. I'm not sure if it would be honest to say more than that. I do understand that she genuinely believed Margaret was the victim … in everything. Anyway, what was Kath ringing about—or is it confidential?"

"Oh! Good news. They've found Bernie Goodrick's will. He'd given a bag of papers to Mrs Hall in the office there to look after for him. It looks legal, he wrote it himself but it's signed by Jack Alexander and Jim White as his witnesses, so that might make it easier to resolve the financial side of things."

"That's a relief."

"I still think they gave him something. But I feel like someone banging a head on a brick wall. I want something. Everyone says 'forget it, mate'. They want something. It's why didn't you do this yesterday. I just feel a bit tuckered out. But I'll be back on deck tomorrow."

"Dennis, do you ever feel like dropping something when there's no obvious way to prove it, let alone get a conviction?"

"No. Well, maybe, some days, when I feel totally buggered. But I get up next morning and I'm ready to get back to the tough things. I've finally got a line on the guy that killed and dumped three greyhounds on the edge of the Rolls' farm. Lives in Dalby. I probably can't get him charged but I'm planning to go round there and try to scare the shit out of him. Sorry. I shouldn't talk like that to you."

"Maybe not. But I'd rather have you as you are than anyone else." She stood up and put her arms round him. "Dennis … *please* don't try to put a distance between us, not unless you've grown tired of me. If we have to make difficult decisions—about careers, about where we live and what we do—somewhere down the track—we'll find ways. I'm sure we will."

For a moment he struggled with the temptation to ask her for a more definite commitment. Then common sense came to the party. He already had something he would hate to lose. Something precious.

He sat down heavily and drew the mugs across to pour. His sense of being tired and disillusioned refused to go away. Because, no matter what they had, he was still the same old middle-aged sod not getting anywhere fast. She deserved something better …

"Dennis, I don't only care about you when you're zooming round like Superman, solving everything and putting lives back together. I'm here when you feel like giving the world a big kick." She put her hands on his shoulders and massaged them gently.

"That's nice."

"Then relax and enjoy it." But a minute or two later she said, "Did you ever find if there was any significance to that crow on the fence?"

"No. I don't know where they're at. And I don't know that I really care. I gave them a suspicious car. But they've never told me what they found, if anything. I've just been getting on with my work and hoping that they'll get a solution soon. Ali Deane thinks the crow is a symbol of death."

"Maybe it's a name. An idea … "

"Such as?"

"I don't know. As the crow flies. Crows as ravens. The Tower of London. Beheading. Eat crow. Crowsfeet … "

"Eat crow? As in?"

"Well, not as in *eating* a crow. Yuck. As in humiliating someone, what we used to call eating humble pie maybe … but how would that fit?"

"God knows. And I'm not going to worry about it."

*

Brave words. He spent the next couple of days puzzling over that idea. Then he thought 'what the heck?' If Ali Deane didn't have time to go looking for Ted Pettigrew then he would probably need to go and look for the sod himself—or send Guy over to the library to go through old copies of the *Winville Courier* for starters.

The trouble with this was that finding Ted and finding he had left Winville many years ago gave no indication of any scandal nor did it give him a son called Frank. In that case he would have to find someone who knew Ted … and justify, to himself if no one else, that the time and effort was worth it.

He'd had a lacerating interview with Mary Davidson at St Monica's who never dropped her own impregnable saintly slightly-pained façade; she was doing the church's work, she believed in the infallibility of everything the Pope said, if she believed in big families it was for the benefit of following generations and God's will, and the continuing viability of St Monica's … but what decisions she made in regard to any Maxwell children were confidential and she didn't appreciate his very public intrusion into the convent grounds.

Goaded by both her stonewalling and her attitude of Madonna-like rectitude he had lost the plot and told her what he thought of a church which didn't encourage its members to put a sensible program of contraception in place to stop another generation of abused and abusing children working their way through Buckton life and police files …

"Just as you put a sensible program of contraception in place when you take your unmarried pleasures, Sergeant?"

Whether it was a bow drawn without thinking or whether she'd heard gossip …

"Meaning?"

"I am quite sure you understand the allusion. Now, if you will excuse me, I do have a lot of work waiting … as I am sure you do too."

Afterwards he felt he should've stayed well out of the problem. The children were being assessed. That was all that mattered. And she wasn't the problem, nor did she have any real influence on Mrs Maxwell, nor could she insist that a lot of elderly celibate men in Rome get their fingers out. And the only thing which gave him some subsequent relief was to imagine a world in which he could pack up the Maxwell family and send the whole bang lot of them off to drive the Vatican into the sort of despair he felt when he contemplated the family's likely future.

There was still Damien Scully, back from Winville, waiting to be interviewed about the accident and his claim that his 'girlfriend' had been driving. But before he had the pleasure of Damien's company yet again he thought he would ring RSL president, Cliff Brady, and see if he had any memories of Ted Pettigrew. If nothing else Cliff was good company.

Cliff's wife said he would be back in about an hour and he was welcome to drop by; so he sighed and went round to see Damien Scully in the interim. Damien had had time to reassess everything, get his confidence back, rehearse his story. He opened the door and stood there with a return of all his old cockiness.

"You've got trouble, son. Driving like a bloody maniac. You could now be up for manslaughter if Mr Mitchell hadn't managed to get clear in time."

"Wasn't me. That stupid girl."

"That stupid girl doesn't know how to drive a car and doesn't have a licence. So quit trying to pretend she was driving—"

"How was I s'posed to know. She asked to give it a try. I said okay. Next thing we're off the road. I tried to grab the wheel and get us round."

"Don't give me that bullshit."

"You ask her. She'll back me up."

"I already have. Which girl are you talking about?"

"That Tansy. She's a wild kid. But seeing she was Kelly's mate … "

"Won't help you. Winville decides to lay charges—you're sunk, son."

"You know something—you're really stupid. They charge me—I dob her in. And she'll say anything not to have to go to court—" That was probably true. But it could work both ways.

Mrs Scully came up behind Damien and shot Sergeant Walsh an angry look. He said, "Ah, Mrs Scully, nice to see you'll be up for more expense. Getting your car towed, getting it repaired, ditto for Terry Mitchell's car. It keeps on mounting up."

For a moment she looked worried then a blank look came over her face. "That girl will pay. We'll make sure she does."

"That girl wasn't driving, Mrs Scully—"

"Don't you believe it. It's all around town that she was driving."

"Only because Damien put it around town."

She gave a snort and said, "You poor booby, you think you know it all. You don't know nothing round here."

"I'll make sure Damien doesn't wriggle out of a charge this time—"

"Don't you go threatening us!"

He wasn't sure if she still believed her son, if it was a matter of family solidarity, if she thought he was bluffing. If she, like her son, believed Tansy Piggott would say yes to anything rather than have to go to court and argue it out. It wasn't worth staying to argue. But he had one piece of information which would probably clinch the case … if it came to court. Neither Tansy nor Damien had been wearing seatbelts. Damien had badly-bruised ribs. Tansy had a bad cut on her forehead.

*

Cliff Brady seemed quite glad to have some company to while away the afternoon with. But he said straight up that he barely remembered Ted Pettigrew and that he wasn't sure he should recycle some old gossip without knowing if it was true or not. "Not like some people," he added with a wry smile.

"Best to tell me what the gossip was and I can have a quiet check to see if there was any substance to it."

"Righty, then, but it was probably all hot air. You know how people exaggerate things."

"I do."

"Ted had a photography business there. I didn't know him before the war. But most of the Winville and Buckton fellas were together. My brother and I joined up earlier so we went to the Middle East. But Ted and some of the others were in the Pacific. It only came up later, after the war, when Ted was in the RSL branch there in Winville. I don't know how the talk got started. But some of the fellas said Ted had a thing about … I don't quite know how to put it. He fancied women who were a bit … " Again the old man seemed to run into a dead end and had to look round his comfortable little sitting room with its view of Buckton Hospital and the dozens of picture plates displayed on stands on every shelf in his search for a suitable euphemism.

"Disabled? Short the full quid? Barking mad? Or just … available?"

"Oh, I don't think they were available. But it's hard to prove, isn't it, when a woman can't talk. It started up, the gossip I mean, after the war when people said Ted had raped a girl who was spastic. A bit hard to prove one way or the other … if she said yes I mean. And a few of the fellas got talking and the gist of it was that Ted had done the same thing round the islands. With girls who were a bit … you know … and it started to look as if he was a bit that way inclined. His wife looked after the shop and she looked perfectly normal to me. But I heard after they left town that she had an artificial leg. Maybe it was true. She always wore slacks and most women then wore frocks. I never really knew the truth of any of it. But the girl, s'pose she wasn't a girl, twenty maybe, they

said she'd gone off to some place for the sub-normal in Toowoomba. But I s'pose it's always possible she went off to have a baby. I don't think Clare and Ted ever had kiddies."

"And Clare and Ted might've adopted the baby?"

"It's possible. But I never heard any more after they went to Brisbane and started a business there. He had a camera shop, I think."

"Do you remember anything else about Ted? What he looked like, if he had any special friends, if he had other family in Winville?"

"Not much. Hardly ever went to Winville in those days. I just heard the stories through some of the other fellas. There was talk of asking Ted to resign … but they felt it would look bad for the girl maybe … and hard on Clare. But I'll tell you one thing I remember. I don't think Ted was his real name. They used to call him 'Red Ted' … after the premier, you know … well, before your time … before mine for that matter. I don't mean Ted was a Commie or any of that … just that he had red hair."

"So what was his real name?"

"Now, there you have me, never heard him called anything but Ted. But I have an idea it had something to do with one of those stock and station agents … not Dalgetys … you know what I mean."

"Thomas Mort?"

"Mort. I wouldn't swear to it. Not on a Bible. But that rings a bit of a bell … or it might be close … "

"Short for something else?"

"Could be. I'll put the old thinking cap on."

"Okay then. Give me a ring if anything comes to mind."

"Will do."

*

Back at the station a very irate John Binnie was giving Constable Briggs an earful. He had just heard that there was a girl temporarily at the hospital but living in his house. *His house!* He demanded that she immediately be evicted and charged with breaking and entering—*and* he had just found that someone had placed padlocks on all *his* doors—

John Binnie was at most times an easygoing and pleasant old codger and this bout of anger had something ramped up and artificial about it.

"I understand the case is before the courts," Dennis Walsh said wearily. "We can't intervene."

"Rubbish! That's bollocks and you know it! I said they forged that will and there's people that agree with me. But I don't see why *I* have to pay to prove that they're a bunch of crooks."

"They are your relatives—"

"Poppycock! They're nothing to me. No blood. Never set eyes on 'em in years. But soon as a bit of the ready is in the offing up they jump like a bad smell and yell that it all belongs to them. Worst thing he ever did—marry that Piggott dame. Dora and me—we've had about all we can take from them. And we're not getting any younger—"

"Then what about doing a deal with them. Go halves or something—"

"Are you out of your tiny mind! Go halves with that bunch of crooks! You'd see me in hell first!"

"Well, go on then, both lots of the family—waste all your time and money on lawyers and in the end the court'll probably tell you to cut a deal. Not my worry. I never interfere once there's lawyers in the mix—"

John Binnie seemed to swell in his sudden access of fury. Guy Briggs had the horrible feeling that any minute now the old man would have a heart attack and fall dead on the station floor and they would then have to answer some very pointed questions and they would be accused of threats and violence against a mild old man who had simply come in to make a complaint … and they would both be drummed out of the force or, at the very least, sent to Quilpie and points west … and Dennis Walsh would take it in his stride whereas he would curl up and die …

But his sergeant said grimly, "Calm down. Go away. And come and see me when you can talk sense."

Guy Briggs half-expected Mr Binnie to explode into a million tiny fragments. Instead it had the opposite effect. The old man seemed to deflate and then merely stand there looking foolish.

Walsh went on, "Get copies of both wills. Get on to this Piggott bloke. Let me know. And we'll all go round to the hospital and have a brief discussion." He made discussion sound like the minute before he got the handcuffs out. "That girl nearly died in that bloody house. So it's about time someone injected a bit of commonsense into this situation. If we can't resolve it … then you and this other bloke can go at it hammer-and-tongs in court. Not my worry."

But after John Binnie had finally consented to go away and consider this course of action they were called out to an accident near Dinawadding where a car had hit a cow calmly camped and chewing her cud on the side road near old Mr Kavanagh's farm. "That'll be those fucking Conways again—" Dennis said gloomily as they drove away. "I don't wish Japana on anyone—but I'd cheer if the Conways sold out to them and got off my patch."

*

When Fiona Greehan dropped by the station on her way home it was to find Dennis still working away, looking rather tired and harassed. He'd sent Guy Briggs round to the hospital to do yet another bedside interview.

She said kindly, "Can I take you out to dinner somewhere? You look as if a nice quiet meal and a long beer would go down nicely."

"It would. But I've still got a lot of stuff to get through."

"Then—if I were to go over to your house and cook us something would you be done in about an hour?"

"Can't say for sure" He seemed to realise he was being unnecessarily short with her. "I've got a theory about the Pettigrews but I'm damned if I can see any way to prove … or disprove … and Winville will only tell me to take a hike … "

"Is it something you can pass on to an outsider? I am discreet."

Which was more than the hospital staff had been about young Tansy Piggott. But maybe it would all prove to be for the best. Eventually.

"I've been wondering if he had a legit business and a suss one underneath it … blue movies, that sort o' thing."

"Well, *someone* must make them."

"True. I've just been given a hint that there might've been a family … don't know what you'd call it … a habit … a fancy … a liking for sex with disabled women, that kind of thing. Maybe there's a market for that stuff. I wouldn't know."

It was a curious thing about him, she sometimes thought, even when he used some foul language there was still something that resisted getting down and dirty. She found herself wondering if he had put his mother on a pedestal and vaguely believed that all women should aim equally high and all men should treat them with that kind of belief in their natural purity. Was that part of the explanation for his enduring anger over what had been done to his wife? That he had treated her with the respect he'd been raised to give all women—and those youths had instead probably dismissed her as a 'dirty Abo cunt', that kind of dismissal, and seen no crime in their behaviour …

"If that was what they were doing—there must be a way to prove it."

"The way I'm going I can't even prove you jay-walked to get here," he said gloomily. "It's been one of those days. I even had Damien Scully call me stupid and Mary Davidson call me immoral … the way things are heading I'll start believing them soon."

"No, you won't. But I'll leave you to get on … " After she'd gone out he lifted the phone and rang Winville and got DS Greg Sullivan just as he was packing up for the night.

"Greg, did you end up getting a father for your Frank Pettigrew? He wasn't Mort's son was he? The bloke who had the photography business there forty years ago?"

He could hear Greg shuffling papers at the other end. "That was Ted Pettigrew, had the business here. But you'd be right about the Mort as Frank's dad. Haven't tracked him down. Could be dead or interstate."

"No. Ted and Mort are the same person." He made it sound simple. "And tell me another thing. Greg—have you got movements for those two that Friday? Who they saw, what they said when they left the office, how come they left early, that sort o' thing."

"Just the usual. But they knocked off about three. Said they were going to take a long weekend. Told their secretary Annabelle Harris to expect them back on Tuesday. She knows the business inside out so she wasn't worried about carrying on when they didn't get back Tuesday morning. She tried to ring Frank's mobile but it was turned off. She said she kept trying it but assumed they didn't want to be contacted … or had forgotten."

"So did they give her any indication of where they were going for their long weekend?"

"No. But she says they quite often went out to country areas, up the coast, to meet people they thought might be worth representing. They were very proactive in seeking out talent, she says."

"Good employers, good agents?"

"It's beginning to look like it, Dennis. There were a few tiffs and misunderstandings. But unless people are playing them down now they seem to have made a real effort—"

"Could there have been another business under the legit one, blue movies, prostitution, girls brought in from overseas, some kind of exploitation. Someone was very angry with those two."

"If there was we haven't found a whisper of it."

"So what did they do for light relief?"

"Not a lot. The business really was their life. I s'pose they watched TV, went to things, got offered free tickets to something now and again, that area. But he never mentioned going off to golf or swimming, that sort of thing, sociable but not a lot of private entertaining."

"So what did they say to the secretary before they left?"

"Nothing much. A couple of reminders. Then Frank said something like 'I'm off to see a man about a horse' and then they said 'see you on Tuesday' and went out. The secretary assumed he meant he was going to look at an animal act of some kind. They've got a few on their books, people who train for movies and to do those ads you see with the cat picking the food out of his bowl with one paw, that sort of stuff."

"And no one saw them from the time between when they left the office and drove away … and when Owen Binnie's boys found them?"

"No one who'll admit to it. Yeah, that's about it. And that reminds me—Doug is still saying how come no one saw that car … "

"The Hyundai?"

"Yep. The one where someone wet themselves they were so bloody scared … or the driver wouldn't stop … Doug still thinks you're dragging the chain."

"I am. I've got better things to do." But as he spoke an idea began to take shape and wander through his thoughts. He hung up. 'Maybe I'm doing a Dougie—too taken up with a one-track-idea to even check the rear-view mirror.' A couple of minutes later he went out and drove away. An idea was only as good as the supporting evidence.

When Fiona, wondering how much longer he might be and whether to turn off the dinner, wait a bit longer, bring him over a plate, came across it was to find the station deserted and the car gone.

Old Gus Mortimer kept pretty much to himself. He came into town about once a fortnight to shop, have a couple of beers at the pub, go to the bank or do other business. He'd never married and he projected a benign and rather battered visage to the world. But Bill Borrie had once told Dennis Walsh that Gus never did anything out of the kindness of his heart. He had a sharp eye for a bargain. And he made sure people paid their bills on time. His farm was used as a small spelling place, he took in a few old horses and donkeys for people not yet ready to say goodbye, he spelled a half dozen racehorses at a time. He had fenced off the old stock route and used it to run a few dozen heifers. He also grew a small plot of lemons and supplied a couple of local businesses. He wasn't greedy. He lived simply. But he didn't take kindly to anyone who wanted to pull a fast one; he didn't take any kind of criticism lying down … not even a statement by Dennis Walsh that he could use the grass along the stock route but he couldn't fence it off. Still he *had* complied, eventually, and instead put some slip-rails across. In the end Dennis had left the matter. No one ever used this route and it was safer than having stock wander.

Now he said, “What’s up? Not about my cattle, is it?”

“No. Did Constable Briggs call in and ask if you’d seen a vehicle the night those two got dumped in Owen’s old house?”

“Haven’t seen him. But I can’t see the house or the road from here. So I wouldn’t be much use to him. I might hear a truck during the day but my hearing’s not as good as it used to be. A sedan … doubt it … ” He shook his head. “Why? You planning to chew him out?”

“Sooner or later. I see you’ve got some decent neddies in the yards. Still taking them for your brothers?”

“Now and again.”

“They’re still there … same place … same business?” He resisted the temptation to leap in with some tougher questions.

“Yep. Ernie reckons they’ll go out with their boots on. Why? You interested in getting a neddy—”

“Do you know, that’s a bloody good idea, Gus. I need something to take my mind off all those stupid kids out there. I wouldn’t mind to have something to look forward to of a Saturday arve … get round a few of the country tracks. I can’t go the big money … just a reliable old gelding that’ll run a few places for me.”

“Want me to ask them to keep an eye out?”

“Look, leave it with me a few days. I might get home and decide it’s not a goer after all. I’ll give you a ring next week. They’d keep their ears pretty close to the ground I’d say … so that might be the best way to go if I decide to give it a whirl.”

He drove away after a bit more chat about horses and called in to see Father Meagher on his way back to the station. The convent was dark, the church was dark, a light shone from the house next door. They were probably sitting down to dinner, all nicely cooked and served up … whereas poor Fiona was probably starting to wonder where on earth he’d got to …

Father Michael came to the door to greet him. “Any news?”

“I won’t keep you—but the day you went to Toowoomba—do you remember telling anyone where you were going?”

“I probably did. It wasn’t any secret. I was down to the bank, I had a couple of classes, I went to the hospital to see several people … all the usual people … I remember chatting with Mrs Pounder in the bank … though I think that was just about the weather and so on.”

“Anyone you didn’t usually meet … someone from out of Buckton, not a Catholic, that sort of thing?”

“Yes, I *was* chatting with an old chap at the service station. Noel gave my windscreen a wash, checked the oil, that side of things, and I chatted for a couple of minutes. I don’t know his name. He had a dark green ute I think. Sort of a bush of curly grey hair, receding a bit. I said I was off to Toowoomba and he said he went down now and again and where was I going. So I just mentioned the retreat. He didn’t seem very interested. But I said I was looking forward to a quiet weekend. He said it wouldn’t be his cup of tea and he got plenty of quiet on the farm and then Noel was finished and I drove away. Why? Is there something significant in that?”

“I’d say so. It’s always bothered me—trying to get a local connection to it all.”

“You’re not suggesting—I really couldn’t come at that. He was quite elderly, seventies at least. And I can’t see him mixing with … flash people like that … You mean, he mentioned it to someone else?”

“I’d say so.” He left Father Meagher to his dinner and returned to the station and rang Winville. Greg had gone home but Neil Midgley answered. “Just the man I want. You still keep up with the neddies, don’t you?”

“To my wife’s sorrow, yes, I do. What’s that got to do with anything?”

Neil always ran the Melbourne Cup sweep for Winville and the surrounding stations. Dennis had never managed to luck on to a winner but he quite enjoyed the hope, and Neil’s enthusiasm got everyone cheering.

“Do you know the Mortimer brothers in Toowoomba? They’re still training I gather.”

“They are. You planning on throwing your hard-earned money down that pit, Dennis?”

"If I were—would you recommend them as trainers?"

"We-ell, let's say—they wouldn't be top of my list."

"And Frank Pettigrew had a horse or has a horse or is thinking of getting a horse—"

"Is he? How do you know?"

"I was hoping you might know. Any Pettigrew horses for that matter."

There was a long silence then Neil said calmly, "Mort's Choice. Ted Pettigrew did quite well with him. Ernie and Bill trained him. But that's twenty years ago, maybe more. I haven't seen or heard … Ted could be dead for all I know. How does that fit in?"

"Ted's real name was Mort or more likely Mortimer."

There was another silence then Noel said, "You old devil! So that's the way you're thinking."

"But we're too late. Ernie and Bill will've got rid of Frank's mobile phone and the gun."

"So how do you read it?"

"Frank fancied trying his hand, bought a couple of nice youngsters, gave them to Bill and Ernie to train, all in the family you might say, though I get the impression it wasn't all sweetness and light in that family, and he could learn the ropes round the country tracks before he tries to mix it with the big boys … but Ernie and Bill did something he didn't like. They pulled a horse maybe … or they came down too hard on a horse … I don't know what. And Frank got something on film and he came up to Toowoomba that Friday evening and confronted them and it was the last thing he ever did. Maybe he threatened to take his expensive yearlings out of their stable. I'm guessing. The brothers rang to ask Gus for his help in getting rid of Frank and Vicki. He told them about the priest's car. He told them about the old house, mightn't get visited in months, dump them there. They tied them up, put them in the car, brought them out, shot them, dumped their belongings somewhere. I'm just surprised they didn't take Vicki's jewelry but maybe they were in a hurry or thought it was cheap stuff. Then they went home."

"So where's Frank's car?"

"By now, I'd say it's parked somewhere in Brisbane, all squeaky-clean and no prints except Frank and Vicki's … I'd say they couldn't use that car because it probably has a logo on it, someone might notice, and they may only have a ute or pickup, something to pull a horse float … and if anyone local *did* see the priest's car … they wouldn't think anything of it."

"I think you're right. There was a story did the rounds years ago. Ted got himself another horse after Mort's Choice but it was one of those that show promise but decide they don't want to race, an Eskimo Prince type, and it lost a race they were all sure they could win hands down, and lost them a packet. I heard someone say they sent it for a spell here somewhere and it died … but there was a rumour that they flogged it to death. I never got to hear the rights of that. But I wonder if they sent it to your Gus Mortimer. He still spells their horses for them, doesn't he?"

"He does. And I'm half-inclined to believe that story. He keeps to himself but I think he *is* an old bastard. Just something about him. Something about his animals. A bit hangdog. A bit too nervy for my liking. But I'll leave it with you. You can confront Doug if you feel up to it."

Neil laughed without much mirth. "No. Doug might be following those same signposts—but I doubt it. I think, first off, I'll ring a mate in Toowoomba. He'll know if the brothers have recently got some expensive youngsters into the stable. I'll take it from there."

Dennis put the phone down. Neil was a good reliable man. He'd follow through. He could now let that problem go …

The door opened and Fiona came in. He looked up. "Sorry! I s'pose it's burned to a crisp?"

"No, I'm learning the hard way never to make you anything that can't be reheated easily. But you're looking more cheerful, a bit more cheerful, I hope that means someone told you you're the Sherlock Holmes of Buckton—"

"Not quite. He only called me an old devil but I took it as a compliment."

"Good for him—whoever 'he' is. Can you leave this place for ten minutes to—"

"Hold on a tick. I've forgotten something." He picked up the phone and after a minute or two managed to get through to Winville again. "Just one more question, mate. You've seen the brothers, haven't you? Would one of 'em wear odd boots by any chance?"

"Yeah, Ernie wears a built-up boot. Doesn't bother him. He gets around as good as you or me. But I'd say he has to get 'em specially made."

"Talk to Ali. She's got a theory about the bootmarks."

He hung up again. "It looks like they can wrap the Pettigrews. But for the life of me I still don't know where the bloody crow comes into it. Anyway, I'm starving. All meanings of the word."

They were sitting over ice cream a half hour later when Midgley rang through. "I thought you might like to know, Dennis. Two expensive youngsters. One called Raven's Foot and the other called Vicki's Choice. And seems the Pettigrews hadn't actually got round to making a will though they discussed a partnership with several of their senior employees. I guess everything will go to their relatives—including the horses if they were in their name—who just might turn out to be Mortimers as they had no children. And Frank was an only child, looks like. So the sooner we get there the better."

"You were right," Dennis said to Fiona as he hung up, "but I wonder if they can lift Gus Mortimer's fingerprints from a dead crow? And I wonder if he was feeling symbolic or merely diverting attention—or maybe thumbing his nose at us?"

But he let the conversation, the questions, lapse. It was nice just to sit back a while and let it go. Just to see in her all that made the letting go so safe and easy …

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Country Casebook: Book Nine

Case No. 1: Persistence

Christmas in the small Queensland town of Buckton was a cheerful though rarely extravagant affair. The summer had seen a reasonable harvest. Children had plans for swimming and hopes for beach holidays. All the shops along the main street had unearthed something to brighten their front windows, ranging from some cardboard cut-outs in the Commonwealth Bank to the large tip of a cypress pine in a tub in a corner of Jack Alexander's carpet showroom, with a sign propped up "Doesn't matter how much mess Christmas leaves—Jadigo Carpet Tiles Can Cope", to the head of a reindeer in the butcher's shop and Dave Barry's less sophisticated sign: "Everything but reindeer meat for your Christmas celebrations". Some local vandal believing himself to be a wit had spray-painted on the window beside the word reindeer, "or decent rumpstake". Dave Barry suggested to local police sergeant Dennis Walsh that he should look around for someone who wasn't much of a speller; Walsh said unenthusiastically that would take in most of Buckton including himself … but that he'd keep an eye open …

Other shops had contented themselves with a bit of tinsel or a sign to say "Season's Greetings to Our Customers". Raelene Perry had a rather pretty display in Buckton's only boutique with a couple of robins peeping in a snow-bound window to a colourful display of bright leisure and beach wear. The Bank of the Darling Downs, placed in splendid isolation along the road to Winville, had contented itself with some second-hand baubles. The budget for decorating the building was so small that the assistant manager Brian Collyer said, "Why don't we all bring things from home and

blow our budget on coffee and cakes as a kind of Christmas morning tea for staff and customers?" Not only had it made for a more unusual display it had also brought people in.

"Nothing like a freebie," Brian said later to his wife.

Tania Collyer was wrestling with the possibility of a move to Winville if Brian got the assistant manager position there which he'd applied for at the suggestion of his boss. Fiona Greehan had considered applying for it herself. It would be a comedown; going from manager of a small branch to assistant in a larger branch but that wasn't the deciding factor. Nor did she really mind the idea of living in Winville. It was a long commute if she thought of remaining here and driving to work—but not impossible. But as she told her friend and flatmate, Raelene Perry, "I honestly don't think I can handle the disruption and change of routine, not with the court case dangling over me."

There was some doubt still hanging over the progress of the case through the justice system. While she was standing in for the hospitalised manager of the Garramindi branch she had been attacked, abducted and dumped, still tied up, in bushland well away from the small town. Even now, people in Garramindi refused to believe that the quiet motherly-looking Margaret Elliot could have done such a thing; unless under extreme duress. Margaret was out on bail and still doing everything possible to recruit local sympathy and support.

Raelene was sympathetic to Fiona's reasoning but she couldn't resist saying a little drolly, "Nothing to do with a certain person?" She continued to see Fiona's relationship with Sergeant Walsh as a kind of passing infatuation, a dangerous brainstorm, a case of misplaced gratitude masquerading as love, even a sign of mental deterioration. In this she wasn't alone. Other Bucktonites regarded their local police sergeant as a tyrant, a bully, a person to avoid …

Brian Collyer had at first dismissed Fiona's suggestion that he apply for the Winville job. But after giving it more thought, and discussing it with Tania and their children, he decided it was worth a try. Fiona had written him an excellent reference. He had an unblemished record. And now the good news. A letter to say he had been shortlisted for the position. The coffee and cake was as much his private celebration as a form of well-received PR.

What neither Brian Collyer nor Fiona Greehan knew was that the bank's head office was casting round for somewhere to park an unwanted and soon-to-be-retired executive. Hilton Browne had been manager of the now-closed Garramindi branch until sidelined with gallstones and other serious health problems. For a time people had spoken of him as unlikely to pull through. But he had clawed himself back to reasonable health; perhaps to prove them all wrong. He wanted to get back to work as soon as his doctors gave him the green light and head office found him another branch. He said he would like to retire in a normal and dignified way. Head office, or possibly a friend of his there with some clout, had responded with a firm yes. He should hear their decision soon after the short Christmas break …

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Constable Guy Briggs had a different question to resolve. His parents had indicated a willingness to come out to Buckton to visit their youngest son currently enduring what they regarded as a form of exile. As he said to Dennis Walsh, "I guess I could book them into the motel—or do you think the pub would be better?"

"Depends who you want to benefit. I'd rather give my dough to Bill Borrie at the pub than John Goodrick at the motel—but it's your choice. I hear there's a farm stay place opening up over Dinawadding way. They've got some brochures in the Co-op."

The complex company structure which had operated the feed lots there, under the name of Japana Beef, had sold off everything in a giant auction sale. Local people had responded with mixed emotions. Some had wanted a more responsible company to take everything over and provide employment locally, buy locally, in general become a responsive member of the small struggling community. Others were now so disillusioned by the supposed big corporate solution to country problems that they expected no benefit no matter what happened. Some had hoped to be able to buy back into land that had once been owned and operated by long-time families in the area. In the event no one really got much out of the sale except the shadowy people behind the business; theirs too the benefits of the sell-off and the transport; theirs too, so some people said, the discreet

movement of profits to tax-free havens. And there had been rumours that it wasn't a 'real' sale, that it was merely … but people varied on what they meant by 'real' …

One of the old farmhouses in the complex had reportedly been sold to a Sydney couple who had also bought and transferred part of the bunk house system. After a month or two of feverish activity they were opening up under the curious title of Caritas Farm Stay Holidays. Several people had asked Father Colgan if it meant the place had the blessing of the Catholic Church. The old man only responded with his slightly sardonic smile, "I am chary with my blessings. I don't give them to brands or logos or commercial tat. Nor should you." People were unsure whether they should treat this as an indication not to have anything to do with the place—or whether it only meant that the name itself was irrelevant and they should see what guests had to say about their stay there.

None of this helped Briggs decide where to park his mum and dad for a few days but it did suggest a discreet place to invite his ex-girlfriend Rita. After a year together in Brisbane they had broken up when he told her he was being sent to the small town of Buckton, on the Darling Downs. She had, understandably, seen this as a demotion and probably the end of a viable and worthwhile career. At first he had accepted that as the end of a nice relationship. Then something had kicked in; maybe a bit of toughness had rubbed off his new sergeant. He wasn't sure whether Dennis Walsh would persevere against the odds when it came to his love life but he now had absolutely no doubt that his sergeant never gave up on a case no matter how small the problem or how sparse the clues.

When he found himself sent round to the bit of weedy land on the other side of Buckton Creek behind the butter factory, to check on who'd been trying to set alight the two wooden picnic tables there he had assumed it was the usual business of going through the motions; the problem was to be checked and written up, then they would move on to more important things. But that wasn't the way Walsh worked. A problem was a problem. And he was expected to bring all his skills to bear on it. He had smarted from the unvarnished criticism for days afterwards. But he had learnt something from the experience.

What material evidence had he found, his boss wanted to know. Who used the area regularly. Had anyone seen anyone down there. How far had he extended his search. At the end of this grilling he was sent straight back to do another, wider, search. And this time he had found several pages from what looked like a children's novel caught up in the scrubby wattles along that side of the creek. He still wasn't sure what to do with this evidence or even whether it *was* evidence but Walsh sent him round to the primary school to get the pages of the book identified.

An hour later he had them down as coming from a Robin Klein book called *Junk Castle* and that a copy had not been returned to the library; the borrower being a timid boy called Vaughan Pike. He had paid the library the cost of a replacement copy out of his pocket money. When questioned he could only, or *would* only, say he must've dropped it somewhere.

"Down in the picnic area behind the butter factory?" Guy Briggs felt some sympathy. He understood what it was like to be bullied both at home and at school.

"No. I n-never g-go there." But Briggs was experienced enough to know when a nervous child was lying.

"Did they take your book away from you—or did they wait till you came through the back way there?"

"No. I d-didn't … I don't know where I lost the book … honest I d-don't."

"But your home is up that way. It would be natural to cut through there by the nursery and go up that way."

"I never … I g-go r-round … "

"You aren't in trouble, Vaughan. I know someone took the book from you on your way home."

"I just … I lost it s-somewhere."

It was like questioning a little rabbit caught out in the open too far away to make a lightning dash to the safety of its burrow.

Vaughan was obviously more frightened of other boys than he was of Guy Briggs. If it hadn't been for the intervention of the part-time librarian, Julie McLaren, who said, "It's okay, Vaughan, I'll tell Constable Briggs that I saw—"

"No! Don't tell!" The boy showed signs of real panic.

"Okay, I won't tell." But he showed no sign of being appeased.

Guy Briggs hated finding himself in a situation where he didn't know what to do next. He could go back to the station and ask his sergeant how to proceed; should he push, should he step back a little, should he give guarantees … and what was a guarantee worth in this situation …

"Just tell me one thing then. Are the other boys who go home that way in your class—or are they older?"

A mulish look came over the boy's face. Wild horses were not going to drag an answer out of him. But Mrs McLaren said calmly, "They're mostly older. Don't worry, Vaughan, you're not in trouble. But we have to find a way to resolve this situation. I want you to be safe outside school as well as inside it."

Vaughan didn't seem to find any comfort in this.

But Guy Briggs realised that he had more material evidence than the torn pages. The old days of neat black and brown lace-ups or summer sandals had given way to a range of footwear for the school's children. Uniform was not compulsory at Buckton Primary. Shorts and shirts for the boys, blouses and skirts for the girls. But beyond that was room for hand-me-downs, varied colours, if not much individuality, and he'd found a number of clear marks from shoes in the area where children came over the small footbridge and past the two picnic tables. He'd also lifted several threads caught in the slats of the tables and benches. They might be relevant.

"Okay. That's fine, Vaughan. The police have lots of clues—apart from the pages out of your library book."

"It mightn't be my library b-book." Vaughan hadn't given up his fearful stance.

After the boy had returned to the playground Constable Briggs said, "If you could just let me know the names of the boys you've seen going that way—but I think it would be better if I tackled the whole class."

"I don't think you'll get any confessions, Constable."

He wasn't sure either. It was one of the rare times when he wished he had not only Walsh's confidence and local knowledge but his willingness to push people up to the boundary lines. He had the awful thought, at times, that the only reason he'd chosen the police was his fear of being seen as a wimp. A uniform brought a certain useful sense of authority with it. With three older dare-devil brothers pushing him, daring him, teasing him, bullying him, he had looked round for a way to offset his natural shyness and lack of self-confidence.

Now he could go into a classroom and try playing the tough guy cop. It probably wouldn't be very convincing. Or he could …

"Which room is theirs?"

"Five A … at the end of the corridor here."

"Thanks. I'll try a different tack. Have you got any spare paper?"

He set himself up at the classroom door and waited for the children to come in at the sound of the bell. Then he asked each child to allow its shoes to be drawn around on the paper. There were eleven boys and fourteen girls in the class so some refining of the results would be necessary. As each one stepped on to the paper he asked for a name and an address. The class teacher was not enamoured of the holdup but many of the children seemed to find the exercise intriguing. One girl was brave enough to ask, "What are you looking for?"

"I've got some very suspicious footprints. I need to see who I can remove from my investigation. The others will have to be questioned by Sergeant Walsh." He felt vaguely compromised, even something of a heel, for using his superior's name in this context. But several of the students looked a little uneasy. One thing, maybe, to pick on a younger and more timid child on the way home—but quite another to have to face up to Buckton's ogre of a sergeant?

At the end of the exercise he gathered up his wad of old paper. "Could I just say something to your class before I go?" The teacher with a long-suffering look gestured 'be my guest'.

Constable Briggs was not particularly confident in any public sphere but he said firmly, "Boys and girls, I'm here because of a serious crime. Do any of you know what arson is?"

The same girl put her hand up. “I know. It’s when you burn things that don’t belong to you, isn’t it?”

He nodded. “That’s about it. Has anyone here ever burnt, or tried to burn, something that doesn’t belong to them?”

The class all stared back at him but no one volunteered any information. “Okay then, who walks home past the plant nursery and through that little picnic ground and up the road past the butter factory?”

Again there was silence. This time the teacher intervened. “You do, David, and Trent and Ian and Sam. So don’t just sit there.”

The four boys continued to sit mute and solid, apparently determined to test everyone’s patience.

“Okay, I won’t keep you from your lesson any longer—but I expect you four to come by the police station after school so I can check if you ever saw anything.”

They had obviously hoped their class teacher, a rather gangly young man called Evan Conroy, would ask that he be allowed to get on with the afternoon. Now a sense of dismay, faint but almost palpable, seemed to intervene. But it was the same girl who pitched in firmly again.

“Everyone knows they tried to burn those picnic tables, mister. They talked about it. They even said they used that little kid’s library book so they’d get him into trouble. We all know that. You don’t have to be clever to solve that crime.”

Afterwards Guy Briggs wondered if this was true. Not clever exactly. But persistent. So he *would* try to persuade Rita one more time. If nothing came of it, if she’d already found someone else, then he would ask Joanne McNally out in a more serious way. But Rita, when he girded up his confidence and asked her, said a cautious ‘yes’.

Dennis Walsh had a quite different question when he heard the result of this investigation. “So who is this girl who solves crimes for you?”

It embarrassed his junior to have to say he didn’t know.

“I thought you wrote their names down as you outlined their feet.”

“I’m not sure which one was hers.”

“For crying out loud! We need to know if this kid is running any risk herself by dobbing them in. We need to know if this is revenge for something else. They may not be hardened criminals—but you have to ask if there’s any chance of payback.”

That his return to the school had something slightly crestfallen about it did not influence his thoughts in regard to Rita … but it seemed to bring out the worst in the principal, Nelson L’Estrange, when he found the young constable asking questions of the school secretary; the gist of his criticism being that the police should stay off school premises unless they received a specific request from him or a member of his staff.

If there was a simple foolproof way of dealing with Mr L’Estrange then Constable Briggs had not yet found it. He longed to say with authority, “Then how about tackling the question of bullying as children try to get home safely? And why didn’t *you* get on to us as soon as it became common knowledge around the school?” But he did as he usually did there, acquiesced meekly, took the slip the secretary handed him, and left the school as fast as possible. To make matters worse, the name on the piece of paper meant absolutely nothing to him. Genevive Carter. He couldn’t link her to a Buckton family. Maybe she found the courage to speak out because she was only here briefly, perhaps staying with relatives or here because a parent had a temporary job in town.

Worse still, though the boys had confessed and young Vaughan had been absolved of all responsibility for the library book they’d ripped apart to thrust some of its pages between the slats and set alight, it did not leave him with any sense that *he* had solved the problem.

Sergeant Walsh only said, “Make a note of the name. But don’t forget—it was worth going back and hunting round more carefully.”

He could see that. And he called by the Co-op on his way home to pick up a brochure. He couldn’t ask Rita to stay in the small flat he rented from Betty and Mervyn Cronk. Betty, he felt sure, listened at doors. And she wasn’t backward in calling fornication ‘disgusting’. Like Pastor Kramer she was loudly indignant that their local sergeant was happy to ‘live in sin’. What sort of an

example was that to impressionable young minds? He had thought to cut in on one of her regular diatribes to ask her for her proof. He had thought of pointing out that sex outside of marriage was not a crime. Instead he did his best to avoid his landlady … sneaking past her door, avoiding her invitations to 'come on over', excusing himself with the plea of work any time she managed to waylay him in the lane past her house or when he was putting out his weekend washing …

The Farm Stay place sounded quite good. They planned to open for business on New Year's Day but they still had a few rooms available at their Opening Special Price. The woman who answered the phone had a rather throaty sexy voice. He wondered how she spoke to enquiring women. But he did as she suggested and booked Rita in for four days at the end of January. If it turned out to be awful he was certain he could find somewhere in Buckton …

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How the information leaked out—that ex-racing driver Campbell Briggs was planning to come to stay in Buckton—no one knew exactly. But it didn't take long for several people to call in to the station and ask if there was a chance to meet him or would they just have to try their luck round at the Coolibah Hotel? One of them, the Principal of Buckton High School, Derek Coleman, had a more ambitious idea: was there any chance of Campbell Briggs running a 'driving day' where young men or more particularly high school students getting their L plates might be able to get some tips on safe and professional driving? Kids who would tune out their parents' attempts to drill safety in might actually listen to someone who had won at Bathurst and other tracks around Australia.

Dennis Walsh said, though without wild enthusiasm, "For once the old fool seems to have a reasonable idea. Is that something your dad might care to do … on his holiday?" Guy had never seen Mr Coleman as an 'old fool' and wondered what had sparked the epithet.

"I'll ask him. He might agree." But there was something in the way he said it which seemed to suggest there wasn't a warm father-son relationship to be invoked. It might only be that Campbell had been away frequently in his son's growing-up years, that Campbell hoped his son would follow in his footsteps, or even that Campbell felt his son should be more savvy when it came to mechanical things …

"They didn't like it when you decided to join the force?"

"They didn't mind. My mum's dad was a cop. He ended up as an Inspector. They want me to get at least that high up." It wasn't so much the words or the tone, more something to do with body language; his father had been annoyed that his son, long before he got a firm foot on the ladder, had chosen to make enemies and get himself punished in the simplest most effective way open to powerful men: relegation to a small distant unimportant backwater.

"You will. If that's what you want."

Campbell Briggs wasn't wild about the idea of running a workshop for 'hick' drivers but said he would set aside a day. As Guy thanked him and hung up he found himself thinking back to his boss's statement: you will. But what about the second part? Was it what he wanted? And the answer, even on the days when he felt he had achieved something worthwhile, helped someone maybe, found something, helped move a case forward, was a cautious 'no'. He was no longer sure if it really was what he wanted. And if not … then what? Sometimes he lay in bed musing. But seeing his parents, seeing Rita again—maybe that sense of contact with the wider world would help make his thoughts clearer.

While people were gathering at the small Uniting Church for a carol service on Friday evening Guy Briggs was driving out to take a first hand look at the Caritas place. How far away from Buckton was it exactly. What were its facilities like. Had they really managed to set up a swimming pool, tennis courts, and clock golf in such a short time, not to mention 'pleasant horse trails' and 'a chance to stroll in the bush'. He wasn't sure that Dinawadding had much bush left to stroll in.

Dennis Walsh also had a question still begging an answer. This Genevive Carter. Was she confident because a parent taught at the school, had money, had influence? Was she related to young Vaughan Pike and felt mildly responsible for him? Had those boys teased her, made her life a misery, and she felt confident enough to speak out now that it was clear the police were involved? Or some other reason …

Fiona Greehan sometimes dropped by the station after work. She had long since ceased to be surprised to find Dennis there at all hours. The presence of Guy Briggs might make it easier for him to go out on cases. But there was a quality to him which hated leaving things undone. She understood, even sympathised, and she had come to accept the interrupted nature of their times together. She even had the vague sense that it heightened something; this sense that she never knew when he would be snatched away from her. Now she came over to the counter and waited for him to finish shoving files into the station's battered cabinet. He said straight off, "Have you ever come across anyone called Carter round the district?"

"I sometimes lie awake at night asking myself—is it me that Dennis really wants or just me as a source of information? I can never decide the answer."

"Very funny. And I know that if you know something—chances are everyone from here to Charleville also knows it." He closed the cabinet and locked it before coming round the counter to give her a decided kiss. "And you haven't answered my question."

"As a matter of fact I have heard of someone called Carter. The man in charge of building the new dam at Burleigh is an Anthony Carter. Is that of any help?"

"Does he have a daughter?"

"I really don't know. Kieran would know."

"Okay. Thanks for that. You're looking a bit gloomy. Don't you like Christmas? Or have I been too offhand lately?"

"I am pleased for Brian, I really am. He deserves to get ahead."

"As in?"

"They just contacted him to say he's got the job of assistant manager in Winville. It's me I'm worried about."

"You could've applied. I wouldn't try to talk you out of it."

"It isn't that. And it *is* only a rumour." She seemed reluctant to spell everything out. "It's about Hilton Browne. He's just about okay again … and he's been told he can work out his time in a quiet branch … "

"As in Buckton?"

"Maybe. He would be senior to me. I would have some difficulty working under him. But I guess there's no point in worrying about something which may not eventuate."

"True. And don't let it spoil your Christmas."

"I won't. I'm just off round to the church to sing carols. I don't suppose you'd like to join me? I'm sure you've got a lovely baritone voice tucked away there."

"I didn't know you go to church."

"I don't usually. But Godfrey Waddell invited me. I always feel a bit sorry for him. People say he's gay but he isn't—and some of the men round town give him a hard time, not you of course, but some of the … " She could say 'the redneck element' but she really didn't know if that was true. And Dennis wasn't fussed on city people who casually used descriptions like 'hick' and 'redneck'. He was mildly sexist, but not embarrassingly so, and he was as free of any aspect of racism as anyone she had ever met. But how he felt about homosexuality she really didn't know and wasn't about to ask.

"Well, enjoy your singing with him." But he held her for a moment longer than usual in a powerful embrace. It was hard to read danger into this unexpected friendship with Godfrey Waddell but he knew the men who could inspire pity, a feminine need to nurture and bind up wounds, could sometimes be more successful that the self-sufficient ones. And Waddell was a good-looking man to those who didn't mind that rather namby-pamby effeminate aspect. Fiona might well be willing to overlook that for the sake of a companion interested in music, theatre, even ballet …

But the idea of seeing himself in a tussle with Waddell, Fiona the prize, was absurd. The more people she had in her life who made Buckton seem friendly and pleasant, a desirable place to remain in, the better.

He lifted the phone when he had the office to himself and eventually tracked down Kieran Dobbs and asked him what he knew about Anthony Carter—or any other Carters.

"Site foreman out at the dam. Late thirties maybe. Seems a decent sort of guy."

"And does he have a daughter, name of Genevive?"

Kieran seemed to ponder this before saying, "Do you know, I have an idea he has. I think his wife died and he takes the girl with him on longer contracts. He's got a big caravan parked near the site. So I guess she could get the bus in to school. But I don't know her name. Is there a problem with anything?"

"Probably not. But I might just check and see if it's the same girl. Thanks for that."

If she had to deal regularly with some of the men who ended up on building sites she might well be capable of dealing with that group of school bullies. If she was going to move on in six months she might not care about making serious friends and being popular with the other girls in her class. The trouble with all this was that it left Vaughan Pike in a vulnerable position …

He lifted the phone again and got Nelson L'Estrange. The boys had been let off with a caution and the requirement that they, or their parents, pay for the repairing of both picnic tables and the replacement library book. School had now finished for the year. He wasn't entirely happy with the outcome; that dangerous combination of pleasure in setting fires and targeting a much younger boy. But he had passed a small item on to the local broadsheet urging parents and community members to take that kind of petty vandalism more seriously; left unchecked it could grow. This had brought down some parental ire and he'd found himself explaining that although a caution kept the boys out of the justice system it didn't give them the right to have their names and ages suppressed. He wanted Nelson's take on the bullied boy. Was there any likelihood of him getting bullied in the holidays?

Nelson always gave the impression of someone who knew everything and everyone in his small domain; he was forever poking and peering and prying, always complaining about the smallest issues and discrepancies. And yet he was like someone who homes in on the brushstrokes in a Rembrandt rather than ever viewing the whole picture. It seemed to take him a while to call Vaughan Pike to memory.

"I wouldn't think so. All the older boys are talking about going to see Campbell Briggs at the showgrounds or getting into the cricket coaching clinic Ben Knight is going to run through the holidays. I doubt if they'll give Vaughan another thought—unless he gets in their way."

"I'll take your word for it."

But after he'd hung up Walsh wondered how reliable the principal's word really was. Nelson and his wife would be gone from Buckton for the next six weeks, their house left empty but bristling with locks and alarms, their garden left in the care of Kaylee Williams to mow and trim and water as needed. Nelson might not be the best person to ask about a vulnerable child.

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Guy Briggs found the right turn-off to take him to the farm holiday place; the road ran east along the boundary of the feed lots, not the most attractive of places to holiday, even for a rabid meat-eater (and he couldn't remember Rita ever expressing an opinion one way or the other) but Caritas had set up on one of Japana Beef's newly-acquired farms well away from the maze of yards and silos. Only the back paddocks had been brought into the operation at the time of the sale. Now he looked out on an old farmhouse surrounded by pepper and bottle and jacaranda trees, relaxed-looking with verandahs on three sides and little sunrooms tucked into the corners. It looked peaceful and pleasant as he drove into the small parking area beyond the front garden. Maybe it would turn out to be a good choice after all.

As he parked a tall attractive woman with a blonde ponytail came out and down the steps towards him. He had come in his own car but had not bothered to change out of his uniform before setting out. Later he had difficulty in deciding just what it was about her which suggested she wasn't happy to have a policeman come calling. The way her smile slipped briefly and had to be re-pasted? But when she spoke her voice was warm and faintly sexy. "Hello. What can I do for you? Is there a problem here?"

"No. Nothing like that. I just came on after work. I rang you the other day to see if you'd have room for a guest in late January. Rita Jackson."

"Of course! I thought for a moment … something might've happened locally and I hadn't heard. Do come in and look around. I'm Eve Rogers by the way."

She seemed the gracious hostess to her fingertips and he was amazed at how quickly they had turned a not very exciting farm into a place to relax in comfort. A brand new swimming pool now spread out behind the house with non-slip paving, tables with beach umbrellas, newly-laid lawn, even the importation of several well-grown palm trees. The old tennis court had been re-fenced and refurbished. The bunkhouse they'd bought and shifted over now looked more like conjoined beach huts; several horses grazed in the paddock beyond and a lovely big golden Labrador came bounding out to join them on their tour. The old sheds still looked like old sheds but he didn't doubt they'd soon receive a makeover. A small cottage a little further away was a small country cottage, apparently unchanged. He asked what they planned to do with it.

"We haven't decided yet. Maybe more accommodation if there's the demand. Maybe a games room, ping pong, that kind of thing. Billiards maybe. We'll learn as we go along."

"And what about the farm side of things?" Not that this would particularly interest Rita—unless she had changed drastically since he'd last seen her.

"The horses, of course. We've got some cattle on agistment at the moment, they belong to Japana. We thought we would get a tractor for people who would like to learn to drive one. But what we really want to create is a little oasis of calm in people's busy lives. We plan eventually to put in a small landing strip and heli-pad so people can fly in from Sydney for a weekend and have nothing more disruptive in their time here than some birdsong. We know it's something which will only have limited appeal to country people but we're hoping jaded city people will enjoy it."

"Is that why you called it Caritas?"

"We do care … about our guests. And there doesn't seem to be any reason why the Catholic church should have a monopoly on it."

She showed him through the bunkhouse rooms which were set up now with en suite bathrooms and self-catering; the house had a long dining room and two large lounges. The kitchen was now a bright modern area. She showed him the two guest rooms in the house; one set up as an old-fashioned bedroom with dark drapes and a chaise longue in one corner and a beautiful washstand with a china ewer and basin, the other as an old-fashioned sleepout with Boys' Own-type-furnishings, books, comics, a half-finished balsawood model on a small table, several boxes of Meccano …

It was only later when he was telling his boss about the place and Dennis said, "Sounds like an attempt to get old blokes to relive their childhood," that he realised it *was* subtly geared to the needs of older men. Did it matter? Rita might like that kind of attention—and more so if the men were well-off. As he thought that he realised that though she seemed happy enough to work in a souvenir shop in the Queen Street mall there was something of the hustler in her makeup. If she couldn't get there under her own steam then she would happily marry someone who could carry her along. He wasn't sure what to make of this thought. She was willing to come all this way … so she must believe Buckton was only a small blip in a rising career.

"Would you mind if I used the Internet to try and find a bit more on the Rogers? I think they came here from Sydney."

"Seems I can't keep you off the bloody thing. But I s'pose there's no harm knowing who's moved on to our patch. D'you want to check and see if they've got a police record while you're at it?"

"No. Of course not! She seems a very nice woman—"

"And nice women never commit crimes? New one on me."

"I didn't mean that exactly. But they've been checked by the Council and the Health Department and they're accredited with the Farm Stay organisation."

Dennis Walsh was tempted to say, "So what?" But it wasn't worth pursuing. And if the Rogers brought money into the district people would find pleasant qualities in them, willy nilly. With luck they were genuine and decent people and would be a welcome addition to the small and struggling community of Dinawadding.

Though he spent quite a while on it Guy Briggs could not turn up any Eve and Adam Rogers. Possibly this was their first business venture or, though they were listed as proprietors, they were actually just managing the place for a sleeping partner. He found a number of things using the word

Caritas in the title; obviously it was not solely a Catholic concept. It was only when he moved on to look at the restructuring of Japana Beef that he came on something interesting. A company called Bruloder Inc. had bought the central part of the operation and the right to continue using the name. But Bruloder's head office was listed as being in 'Chicago, Illinois, USA'; a Brisbane postal box was also given.

No one had mentioned this American connection. It probably was irrelevant but he felt his own curiosity piqued. Why had they kept it so quiet? There had been a big fanfare when King Ranch and other American business interests had moved into rural Queensland. Why not Bruloder? Or were they another of those complex holding companies—and the real owners were something quite different? It wasn't a crime to keep a low profile and he couldn't see a way to justify spending more time on slaking his curiosity.

But he thought he might ask Rita to keep her eyes and ears open. If Dennis thought there were grounds for suspicion then he didn't want to be found lagging behind the eight ball … except his boss hadn't exactly been *suspicious* … more that passion to know who was who and what was what on his beat …

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The Show Committee had got firmly behind the idea of Campbell Briggs running a talk, a demonstration, some hands-on driving at the showgrounds, even demonstrated some alacrity. Staid and sober farmers and businesspeople suddenly turned into youths whose wilder dreams had long ago been put aside in favour of 'real life'. They even consented to truck in a load of gravel to create a 'dangerous' corner to demonstrate good driving on bad roads …

The local café agreed to set up their hot food van. The Committee, a little less joyfully, offered their meeting room as a film room. And youngsters from about ten upwards turned up in their dozens …

Campbell Briggs in the flesh had all the flair and flamboyance of his TV appearances. A wiry man of medium height with dark hair going grey. And he held his motley audience in effortless thrall as he talked about big races, asked tough questions, said a driver who needed to check his speedometer all the time should not be on the road, "like a jockey you've got to be a good judge of pace", got a number of teenagers to drive a circuit with him close behind; he even got in and asked several of them to show him how they cornered, how they started, how they stopped. He autographed the things people thrust at him. He gave some sharp and racy commentary to the footage he had brought along to show.

Dennis Walsh had said to his junior, "Do you want to be there when your dad does his stuff?"

Guy had hesitated then said, "Yes, I think he would expect me to turn up if I can."

"That isn't what I asked you." But he let it go. Campbell Briggs would be a hard man for his son to argue with. He came out himself and spent a half hour watching the activity. It might make the local kids think they could drive with the same panache. It might make them treat driving as a professional skill worthy of their undivided attention. Time would tell. On his way back to town he thought he would stop by the hotel. Clouds of summer dust were in the air. There was a reddish tinge to the sun. The hotel was almost empty except for Bill Borrie sitting with an unknown woman in her fifties.

Campbell's wife? Guy's mother?

Nothing the young man had ever said suggested his mother was a lush but there were a number of glasses on the table.

"Come and join us, Dennis." It was possible it was Bill who had been letting his hair down. "Mrs Briggs has been introducing George and Emma and me to some new stuff." Bill got up, introduced them, then said he was going to bring Dennis a Kahlúa and Coke.

"So you didn't want to join the circus out at the showgrounds," Sergeant Walsh said as he took Bill's chair.

"No. I came for Guy's sake, not to see my husband, the fading star." She didn't sound bitter or envious or even matter-of-fact, more like someone who for whatever reason has ceased to fully engage with life. She was a beautifully groomed woman but a little pale and faded. She gave him a fleeting smile. "There are groupies in our world too, Sergeant, it isn't so different to having a rock

star for a husband … or not the way Cam runs his life. I don't mind if girls adore from afar. It's when the groping starts I find I'd rather be somewhere else."

He nodded. It was hard to know whether she continued to nurse strong feelings or whether she was in the process of letting go that aspect of their life together.

"Anyway, please tell me how well you think Guy is getting along here. He told me you don't like him but I said that liking isn't really the issue. I wanted to know if he was safe and getting on with his career."

"I don't know that he likes me. I'm always at him. But as you say that isn't the issue. The real problem is that his heart really isn't in his work. You can't do your job properly if you avoid people. He would rather solve problems with a computer and it just isn't on in a small two-man-station like Buckton."

"Yes, I do understand that. He's got three older brothers, all good at sport, all extroverted like my husband. And then Guy came along, a little quiet bookish boy … and we aren't a bookish family, you know. Cam never stopped trying to turn him into a clone of himself. And the more Guy retreated from that world the more frustrated and angry my husband got. Guy went into a library when he left school and he was happy there. But hardly a day would go by when he was still living at home with us but his father didn't get stuck into him, telling him libraries were for old maids with buns and glasses—and what the heck was he doing in there. It just never let up. I guess I shouldn't be telling you all this … "

Bill Borrie came over with a glass of dark liquid and a bowl of peanuts. Dennis put a hand in one pocket and spread some coins on the table, "I don't fancy paying to poison myself but—"

"Go on! Down the hatch!" Bill was more chatty and cheerful than useful.

Dennis sipped the drink as Bill helped himself to a couple of coins. "Mmmm, not too bad." Both Bill Borrie and Kaye Briggs looked pleased. But she said to Bill, "You should shout Mr Walsh a drink or two. You told me he keeps the peace for you—"

"Why should Bill shout—when no one expects the bank or the dry cleaners or the supermarket to shout."

"No. I suppose not."

"You've got a good bloke here, Mrs Briggs, so don't tempt him off the straight and narrow. Least corrupt cop in Queensland." Bill was obviously in a jovial let-your-hair-down mood. Dennis Walsh made a mental note to steer him away from exotic cocktails if they looked like becoming a habit.

"Given the benchmark that isn't saying a lot," Dennis said drily. "Haven't you got any work waiting, Bill?"

"Oh, I can take a hint, mate, never fear." But it was another few minutes before Bill consented to leave them to a quiet discussion.

"You were telling me about Guy. So he joined the force to get some peace from his father's pressure."

"That's about it. And my dad got in on the act. He said joining the force would 'make a man of him', that sort of thing. So Guy gave in finally and applied and got in. He was big enough, he was bright enough … but his heart just wasn't in it. He decided it was worth sticking it out so he could get some raw material for a book."

"The famous police procedural he's planning to write?"

"So you know about that?"

"Nothing wrong with his ability to write. He can get the words down on paper. He can whiz around a computer. But then he asks me how to go about the most basic of interviews. That side of things worries me a bit."

She was silent for a long time. "I suppose you are thinking of backup … if things ever get really hairy. I watch the shows on TV."

He hadn't been. But she was right. Guy might or might not be useful in some sort of violent stand-off. He just hoped there was nothing more than the usual petty crime in the offing.

"Maybe. But don't get me wrong. It took courage for him to speak out when they started fiddling with the evidence in that case in Brisbane. I admire him for that. I just don't want him to

spend his life as a square peg in a round hole, just to please his dad. And I'd like to have a constable here with a real commitment to the job."

Both Bill Borrie and George Johnson saw Kaye Briggs put a hand out to clasp one of their sergeant's large paws and lifted her eyes, rather beautiful hazel eyes, or so they later insisted, in a gaze that was no more than kind and grateful but which they reinterpreted as a sign she had fallen victim to their sergeant's not-very-noticeable quota of charm. Within a week various versions of this were all around Buckton and Raelene Perry said to Kieran and Fiona and their friend Matt Holloway, "Have you heard the latest? Apparently Campbell Briggs's wife fell hook, line, and sinker for Dinny Walsh while she was here. Tender moping looks. Holding his hands in the pub. Telling him she can't leave without him. Just about turns your stomach to hear what's doing the rounds, like something out of a bad Victorian novel, and the poor woman must be going gaga—"

"So how is Guy taking the gossip then?" Kieran said briskly.

"I've no idea. I think we've shared six words since he came to Buckton. But I imagine he's terrified even by the merest suggestion he might get Dinny as a stepfather down the track. Bad enough as his boss … "

Fiona always said to herself, 'I am not going to let Rae get a rise out of me', but she said aloud, "Do you know, I think there *is* an element of father-son in their relationship. She is probably grateful that he's found someone he can genuinely respect and look up to. A good role model, if you like."

"We *are* talking about Campbell Briggs's son here," Rae said drily, "not the son of Dan Goodrick or some local no-hoper—"

"But I think Fee is right." Kieran often tried to please everyone in his social life. "Campbell was a hit with some of the kids but I also heard people say he was a bit of a skite and a show-off … and they didn't like the way he seemed to regard most of the locals as mentally-challenged. I doubt if fathering ever got very high priority in his scheme of things."

"And you're suggesting it might in Dinny's scheme of things? That's clutching at straws, Kieran." Rae put on an indulgent and wryly amused expression.

"Not our business really. But a bit hard on Guy if people really are spreading stories like that," Matt said. Then he moved the conversation away to the new dam being built, water allocations, the changes that irrigation would bring to the quiet little community around Burleigh. Fiona listened but her thoughts wandered a little. Because there was an important difference between Dennis and Campbell Briggs. Dennis, she felt sure, would never take his son for granted in the way the other man did with Guy. Because there was other gossip doing the rounds to the effect that Campbell Briggs had guffawed and said as though it was a huge joke, "I don't know where I went wrong with Guy—but I guess you can't win 'em all." She was tender-hearted enough to believe that Guy would prefer hearing that his mother and Dennis had found some common ground, even if it was only discussing his career or whether Betty Cronk was a good landlady …

Case No. 2: An Old Flame

January was a hot dry month in Buckton. A couple of afternoons which promised storms withered away instead into some muttering on the horizon and reports of rain elsewhere. But no one watched the weather with more painful intensity that Constable Briggs. If it was nice while Rita was staying at Caritas it might help his cause. If it was horrible, dusty and blowing, she would probably blame him and hurry home to Brisbane …

The only other person to feel the week would prove important was Joanne McNally. She knew it was very unlikely that she and Guy would ever get serious; she could not wind the clock back far enough to believe in such a possibility. But she had heard the gossip and seen his parents and intuited something of his doubts. She wasn't given to deep introspection but she felt that the one thing she could offer, a happy and warm-hearted domestic situation, was what he really wanted. He just hadn't stopped wanting what he thought he should want.

The bushwalking that Caritas could offer was only a stroll through the little slice of bush round the gully to the east with its remaining stand of stringybarks and a few grasstrees on the slope. But if it would rain the creek would be replenished. Not that it really mattered. Rita wasn't interested in bush or walking. Nor did she really want to go to see the Environment Park at Burleigh and Buckton's 'sights' were exhausted in half-an-hour. The alternative was to go swimming at Caritas or take her to things in Winville.

He gave her a guided tour of the police station and introduced her to Sergeant Walsh. Afterwards his only comment to his constable was, "Pretty girl you've got there."

Briggs seemed to take it as a personal endorsement of his choice because he said enthusiastically, "Yes, she's pretty gorgeous, isn't she?" He embarrassed himself with his vehemence—and it didn't take much in the way of detection to see that he hadn't 'got' her and that she was bored stiff with Buckton and the stories he told her of the people and the various crimes, even headline-grabbing things like the Pettigrew case, he'd investigated here. The only time she seemed to spark into her normal effervescent self was when they turned on to the Dinawadding road for the run out to Caritas.

"I'm glad you like it," he ventured at one stage.

"The place iself is not that exciting. But there's some pretty fancy people staying there. I've got an invitation to go to Sydney and visit. And maybe I can wangle a job offer if I play my cards right." It was nice to see her as her remembered bubbly personality. But he couldn't hide his puzzlement.

"Fancy? What kind of fancy?"

"You know, like really rich. There's a man there with a really big import business in Sydney. He showed me a photo of his house and it's like, wow, you wouldn't believe. This huge place right smack on the harbour."

"So what's he doing at Caritas?"

"They've got plans to turn it into a really sophisticated hideaway for business people eventually, somewhere they can come and no one will bother them."

"So it's not really the farm stay side of things they're interested in?"

"I think that's for the quiet times, in between the high fliers. Sort of bread-and-butter stuff."

The first night she was keen to have sex with him there; and although he thought she enjoyed it he felt it was somehow downhill after that. Not an obvious rejection. Just the feeling that she didn't find it as exciting as she'd hoped. There was a faint hovering sense of disappointment about her. Or possibly the disappointment was to do with other things and it simply flowed into their times together in bed. The room had been done out beautifully, the back wall was now what he thought was a fiberglass shell over the original wood—and it glowed with a sensual pink glow at night while soft music seemed to surround them.

"It's going to be like this right the way through when they've finished. I don't know how they do it. But Eve says she wants all their guests to believe they really have stepped into a different world." He agreed with that. The effect *would* be magical. But somehow the image didn't seem to fit the place. At some deep level he really did want to see happy kids out on ponies and parents pottering through the pleasant old garden or sitting by the pool …

"I'm glad you like it."

"It's got a long way to go—but it really is going to be a fab place in a year or two. I wouldn't mind to come back then and see what else they've done with it."

He knew he should say something to suggest he wanted her to come back. But the understanding was gaining on him. He might not belong in Buckton but Rita and Brisbane had gradually drifted away from him. Now he was stuck somewhere between ship and shore. And as he accepted that he and Rita could never be … he hesitated over the right word, not sure now exactly what they had been before and what he had convinced himself they had been …

And if he and Rita couldn't be … what of Joanne? He had been twice round to her house for dinner and he had taken her once to Winville to a movie. It hadn't been a-laugh-a-minute. But now he appreciated how pleasant and comfortable it was to be with someone who just accepted him as he was and hoped he was enjoying her company.

He came out to see Rita and say goodbye on the final Sunday of her stay. She seemed bright and happy but he didn't know what to say in return. He wasn't going anywhere. And it didn't seem much good discussing 'next time' when they both knew there wouldn't be a next time. Even so he was grateful to her for coming and said so because his thoughts were now much clearer …

He said goodbye and kissed her out in the little parking area and said he would fix the bill for her. It was expensive, or far more expensive than either the motel or the pub, but he didn't begrudge the amount. Self-knowledge probably had its own price. He watched Rita's car disappear into the summer haze then he turned and went into the house. The office opened on to the side verandah near the carpark. He could hear Eve on the phone, something about "it worked a treat, so you can relax" and then "must go, darling. Bye now."

He wondered vaguely what she was referring to; but then any new business venture probably had its share of glitches; the equipment and marketing and advertising all waiting for the big test.

As she prepared his bill and he hunted out his credit card he thought again what an incredibly sexy woman she really was; that voice that would not go amiss on a screen goddess, that tall rather willowy style, those breasts Rita had probably envied, that sense of *couture* … the only woman he knew locally who could even pitch in the same league was Fiona Greehan and she was too slight and slender to make that sort of impact.

"Do you have to rush away," Eve said as she ran his Bankcard through the machine. "I'm all alone till my next group of guests arrive. I know you feel at home in these wide open spaces but I must admit I feel a little strange, not nervous exactly, but like a lost child in a big world. Let me get us each a drink and the last of that devil's food cake … it's meant to be eaten fresh by handsome young men." No one had ever called Guy handsome to his face; but later he wasn't sure if she had caught him via his ego or his lust. Because half-an-hour later he was in a big beautiful—or beautifully lavish—room with mirrors everywhere and Eve was convincing him that he was a lover just about any woman would die for …

It was only on the flat glare of the road home that he began to feel a little uneasy. Was that really him, that man who had so effortlessly made love again and again? He felt increasingly queasy and wondered if it was his behaviour or something in the drink or the cake … but that seemed absurd. And any red-blooded man, faintly disappointed in the other woman he'd come to see, might drown in the alternative …

It was only when he turned into the lane and saw Betty Cronk's rather sanctimonious little face at the window that he found he could pinpoint his unease more precisely. There was no hint of love or affection or even need in the afternoon. Instead he felt vaguely like a little performing dog which has been put very thoroughly through its paces.

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If Constable Briggs had uneasy moments through the next few weeks they were not to be compared with his boss's response to going into the neighbouring branch of the Bank of the Darling Downs to make a withdrawal and finding Fiona removed from her office and replaced by the grey figure of Hilton Browne. His name board struck the sergeant like a red rag to a bull.

He had handed his withdrawal slip to Janice Low when he saw the board. Janice was a nice woman and he had no wish to embarrass her. But he took back the slip, said "Sorry", tore it up, took another slip and began to fill it in. "Could you let me know what my exact current balance is, all interest as of today. I'd like to close the account now."

She looked mildly astonished but checked the amount and wrote it down on a piece of paper and pushed it across. He finished filling in the slip and returned it and his bank book to her.

"Is there—is there any reason for this? I mean have we done something to upset you—or would you like to discuss a different kind of account?"

"It's nothing to do with you. But I'm not going to leave my money in a bank being managed by a criminally incompetent man. So I'll just have to transfer over to the Commonwealth." Barry Long might not be the world's best manager but if he'd been up to any shenanigans with customer's accounts, even merely looking the other way, then it wasn't common knowledge.

"I'll just have to check whether I can withdraw that amount in one go for you. I won't be a minute." She dredged up a smile then went away to consult with Fiona Greehan.

"It's under the linit. You don't need authorisation, Janice, but did he give a reason?"

"He said," Janice lowered her voice, "that Mr Browne is a criminally incompetent man."

"Oh dear. Yes, I suppose he's right. But there's nothing we can do about it." The blow-up would come later when Hilton found out. So long as it didn't start a run on the bank. But Dennis would probably now go round to Buckton's other bank and make sure everyone within a ten-kilometre-radius heard why he was there.

Hilton Browne did not get to hear of the transaction till after the bank had closed to customers that afternoon. Then he called Fiona into his office and said, "What did the sergeant want?"

Fiona, initially sympathetic to someone who had pulled through major surgery, was gradually coming to dislike her new boss intensely. He seemed to feel that his survival and recovery somehow gave him the right to believe he was above normal bank protocols and courtesies. He never bothered with names—even addressing her in front of customers with, "Here, girl, stick this in my office" or telling her to bring him a cup of tea. She occasionally made the tea for everyone if she wasn't busy and she saw no reason to always delegate such chores but she had difficulty in controlling her anger at his high-handed and overbearing manner. Had he always been like this—or was it simply that he knew it didn't matter how he behaved for his last few months? Or did he blame her for losing him a pleasant cushy position in Garramindi? If he hadn't been taken so ill would head office have allowed the branch to remain open till he retired? She didn't know. Now she said politely, "He came to close his account with us."

"And how much was in it?"

"Eleven thousand two hundred and thirty-one dollars."

He goggled at her for a moment. "So why the heck did you let him keep that amount in an ordinary savings account? If he'd had most of it on term deposit he wouldn't be able to cut and run like that."

"We offered him all the choices available. That was what he chose—and you know it pays reasonable interest on accounts over five thousand dollars." She felt vaguely embarrassed discussing Dennis's account like this. It was none of her business how much he earned or saved, how he chose to keep his money …

But all Hilton seemed to see was that a decent-sized account had simply been allowed to walk out the front door. "You're supposed to be building the bank! Not cutting it off at the knees! What's the point of opening your legs for him if you can't even keep him as a customer?"

"I'll pretend I didn't hear that."

Hilton Browne had never seen any reason to consider his deputy's feelings; 'little mouse of a woman' was one way he'd been heard to describe his gentle soft-spoken assistant. But now he wondered if he'd gone too far. Something cool and considering in the way she looked at him; like someone deciding whether or not to step on an unpleasant insect …

"Is he moving—and wants to take his money with him?" He knew he wouldn't mind in the least if Dennis Walsh moved on.

"Not as far as I am aware."

"He must've given *some* reason for closing his account?"

"It's not obligatory, you know, but he did say he had no wish to keep his money in a bank run by a 'criminally incompetent man'. His words, not mine." She was tempted to add, "but I fully concur."

The manager ceased toying with a pencil to stare at her. In that moment she was half-inclined to think it was fear she saw in his face then it was wiped away in a tide of anger.

It took him time to get himself under control enough to hiss, "One account gets closed because of him—and I'll see you lose your job with this bank. I mean it. I've got clout. If I don't sack you I'll make sure you're demoted to teller in Woop Woop—"

"Do you know, Mr Browne, I think I would rather like Woop Woop. It would *have* to be nicer and friendlier than any branch you've ever run."

If her colour was a little heightened as she left his office it wasn't particularly noticeable. All the staff had had no difficulty in overhearing the conversation. She found she didn't mind in the least. The interview had solved a lingering puzzle for her: why the branch in Garramindi had been

so lacking in any sense of warmth or helpfulness. A manager sets the tone. And why people spoke of him as being respected and popular but she'd never met anyone there willing to admit to actually liking him. It was his position he had traded on. Not his character.

As she came out of the bank at the end of the day she noticed someone had been gouging the wood around the windows again. Artie Kees back to his usual behaviour with a chisel? She hated the thought. But at least Artie was no longer her responsibility. Hilton could warn him off, threaten to charge him, go round and complain to Dennis …

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A sense of apprehension seemed to hang over the bank the next day, a brooding sense of waiting for the worst. Would there be lines of people waiting to remove money—or had Dennis Walsh's quixotic gesture gone largely unnoticed? Was there sufficient trust and respect for Hilton Browne to offset any bad publicity? All the staff waited, doing their best to appear normal. Not least because they were now aware that their new boss reacted to every reverse and problem in the bank by looking round for a scapegoat.

Fiona, once so angry with Hilton's former deputy Margaret Elliot, found herself thinking that to work year after year under this man would warp and twist even the most kindly nature. And yet to meet Hilton in his customer-friendly mode or holding forth at a Rotary dinner or being asked to comment on rural debt by the media was to meet the quintessential bank manager: a large fruity benign figure, knowledgeable, concerned, 'your troubles are my troubles', someone far removed from the real person and the culture of blame-shifting and spite he fostered.

By the end of the day when Fiona went out wearily and crossed the road to the station opposite her feeling was one of cautious relief; as she told Dennis, "Only four, all elderly women, all very small accounts. And they all told Hilton when he tried to charm them into staying that they were 'amalgamating' their accounts. It sounds as if they planned it together."

"So who were these women?"

"You know I can't say. You'll have to track down your fan club with your detective skills yourself."

"Okay. I'm just shutting up shop here. Would you like to come on over?"

But they had hardly walked into the old house behind the station when the phone rang. He answered it briefly, said he would come, then turned back to Fiona. "A Hannah Morton in trouble apparently. Ring any bells?"

"Well, Morton does. Would you like me to slip into my Wonder Woman costume and come along to protect you from the women of the Morton clan?"

He grinned at that. Although his teeth weren't terribly good (not a lot of fluoride in the water of his childhood) there was still a faintly boyish quality to his grin in the rare times when he let his guard down. She found it attractive. "I won't be long—with luck—stay if you can." He came over to give her a lingering kiss, picked up his cap again, and went out.

Little bit by little bit she had moved a few things into his house; but always consulting him first and trying not to disturb the rather masculine and austere nature of his home. A few extra toiletries in the bathroom, a small cosmetics bag and some spare underwear in a drawer, a couple of items in the frig, several books and magazines in the lounge. Secretly she felt he had no problem with any of it but she still believed that no one else had the right to impose their ideas on his home.

Kaylee Williams had done, or was still doing, wonders with his yard. Little natural clumps of bush garden were being created round several bird baths and a rustic bench and table; a little splash of exotic colour in the form of African marigolds, geraniums, and petunias clustered round the front steps. Kaylee had left a long stretch of lawn alongside the driveway but added in a small vegetable patch, several more fruit trees, and the passionvines which were now growing well over the old fowl house.

Fiona had debated as Kaylee and sometimes her daughter worked in the yard whether he was doing it for her sake, for himself, for greater privacy, even to placate the ire of Jenny Roberts next door; but she always came back to the private certainty that he was doing it to help Kaylee and Susannah Williams as they struggled to establish their little organic gardening business. It was an uphill job; there were still wags who thought it funny to equate organic gardening with eating grass;

there were others who said they would rather eat chemicals and pay less. Kaylee was a large rather phlegmatic woman who appeared to take the comments in her stride. But it wasn't hard to believe that some of the crueler or more misinformed comments hurt.

And she knew that Dennis had got Susannah a replacement guinea pig in Winville (Buckton not having either a pet shop or many guinea pig fanciers) when hers died suddenly. She didn't know their exact arrangement but she *did* know that he'd gone to a lot of care to pick the healthiest one that came closest to Susannah's specifications because she had been with him, one of their rare outings, when he bought it. She had said something about his 'soft heart' and he had only responded with the non-committal statement he thought Susannah was feeding it too much clover. Most people only saw the tough man, the one who inspired terror … but these fleeting little glimpses always touched her …

None of this was much comfort as the hours ticked away. She cooked a meal she could re-heat. She watched the news and a current affairs program then, without much interest, part of a documentary. She browsed through the *Winville Courier* though she'd never quite forgiven John Daly for likening her to Marie Antoinette playing at milkmaids; even Rae laughing and saying, "Well, at least he shows *some* erudition—" wasn't much comfort. She had responded tartly, "No, he's just avoiding a nasty letter from my lawyer."

"*Would* you threaten to sue?" Rae only sounded curious.

"Why not? My reputation may be an intangible asset but it matters to me—and I've had enough people taking cheap shots at it lately."

"But you don't want to get a reputation as being very touchy—or quick to sue. People don't see it as being the country way."

"If by 'the country way' you mean the awful things done to my mother in Garra—like pouring liquid cow manure over her car—then I think suing someone is a more decent and above board way to do things." Although she knew Rae didn't expect to be taken with great seriousness some of her throwaway comments rankled.

The phone rang. Someone complaining that two 'gangs' were fighting down near St Monica's. The only help she could offer was to ring Guy Briggs and ask him to check it out. Another hour passed. She finally gave up and went to bed. It was the sense of waiting which was always hardest to deal with; not because she really worried for his safety, Buckton's version of 'gangs' was hardly a big city version, but because she still hadn't made the mental adjustment to the possibility that he might be back in ten minutes and therefore it wasn't worthwhile starting something—or two hours, in which case she was left with that feeling of time wasted. No doubt police spouses simply got on with everyday life at such times, put children to bed, caught up with friends, went out to committees … rather than this tense business of merely waiting …

Godfrey Waddell who had a rather pleasant tenor voice had asked her if she would think of joining the Uniting Church choir. The church was struggling and its choir rarely claimed more than ten people in its ranks. But this did not stop them trying out some quite ambitious pieces. She liked that. He had told her in his earnest yet fluttery way, "I tried all the churches in Buckton and this is the one that made me feel most welcome." She had not asked how or when or why. It was just nice to see him looking cheerful rather than his rather resigned and mournful workaday self. Now as she drifted off to sleep an odd little idea came to her: she had never seriously considered having a piano, not even a small keyboard, round at the flat, not wanting to inflict scales and arpeggios on Rae and Kieran. But there was plenty of room here if Dennis didn't mind an extra piece of furniture …

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She was deeply asleep when he came home. He slipped tiredly into bed alongside her and debated the possibilities: he could wake her up, but he didn't like being woken up himself in the night and it was a working day tomorrow; he could make love to her as she slept, but although she wouldn't be here if she truly objected to such an idea he felt it wasn't something to be 'done' to someone, only shared; or he could close his eyes in the feeling of comfort and peace her presence gave. There might come a day when he could no longer hide from the fact that he was just another paunchy slightly balding middle-aged cop going nowhere in particular … and hardly God's gift to

women. And one day Fiona would wake up and ask herself what she was doing here with someone who had so little to offer.

His former constable, John Applegarth, had sent him a card. John was now a Senior Constable. John was hoping to make Sergeant soon. John would climb past him in a year or two. John was the callow youth he had urged onwards. John was bright and hardworking and ambitious. Perhaps he should feel vaguely resentful or envious. But he felt only a secret sense of achieving something by the young man's rise.

Perhaps because he still had something he saw as more precious. He reached over to put an arm round Fiona and press a kiss to her sleeping forehead. And John had let his hair down enough to finish up his note with: 'I know I didn't always appreciate your criticisms when I was in Buckton. In fact I dreaded them sometimes. But I know I'm getting along pretty well now because of the things I learned from you. I'll always be glad of that.'

Maybe John was just being diplomatic, maybe he was just being his nice friendly self, but he had developed and matured almost day by day here … and for a fleeting moment between waking and sleeping Dennis Walsh wished he could have John back instead of the problematic Guy. But if any philosophy had been instilled in Dennis Walsh as a child then it was probably the simple one: make the best of what you have.

Fiona, waking and yawning and saying sleepily "I'm sorry I gave up on you" in the strengthening dawn, was the best of what he had in that moment. But over breakfast he told her the story of Hannah Morton and her second husband, Clem Fuller, a small rather brow-beaten man with a long nose, watery eyes, and a perfectly round bald spot, parking their car and caravan in her daughter-in-law's yard. A perfectly practical plan seeing that Buckton didn't have a caravan park—yet—except that the daughter-in-law happened to be a greedy and vindictive woman who demanded that they pay to use all the facilities there. In the ensuing argument three generations went hammer-and-tongs at each other, managing to break a window and spread various household objects over the lawn. A neighbour had rung in to complain, convinced the Mortons were neighbours she could do without, convinced that Hannah was bearing the brunt of the fight, and not really caring whether it might be seen as an unfriendly act …

But somewhere in the middle of the mayhem the new man in Hannah's life decided he didn't much like the stepdaughter-in-law or the step-grandchildren he had just inherited—and he had managed to ease himself out of the fracas unnoticed, hook up the caravan again, and drive away. When Hannah realised what had happened, and the awful fact that her belongings were probably now somewhere on the road north-west of Buckton, she became hysterical.

"I'd get hysterical too if I was left in that household with nothing more than my handbag," Dennis said sourly. "So I just shoved her in the car and went after him. Caught him the other side of the Burleigh turn-off."

"I shouldn't laugh—it's rather dreadful really." But Fiona found herself spluttering into her breakfast cereal and had to take a minute to compose herself again.

"He didn't seem too keen to have her back either. But I told him if he wanted to separate or get a divorce he could at least do the decent thing and return her belongings to her. I said there was a caravan park in Garra. When I left there they were still trading insults. I've got to go out that way this morning so I'd better check that one of them hasn't been dumped on the side of the road."

"And I suppose you told them to pull themselves together and behave like adults?" She could imagine the sort of blast they would've copped from him.

"I did. But, y'know, I shouldn't need to be telling adults to behave like adults." He took his plate and mug over to the sink. "I'd better be making tracks." Guy had actually beaten him into the station the last two mornings, something unheard of, and he wondered if it was a sign of a new-found enthusiasm, or something to do with looking things up on the computer, unmolested.

He went to clean his teeth and put on his shoes and collect his jacket. "Oh, by the way, George Stadler left this for you when he called by yesterday. Sorry I didn't think of it last night. He'd been to visit Brett and Julie at Wacol."

She took the crumpled envelope. "That was very kind of him."

"Yeah. He's a decent old sod."

She slit the envelope and drew out a single sheet of paper. It was from Julie Elliot. The gist of most of the letter was that she wished that Fiona had never come to Garra and had never gone searching for the missing money. Some of it was a long whine about her life there with a supposed father who studiously ignored her, not even so much as a 'Good morning, Julie', and a mother who was always carping and complaining, and Brett who had only one aim in life and that was to get away from Garra, but towards the end Julie seemed to pull herself together enough to say that she had admired Fiona and would like to be like her and then the final heartfelt admission: 'I've never stopped being sorry for hitting you on the head. I did it to please mum and Brett and because I knew you'd found out what Brett was doing to make enough money for us to leave Garra. I hope you will be able to forgive me for it some day.'

Fiona came to the end and looked up. "I thought you were in a hurry?"

"I am. But I didn't want to leave you alone if it was an upsetting letter." In response she handed it over. "See for yourself."

At last he nodded and handed it back. "Either she's a clever little hellcat or it's genuine. But don't sit down and write back for a while … "

"No. I won't. But although it's not a crime or anything to do with what was going on there—now that I've met Hilton I find myself wondering if Julie really is his daughter. Just the vague question each time I look at him."

"It could be false pretences if he put himself down as her father—knowing he wasn't. I've never had to deal with that kind of thing. But I s'pose I can ask Patsy Browne one day."

"Not on my say so, though. I'm not sure I'm capable of looking at Margaret and Hilton in a clear and unbiased way."

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The two officers set out on the Burleigh road but they had hardly cleared the outskirts of Buckton when Dennis Walsh said to his subordinate, "Okay, you've been going round like a month of bad Sundays. Is it just missing Rita that's got you down—or something I should know about?"

Guy Briggs believed he'd managed to keep his vague sense of disquiet to himself. To know he hadn't was an added discomfort. Yet even now his sense of unease remained a nebulous thing, like dispersed smoke. Life might be easier if he blamed it on the emotion of saying goodbye to Rita …

"It isn't that. I knew after about two days that there really wasn't anything between us. It was almost a relief when she went home again."

"Thought so." But Dennis didn't elaborate.

After a long silence, while summer paddocks flashed by, Guy said carefully, "It was what happened after Rita left. Eve Rogers said she was there alone and she offered me a drink … and I didn't think it mattered but then she suggested sex and I thought 'why not? … "

"And that's made you miserable?"

"Not miserable. Just a strange sort of feeling—like I was set up in some way. I can't explain it. That maybe she wanted to compromise me somehow. I know that sounds a bit … egotistical. But the feeling won't go away."

The trouble always was—by the time they could cut a compromised person adrift other people were almost invariably tainted. He should've asked sooner. But Guy's moods were not really his business.

"And was she alone?"

"She said she was." Then he realised he was doing what Dennis was quick to criticise: accepting people's words at face value. "If she wasn't—then I didn't see or hear anyone else there."

"Then trust your instinct and see what else you can dig up on these people. They may be perfectly genuine and the dame just thought it'd be a hoot to try out a young copper on a dull afternoon. It may be that their ideas don't fit in too well here with a more conservative community. But if your nose twitches don't ignore it."

Guy nodded. It might be like that. Eve was a city person and bored in the country. But he found it hard to think of her as bored. Everything she did gave the impression of planning behind it.

"And I'll give you another piece of advice, on the house. It isn't only money and power that can corrupt cops. Sex can do it too. So never treat your dick like you do your nose, out there for all

the world to muck around with. It's not only about caring for the other person—if you don't trust them absolutely—then keep the bloody thing in your trousers."

Guy digested this homespun wisdom in silence. Then he said tentatively, "But what could they do? You'd sack me rather than back off—if you thought there was something iffy going on there."

"Maybe. So what was your take on the whole set-up?"

"They've put a lot of money and effort to get it set up so fast. I was amazed to see the pool and the units and everything. But it didn't have a farm *feel* about it. It was like someone plonked a place to stay down on what had been a farm. There were none of the things kids would come for … poultry, puppies, lambs, a playground, none of the horses looked small enough for little kids … "

"In other words—an adult hideaway?"

"I guess that's about it."

They reached the turn-off to Randall Spink's small stud and that conversation lapsed. Randall had a thoroughbred stud, standing one sire, a recent English import called Solar Wind. His wife had swum through Sergeant Walsh's life when he first arrived in Buckton as she was the daughter of murdered woman Mary Tripp. But whereas many local people regarded Roberta as a snob they saw her equally uninvolved husband as a 'ladykiller'. It wasn't really hard to see why. He affected a squire-like outfit of tweeds and cap, sometimes with jodhpurs, and he had the sort of clean-cut high-boned face that allowed him to carry the style off reasonably successfully.

Now he came out to meet them as they got out of the police car and said coolly, "Thank you, gentlemen, for coming. If you would take a look at him—then watch a short video clip. I don't want to influence you."

They might've been brought here on a bogus claim. But Dennis Walsh went over to the railing fence and gazed at Solar Wind for several minutes. Guy Briggs joined him, not because he knew much about horses but the stallion was a fine sight as he dashed around the small paddock. A big liver chestnut with a narrow white blaze, slightly crooked, and two barely-noticeable white coronets. He had come through his first breeding season in Australia and was putting on weight again.

"What's he like to handle?"

"Excellent. I couldn't be happier." Randall Spink didn't sound particularly happy. "I know that people who buy in an expensive horse think the best way to recoup their outlay is to get the poor animal to serve as many mares as he can stand up to—but I would rather get say fifty healthy foals—than a hundred and twenty with some of them a bit dicky."

Walsh nodded. "And this clip you want us to see?"

"Come inside. I've got it set up. Can I get you a drink?"

"No. We've got other calls to make." Walsh hoped to get to the dam site around the time the men stopped for morning smoko …

The house showed the money spent on it; but the end result was quite tasteful and pleasant. Even if Roberta wasn't popular with local women she had a good eye for colour. Randall waved both men to armchairs. "I bought him through an agency but a friend of mine was in the UK recently and he got me some clips through a media monitoring service and got them to put all the segments on to a single tape."

"So what was your criteria for buying him?"

"His bloodline. His record. And I feel pretty confident that the emphasis on speedy little squibs will peak and then people will be looking for a top middle distance sire. That way you can breed up or down, distance wise—it gives you that extra flexibility." And the horse might've been a bargain.

Guy Briggs listened but made no notes; all this might be relevant, then again it might only be chit-chat. And he still had no idea why they were actually here. No sign of vandals or thieves or stock losses …

But the clips *were* instructive. At the end of twenty minutes of watching Solar Wind parade, race, come back to scale, there was a vague sense of unease in the room. Randall clicked off the machine and said bleakly, "What do you think?"

"You're thinking the horse you've got out there in the paddock isn't Solar Wind?"

"I don't know. I honestly don't know. I've thought of getting one of those DNA tests done. It might prove things one way or the other—but if word gets out—there goes our clientele—even if it comes back that we have got the right horse. And if it isn't I'm going to have to refund thousands of dollars in service fees. He's insured but not against that."

"What about the agency?" Guy said diffidently. "Wouldn't they be responsible?"

"If I could prove that the mix-up occurred when the horse was still in their hands. But it could've happened in Brisbane, somewhere along the road—even here I guess—before I got to know him."

"The other question is—if not Solar Wind—then what horse have you got out there?" Dennis sounded grim.

"If I've been using a scrubber all season—then there's going to be a lot of unsaleable foals around come spring."

"Run it through again." Dennis put aside any plans to get to Burleigh. The lunch break would have to do instead. This might be a simple mix-up, no malice involved, or it might be a deliberate attempt to destroy the stud. The Spinks were hard people to warm to and it was possible they'd made enemies over the years.

At the end Dennis said without emphasis, "I'm pretty sure it is the same horse but there *is* something different. Hard to pick. I thought maybe he was clipped or something but it doesn't seem to be that … a different way of holding himself too. Might only be older, different climate, different handlers. Leave it with me for a few days. I don't think you need to worry about refunds."

Randall Spink looked relieved but still faintly dubious.

In the car Guy Briggs said expectantly, "So what was going on there, do you think?"

"If he was being fed drugs, hormones, who knows what, in his racing career—then he may not be the wonder horse Spink thinks he is. But I can't think of anything which would make those changes. Copper deficiency might give him a lighter coat but he wouldn't be winning races. Arsenic is s'posed to improve a horse's coat—but not change its colour. When we get back you'd better go round to the library and collect up everything they've got on horses, diseases, grooming, diet … whatever. If we don't find anything you can go round and have a general discussion with Vince Bromby."

Constable Briggs wasn't sure he would be capable of picking up useful pointers but at least, with books, he rarely had those terrifying moments when he felt he had been thrown overboard without a life raft …

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Although it was only going to be a very small dam as dams go, and people accepted that so long as water in wet times was released rather than allowed to back up and affect the environment park lagoon, it could only be good for the district. All the proposed water allocations had already been taken up and local people found an afternoon watching the bulldozers at work as good as a picnic.

Rather than making an arrangement with the café in Buckton to use their food van an independent contractor had got the job of on-site catering. The nearest shop was the small general store in Burleigh three kilometres away. But there had been almost constant rumours of vandalism, fighting, complaining, a high level of general bad feeling on the site, and apparently to do with the catering arrangements. Who was the victim, if anyone, wasn't clear.

The big van with a side half-opened to provide a counter and an awning was unprepossessing; the greasiest of greasy spoons at first glance. Several folding tables and old stackable chairs were untenanted in the thin shade of some belah saplings.

Constable Briggs parked and they got out and walked over. "What do you fancy for lunch?" Dennis turned to his subordinate.

The place wasn't inviting but the day was hot and churned dust hovered over the site. "A pie, I guess, and a cold drink." At least the drink would be bacteria-free. "Would you like me to get you something?"

"No. I'll get my own."

"In those TV dramas the boss always expects his juniors to buy him his drinks."

"That's fiction."

"I saw it happen in Brisbane."

"Well, you won't see it happen here."

The van was in the charge of a young woman, possibly Vietnamese, who smiled at them and said, "What you want, sir?"

Dennis, not as enthusiastic about pies since his experience with one from the bakery in Buckton, asked for a salad sandwich and a mug of black tea. The young woman tried to tell him it was her 'pleasure' and she was happy for him to eat her food for nothing. Dennis said without emphasis, "You give me food. I give you money. Savvy?" Guy felt the sudden desire to sink into the ground and never resurface, it was so like a line from a dreadful B-grade Western. But the young woman smiled and took the proffered note and gave him change. He asked her if she ran the van on her own but she said her husband would be along in a minute. "Okay, when your lunch rush is over we'll have a chat with you both."

Five minutes later men were lining up. The Buckton men stood back and watched the interplay; it might only be their presence but the exchanges seemed perfectly normal and polite; or as polite as any building site ever is. As the men drifted away to the tables they got a fair look at the husband of the canteen team; a hulking big black-haired fellow who didn't seem over-pleased to see them. Possibly he believed his wife or girlfriend had been feeding them for free. But as they continued to watch, a man detached himself from a group at the far side of the clearing and came over.

He held out a hand and said, "Hullo, I'm Tony Carter. Have we got a problem here I should know about?"

"Any complaints?"

"I know it looks a bit grubby but I had a close look at everything and I think it's just age and surface dust. Hard to prevent unless we wet everything down continually. They'll get on to the show circuit when they finish here. I think they know the minimum standards they have to meet."

"So these stories of locals coming in at night and messing around—have you seen anything yourself?"

"No. But Rolf has been sounding off. Says local vandals have been pinching stuff. Someone got at the door with a chisel. Someone pissed on a crate of chips. Little things but a bit nasty. I've told him to get straight on to you. Seems he finally took some notice of me."

"No. We haven't heard from him. Just rumours of fights and stuff."

"Yeah. There was a bit of a brawl one evening. No damage done."

"You don't have any security?"

"No. It's a small job. A few yobs. Nothing major. We lock up a bit of stuff, chain some things of a night. It's only the food van that's been targeted."

"Okay. So maybe someone doesn't like Rolf and his missus, or they don't like the food or the service … or it's easier to get at. Do they sleep on site?"

"Yeah. Most of us do. Just three local men go home of a night. Caravans are all over there."

"He hasn't thought of getting a dog?"

"He said he'd tried that one time but the dog had been given poisoned meat."

"So he's had trouble before?"

"Must of. I didn't ask for any details."

"Okay. So how did he get the contract?"

"Lowest tender, I'd say. But I didn't see the other bids."

Dennis left it at that saying as he was about to turn back to the food van, "Have you got a daughter? Goes to school in Buckton?"

"Yeah. Genny. Great kid. I know it's a bit hard on her to travel round with me and go to different schools. But she says she'd rather do that than stay with my mum in Millmerran. Her mum died two years ago. She's maybe growing up too fast. But she looks after me and I look after her and it works pretty good."

Rolf was a lot less cheerful as a personality but he gave them a clear rundown on his troubles and ended up with, “It’s what I always tell ’em. They think they can skimp on security—and it’s me that ends up getting the wrong end of the stick. I said no security—I’ve got no choice but to put all me bloody prices up. I offered to act as night security but they said nothing doing, bloody lot of skinflints.”

“So how does this play out? Were you guaranteed any on-site security?”

“I asked ’em point-blank. I said I had trouble at another place. And this lot said, safest place in the country. They said they could guarantee I wouldn’t have any trouble. It’s not written down, but they said it to us, made no bones about it. I’ve got witnesses. If they don’t lift their game I’m going to sue—then they’ll wish they got serious.”

“So the other place you had trouble—do you know if any of the same men were working there?”

“Could be. I wouldn’t like to dob any of the guys in. And I reckon it’s one of the local sods, maybe some of your lot.”

“Okay. Give me the dates and place of your last trouble and the name of the company you worked for. I’ll ask around. Someone might of moved into the district.”

Rolf continued to mutter about vandals and penny-pinching construction companies as he jotted a few things on a scrap of paper. He seemed about to say something more about the company then he changed his mind, shrugged, and said, “Could be sour grapes. Someone else wanted this contract.”

“Could be.” Dennis Walsh said he would be in touch and walked back to the car. He said to his constable, “Stop at the store in Burliegh. They might’ve hoped to get a bit of business when it came to town.”

Guy Briggs never failed to feel awkward, even embarrassed, when he had to deal further with people he had breathalysed, cautioned, questioned, or even suspected. But his boss seemed to put things behind him. He’d had trouble with the couple who ran the store in the little hamlet and he was keenly aware they were not model citizens but he was quite capable of going in there any time he was passing to buy a drink and chat about the weather without showing any particular emotion.

It struck his subordinate as an enviable ability. It wasn’t that he put people at their ease (that would be asking too much) but he always appeared at ease himself. Now he simply asked if they had either tendered for the job of supplying food on-site or had hoped it would bring business to them.

“Both,” they said sourly. “We didn’t believe anyone else could do it cheaper but then we heard they’d put in a lower bid. Nothing we could do about it.”

“Have you been out to the site?”

“No. No point. That Rolf isn’t any too friendly.”

“You know him?”

“He’s come in here a couple of times. He seems to get a kick out of rubbing our noses in it.”

“But you serve him?”

“Oh, I serve him alright. I don’t knock back business. And he knows it. I reckon he gets a buzz out of giving me as much trouble as he can, changing his order, paying me in either a big note or a whole lot of silver.”

“And his wife?”

“Never heard boo out of her.”

“And you haven’t heard any rumours—kids heading out that way of a night—any strangers asking for directions to the site?”

“Nothing. Pretty quiet.”

Guy was directed to go round to the café in Buckton and ask the same sorts of questions. “Don’t forget the guy’s coming from Winville to install our photocopier this afternoon,” he said as he dropped his boss off at the station.

Dennis had had an arrangement with the Council office to go there to do his occasional bit of photocopying. But their new machine was arriving from Winville—the only trouble being: where to

squeeze it in. Dennis had finally said, “Well, we’re not a ruddy dentist, we don’t keep people waiting, so move those chairs and we’ll stick it in that corner.”

It would obtrude slightly into the entrance to their only cell but as it only got used occasionally …

At the station there was a message from Sr O’Brien. Dennis Walsh rang her back. “What’s this important news, Kath? Something about Bernie Goodrick?”

“I’m afraid so. I got the results from the lab this morning on Bernie’s hair and nails. The poor old sod was chockfull of arsenic.” As Buckton’s doctor, Leslie Davis, had insisted the old man had died of natural causes, as the old man’s will left his estate to be divided between all the staff at the hospital (on the grounds he had “made their life a misery” which wasn’t far wrong), as the new nursing director was unfamiliar with the case and did not want to leap into melodrama the minute she arrived, as nobody had an obvious motive for getting rid of him once it was realised that his relatives would still have to pay his estate his proportionate share of the motel profits, and as he had smoked, drunk, and avoided green vegetables for seventy years it was hard not to agree.

But Sr O’Brien and the town’s part-time undertaker, Godfrey Waddell, had agreed to send samples away before Bernie was consigned without fanfare to Buckton cemetery. They couldn’t ask for priority. They had paid for the tests out of their own funds, and Dennis had almost come to accept that he probably had been alarmist and jumped to an over-the-top conclusion. But he had never quite set aside the feeling that John Goodrick had offered up the whereabouts of his illegitimate son, Brett Foley, as a way of diverting attention from … what? …

“You’re absolutely sure you’ve got the right report?”

“Absolutely. Date. Description. Tests done.”

“So I’m going to have to try to get Bernie exhumed.”

“Better you than me, Dennis. The old sod didn’t exactly smell of roses in real life. I hate to think what he’s like now. Though they do say arsenic is excellent at preserving corpses.” She added this with a slightly malicious chuckle.

He rang Winville and got DC Ali Deane. She said her bosses were out on a case and could she help—

“They’re not going to like it but I need to get a body exhumed. I’ve just got word that he contained unnaturally high levels of arsenic.”

“Oh, whoopy doo! That’ll really thrill them.”

Despite DI Towner’s attempt to treat her as a glorified tea lady and filing clerk Deane remained cheerful and enthusiastic about her life and work in Winville. She believed Dennis would always help and support her, if she asked, because he had a running feud with Doug Towner. But once or twice she had felt there was something more to it than could be fitted into this interpretation.

It wasn’t that he fancied her. After all, he had Fiona Greehan. Though Ali Deane believed, almost alone of anyone in the district, that Fiona though a nice woman was not good enough for him or, more precisely, she didn’t appreciate the things that made him special; his skills as a bushman, his ability to see country as more than a means of livelihood. Ali felt it was more a kind of protective attitude towards her ...

“So what’s the case they’re out on?”

“I don’t have all the details yet. But you’re sure to hear about it soon.”

“I can’t wait.”

“Don’t be so sarcastic, Dennis. You know Doug always appreciates your help.”

In the beginning she had believed that to be cheeky with a more senior man in the blokey world of the police was a quick way to premature retirement; it was nice to know that there was at least one man she didn’t need to weigh every word with, then speak in a meek undertone … not that Greg Sullivan was too bad when Towner was out of earshot …

“So he does.”

Case No. 3: Money for Jam

"Anything from the café? Did they hope to run the canteen there?"

"They put in a bid but not very seriously. It would've meant a lot of driving and no big returns—and they would've needed to put on an extra person."

Constable Briggs could see the value to the construction company of keeping everything on site and starting early and finishing late to get the job done; it was harder to see the value to Rolf Giblin and his wife on a relatively small site like Burleigh. To feed thirty men and a few blow-ins would not make them rich. Any sort of vandalism which cut into their small margins would be a reason for tempers to flare.

"Okay. Get on to that job where he said he had trouble. He's the sort of man who might rub people up the wrong way—and I assume men go round from job to job if they work in the dam building business."

When he finally tracked them down the other small company could only tell him that there had been several 'incidents' and that they had agreed to pay Giblin to undertake some security work as he had some experience in that area. The trouble had stopped. "We weren't surprised," the man he'd got on to said calmly, "not a chap I'd care to tangle with on a dark night."

"Ask him if they ever got a clue to the people making the trouble in the first place," Dennis Walsh said over his junior's shoulder. But the answer to this was, "No, sorry, not a clue. But you always get the occasional troublemaker. We mainly use small independent contractors who have a vested interest in their reputation. It doesn't stop an occasional blow-up. Just takes one chap with a short fuse."

"So who do we talk to next?" Guy Briggs said to his senior.

"It's not looking good for friend Rolf. I wonder if he's got a nice little sideline going. Say he's making ten dollars profit per person seven days a week. It's okay if they live on the road—not so good if he's got a home to maintain, kids left with relatives maybe. Say the company agrees to pay him an extra five hundred a week to keep the site secure. Soon as he gets the go ahead the trouble stops. Nothing to stop him getting a decent night's kip if he knows he's the vandal. End of a two-month-job there's an extra three or four thousand in the kitty. Or if they say no—then he threatens to sue for damage done to his equipment. If they've got another job lined up in Kingaroy, say, or Goodiwindi—it'll cost them time and money to come back here for a court case. Chances are that it'll work out cheaper to pay him for a few scratches or a missing gas cylinder, bit extra for stress and worry. He drives off into the sunset a happy man—and tries his little dodge somewhere else."

Constable Briggs nodded cautiously. It might well be like that. "So how would we prove it? I don't really want to stake out the place every night."

"Wouldn't hurt you." Dennis sat back in his chair for a minute then he said, "Get on over to the library and get those books while I run Mr Giblin through the records. Just a possibility he's been too clever for his own good somewhere along the way."

But the only thing which came up was a conviction twelve years ago when he was working as a security guard at a big supermarket warehouse in the Brisbane suburb of Salisbury. 'Excessive use of force' had been the charge. He had broken the shoulder of a sixteen-year-old youth who'd climbed through a gap in the fence with his brothers to smoke some dope in a secluded corner …

He had just finished noting down the details when the door opened with considerable force and the jangling of the little bell Dennis had added as security and DI Doug Towner precipitated himself into the room. "I thought I told you to get that fucking door fixed!" was his greeting.

"Nothing wrong with the door, Doug, and there's no one here but me." Just as almost everybody in Buckton believed Sergeant Walsh had installed the bell so he wouldn't get caught in a close embrace with Ms Greehan—so Towner seemed to think he would collect evidence of misbehaviour if he either listened at the door for a minute or barged in at top speed. "So—what can I do for you, mate?"

"It's 'sir' to you—and don't you forget it."

"So it is, Doug. But I'm a busy man. Are you here to exhume a body—or ask for my help?"

Doug Towner had whiled away the long dull drive to Buckton by dwelling on two of his favourite images. In one he was being fêted on national television for his brilliant work in single-handedly foiling a particularly dastardly kidnap plot or solving what the media had dubbed 'the perfect crime' … and nowhere in the picture was there even a hint of anyone lurking, least of all Dennis Walsh, who might try to steal some of the credit. In the other, Walsh begged not to be sent to 'Siberia' for repeated misconduct and insubordination. Siberia varied according to his mood; sometimes it was a remote dot like Boulia, at other times it was a contentious beat like Musgrave Park or Fortitude Valley where the heavies would soon compromise him, sideline him, wear him down, chew him up and spit him out. In the fairy tale he always had to decide whether or not he would consent to put in a good word …

And then the grim reality always brought him down with an unpleasant bump; the unhappy knowledge that Dinny Walsh would take Boulia or Musgrave Park in his stride, that Dinny Walsh, like a bad penny, would always be mixed up somehow in his occasional moments of 'triumph', of 'success' …

"Both." It was a bile-filled admission. "Who's the bod you want dug up? And why couldn't you simply leave the poor sod to moulder in peace? I've got work up to my eyebrows—"

"Man called Bernard Goodrick. There's a copy of the tests done on his hair and fingernails. No autopsy because A—our esteemed medico says he can tell gastroenteritis and liver failure when he sees them, and B—you said an autopsy would be a waste of time and money and lead to bad feeling locally. I don't give a hoot for bad feeling but I do like to make sure my back is covered when there's so much confidence and good cheer flying around."

"So what was their motive?"

"Could've been an accident. Something at the hospital. Bernie went out sometimes. But I'd say having to pay the old coot ten thousand down and ten per cent of their takings per year wasn't a bad motive."

Towner took the copy of the report and gingerly folded it into a tiny square. "This better be genuine. You're not going to be any too popular if they've got the reports mixed. And this," he slapped down another piece of paper, "is the farm where we've just found a child's skeleton stuck in a hollow in a dead tree. Let me know if there was ever any gossip this end about any of the owners, missing kiddies, anything at all."

The farm was closer to Winville than Buckton but its past owners might've supplied to the butter factory here, attended church here, had relatives here …

"What age are we looking at? Approximately."

"Round five maybe. Little girl. We haven't got anything on likely cause of death yet."

"Okay. We'll see what we can do."

This, Towner thought as he got back into his car, should be a matter for congratulation, a deferential willingness to put other things aside and provide help—and, instead, he had the awful suspicion Dennis would casually wrap the case up in a week and he would be left with the sort of credit which always left a sour taste in his mouth.

*

"So—do you want me to go through all these horse and veterinary books?" Guy Briggs couldn't hide his lack of enthusiasm.

"Don't sound so bloody thrilled about it," Dennis said grimly. "Work your way through in your spare time and jot down anything that could possibly change a horse's looks or behaviour. Doesn't matter what it is. Diet. Supplements. Hormones. Steroids. Disease. Thyroid. Jaundice. Climate. Soil. Shampoo. Whatever. If you get any ideas we'll check 'em out. If we don't get a nibble we'll tell him to at least get a blood test done, maybe he can get a DNA test. Don't know what they cost. But anything to get him out of our hair. Anyway, I'm off out to the dam again—"

"Can I come?" But as soon as he said it Guy Briggs felt vaguely ashamed; it sounded like a small kid whining.

"Okay. Whack the sign on the door. Treat it as your lunch break."

As they drove out Briggs said, “So you think it really is Mr Giblin who’s running some little dodge?”

“Looks like it. Each time he’s the one who’s suffered. The problem stops soon as he gets hired as security. But the actual damage to him is piddling stuff, maybe a hundred bucks at the most to get things fixed. I’d say he’s banking on the fact they want to go in fast on these small contracts—and move on in a couple of months. I’d also think he’ll be a tough nut to crack. If necessary we can tell Carter some night security is a good idea—but to make sure he hires a person from Winville, someone with no connection to anyone on site. See how Giblin takes that idea.”

Rolf Giblin showed no sign of being pleased at the sight of them. “Found anything?”

“Could be. How come you didn’t contact the police at your Clifton job or here when you started having problems?”

“Small stuff. They didn’t want to bother.”

“You read their minds?”

“Don’t come the smart-aleck with me. You know you sods don’t even bother to attend if it’s under fifty bucks worth.”

Guy Briggs looked from Rolf Giblin to his boss; of course that was often true—but not with his current sergeant.

“So—your previous trouble—what sort of losses are we looking at—in money terms?”

“Say three to four hundred dollars.”

“And you were hired for how long as night security?”

“Don’t remember. Two weeks maybe.”

“The company says ten weeks. So that discrepancy would be worth, say, three thousand plus?”

“Couldn’t say offhand.”

“But you would of kept all your records for the tax man, of course.”

“S’pose so. Doubt if I brought them with me—back home most likely. I get a bloke to do the paperwork for me.”

“Good oh. Just drop over to your caravan to check before we look further.”

“No. My tax returns aren’t your business. I’ve done nothing wrong. And I’ve got work waiting here.”

“So if Tony Carter hired you to mind the site of a night—how did you plan to do your daytime work?”

“I don’t need much sleep.”

“Lucky fella.” But Dennis remained casually conversational. His junior waited for the moment when he would go for the jugular. “But I do in fact need to see your records before I know whether to contact the Tax Office to tell ’em your records could be worth a second look. I never like to dob an honest man in, not if his paperwork is up to scratch.”

“Well, you’re outa luck, mate. I’m pretty sure they’re at me mum’s house. She minds our stuff when we’re on the road.”

“So you’ve got your own home, your mum minds a few valuables for you, and you’ve got an accountant to pull your stuff into shape. Not bad. So if you’d just jot down those addresses and contact details—then we should be able to clear this all up this arve, I’d say.”

Tony Carter and several of the men had come up, without interrupting, and now listened in with unashamed curiosity.

Dennis Walsh looked at his watch but showed no sign of being in a hurry. It was Giblin who started to look faintly rattled. “I’ve got to feed these buggers or they’ll be getting pretty aggro—”

“No. They won’t. Not while we’re here. And it doesn’t take for ever to jot down three addresses and phone numbers.”

“I can’t remember—”

“Doesn’t matter then. We won’t keep you. We’ll just get a note straight off to the tax bods. That’ll be the simplest.”

Guy Briggs thought later the big hulk went down with a whimper, not the bang he’d been expecting. If he tried to rescue the situation with a sudden memory gain at this late stage it would

imply he wanted the Tax Office kept out. If he said nothing the tax people would still get a letter from Buckton Police. The situation had slipped from his grasp.

"Suit your fuckin' selves. I've got customers."

"We will. We'll have a salad sandwich and a beef and onion pie, and two bottles of ginger beer, and two apple turnovers." Dennis turned to Tony Carter and said, almost genially, "And you won't need to bother hiring Mr Giblin as night security. If he wants to damage his own equipment—that's his business."

For a moment the site manager stood with his mouth half-open; then everything seemed to fall neatly into place. "Yeah. Okay. Thanks for that. I was trying to decide which was the lesser of two evils—paying for security or risk being sued."

The Buckton men took their food and walked over to the car where they sat eating for several minutes. Guy finally plucked up the courage to ask the obvious. "How did you know he wouldn't want an audit?" He saw the men continue to come over and get served.

"Handy rule-of-thumb. Not much good setting up a nice little dodge—if it's going to put you up into a higher tax bracket and cream half of it off. Depresses me a bit—because however you look at it—no matter what service you look at—roads, schools, hospitals, our wages—some of it will have been paid for with some very dirty money." He seemed to ponder on this thought a minute then said briskly, "Anyway, write the letter when we get back. It might make him keep his head down a while … but I'd reckon he's the sort of bloke always thinks of hustling a bit on the side."

"A bit hard on his wife."

"Yeah. Things often are. But with luck what she compares it all to still makes this seem a better life."

*

There was a message when they got back to the station to say a team would arrive at eight next morning to exhume the body of Mr Bernard Hurley Goodrick and for them to provide back-up as needed.

"What does that mean?" Briggs had never had anything to do with an exhumation and he wasn't sure that he really wanted to be present at this graveside.

"Well, it doesn't mean we call the CWA ladies and ask them to provide tea and sandwiches for everyone," Walsh retorted, "But contact Waddell and ask him to come. It's been dry so the coffin should be in good nick and can be re-used. He'll know how deep he buried him—and there's always the chance it's a re-used grave. I'll get tarps and ropes out of the shed. We haven't got any decent screens but they should have their own, if they want the whole thing handled discreetly. And we'd better run a rope and pegs round to secure the area—in case half the town turns up to stickybeak. We can do that this evening."

While he was dumping the equipment in the car boot, and while Briggs was agonising over the letter to the tax people, George Hickman rang to say he'd had a break-in at his home last night.

"Took your time, George—"

"No. I was in Winville overnight. Just got home."

"Okay. Won't be long."

George Hickman put out the small monthly broadsheet which did Buckton as newspaper and social diary. Though it was small he put a lot of care into it. The English teacher at Buckton High, Naomi Duggan, had been heard to praise George's spelling and grammar to her classes; "it doesn't matter whether you sell five million copies or five hundred, like the *Buckton Bugle*, it's still worth taking pride in your work the way Mr Hickman does."

George had turned his front room which had once been a sunroom opening into a small garden and on to the side street behind the Uniting Church into an office and place to chat. As Buckton had no printer he took his finished layout to Winville for printing. Now he said, "No, it's not due out till next week. I went to Winville to see a cousin of mine. He's none too brilliant so I thought I'd go and see the poor old codger in case he's not round much longer. I left here about four yesterday, saw him in hospital last night, stayed there overnight, went round to spend a bit more time with him this morning, then came on home. Got in about an hour ago and had some lunch before I came through here to do some work."

"So what's missing?"

"That's the problem, Dennis. I'm not sure. No money. If people come in to pay for ads I try to bank it the same day, not have it sitting around. It looks more like general messing around—but it doesn't look like vandals." He pointed to a lot of sheets of paper strewn around. "It's a pretty simple system here." He pointed to his pigeonholes and cartons and trays. "Paid business ads, paid classifieds. Social calendar, school news, local doings, CWA column, church news, any stuff you give me, ag news, my little poetry corner, riddles, whatever the kids send in, any bits from Dinawadding or Burleigh—I was hoping to do a bit on that Farm Stay place and the new owners at Japana. I told them I had a bit of background but I'd like to do a short interview to flesh it out. The bods behind it. Profiles. That sort of thing. They said okay—so I was planning to go out on Saturday morning—and finalise any sports news in the afternoon. Then I just leave some small slots for last-minute-stuff and close off Tuesday evening." As he talked he was pointing out on his mock-up where everything would go.

"Old Betty Low came across a little while ago," he went on. "She says she saw a small light in here last night and just thought it was me with a torch. She says she didn't realise till this morning that I was away. I took Biddy with me." Biddy was George's little Cairn terrier.

"Okay. I'll check times with her. But let's get an idea of how they went about things. Where did they get in?"

"The laundry window wasn't locked. I'm pretty sure I locked it—but I might be going gaga … and those old sash windows you can get a coat-hanger up if you've got the time and the patience."

"Nothing gone from the rest of the house?"

"Not that I noticed. I keep the spare bedroom locked to keep Biddy out. It really looks as if they simply came straight down the hall and in here."

"Still, if they weren't wearing gloves—we just might get a print on the window. Unless they actually took something from your files here I'd say they just wanted to give you maximum aggro. You'll have to sort that mess, George, and tell me if anything is missing. If it isn't, then … "

"Yeah, I know. Some twit with more energy than brains."

He watched while Dennis Walsh went carefully over the back window, miming the most likely ways for people to touch things as they raised the sash and climbed in. After a few minutes he said, "That's interesting, George. They appear to have worn gloves. If they got in a different window this one should have some of your prints—but they've nearly been wiped away. Very unusual. You're not doing a secret expose of ASIO corruption or police misbehaviour, are you?"

George Hickman grinned at that. "There's Mr Kramer—he wants me to do one on you, says you're corrupting your constable. Perfectly decent lad—till he came to work with you. Now, so he says, he has evidence that young Briggs was going at it like a rabbit with one woman—and he'd hardly said goodbye to her when he turned round and was at it with another woman. He blames such disgustingly immoral behaviour on your bad influence."

"Now that *is* interesting. Where did he say this happened—and who told him?"

"No good asking me, Dennis. I was hardly going to turn it into copy. I just told him if he wanted to complain the simplest thing would be to write to the Minister. I said it would make the old sleazebag's day. He said if I was going to take that flippant attitude towards serious misconduct he wouldn't give me any more church news for the paper. I said it would be his loss. And that's another thing, Dennis, apparently Artie Kees started going round there of a Sunday to listen to his sermons and people didn't like it—so he went round to see old Mrs Kees and give her a blast, tell her to keep Artie at home, that kind of thing—but she gave him a real pasting, tore strips off him—"

"Not literally?" He had his own troubles with the pint-size virago that was Artie's mum; still, he didn't mind if she turned her screeching on to someone else. But there was something about her, a bit pallid, a bit tired-looking, and he wondered if it was just age (local wisdom ascribed Artie's oddness to him being a change-of-life baby) or whether there was something wrong with her. What would happen to her middle-aged retarded and unpleasant son when she died or went into a home was problematic.

"Told him he wasn't fit to be a minister, called him a Peeping Tom to his face, called him a scumbag and a few worse things. I didn't see him when she sent him away with a flea in his ear—

but I've got it on good authority that he was just about livid with rage. Such a pity they can't get another minister there like old Eddie Torrens. You'd go a long way to find a nicer man."

George, obviously, was not worried enough to be deterred from talking on any and everything. Dennis finally said, "Ring me when you've sorted that mess—and if you want to watch them dig up old Bernie come round to the cemetery tomorrow at eight."

"Always hard to know if people just want to be mildly titillated or if they want strong meat." But George got down with a creak and started to sort his strewn-about papers.

Dennis, Guy, and some rope and pegs and a sledgehammer were just heading out the door when George rang back.

Old Betty Low had narrowed the time when she saw a faint wavering beam down to somewhere between half-past-eleven and twelve. She had got up because of toothache and gone to the bathroom to take several Panadol. She said she was sorry that she hadn't taken closer note. "I just thought it was George," she said at least three times.

"He doesn't turn on his light?"

"I really don't know. I'm an early bird."

Still, it just might help them get a car sighting if a local person hadn't walked quietly up that way and slipped round the back.

Now George said in a puzzled way, "I can't seem to find my notes on Japana, the new owner. I'm sure I hadn't put them anywhere else."

"George, have another close look. Tell me tomorrow. If your notes are definitely not there I'll get on to them."

Bruloder. He had found himself puzzling on it at odd moments. A person's name? A combination of names? A name in another language? A nickname? Nothing came to mind.

Maybe a police check, after all, mightn't be a bad idea.

*

While Dennis and Guy were setting pegs into iron-hard ground in the small cemetery off the road to Dinawadding, or trying to, Rae, Fiona, Pauline, John, Kieran, Vince and Joanne were settling themselves in for a meal at Domenico's. They tended to eat earler in the evenings when Joanne joined them. Her son was beyond needing baby-sitters but she always liked to be home soon after eight. She now found herself in the pleasant position of having two men, Vince Bromby and Guy Briggs, both willing to take her out now and again. She had a fairly modest estimate of her attractions but it was annoying, even so, to have her sister Pauline accuse her of cradle-snatching. She had laughed it off and said, "Jason comes first—but it's nice to have pleasant company now and again."

And there were times when she felt Pauline, even as a sister, was a hard person to like …

In the beginning she had felt quite excited to be invited along by Vince to these dinners. Guy had been more in the nature of a poor relation; someone who still hadn't got anywhere with his career or his life. But there had been a subtle change in her priorities in the last couple of weeks. It had to do, she felt sure, with the simple fact that Vince found Jason slightly tedious, someone he was required to be nice to, whereas Guy Briggs treated Jason as a pal and someone he enjoyed being with. And Guy had gone up in her son's estimation since the visit by Campbell Briggs. Vince might also have an exciting dad but he never mentioned him.

Fiona as she sat down opposite Joanne felt a certain pleasure in being here. At least she could forget Hilton Browne for a little while. Hilton, she was coming to think, was about the most spiteful man she had ever met. In the beginning all the staff were sympathetic. He'd had a rough trot. Now they avoided him—even to the point of taking sickies. He had called her in to ask why both Janice and Linda were away. "Your staff," he had said as he kept her standing in front of his desk like a naughty pupil, "have an appalling record when it comes to absenteeism."

"But they aren't *my* staff, Mr Browne, they are your staff or the bank's staff. And I have always had the opposite problem—getting them to stay home when they aren't well."

Instead of seeing it as an issue to be investigated he had criticised her for failing to speak to him with due deference. Due deference! She was sorry there was no one she could describe him to, no one she could really unburden herself to. She had seen Dennis and Guy drive away in the late

afternoon so there was no point in going over to the station … and Dennis probably didn't want to hear her whinge non-stop …

They had got on to the subject of the child's skeleton supposedly found in a tree near Winville. "Someone told me," Rae said brightly, "that Dinny asked what kind of tree it was."

"And what kind of tree was it?" Jon Dundas said mildly.

"God knows!" Rae always made for a lively gathering. "And it hardly seems the most pressing question."

"Still, if he did ask, he probably has his reasons." Kieran was a placid cheerful presence.

"Well, okay, so he probably knows his trees," Vince said rather snidely. "But it's hardly the mark of an educated and sophisticated person—unless you're—"

"A rabid greenie?" Jon could see some value in being knowledgeable about trees; it always hurt him to come on to a building site and see that a magnificent old tree, hundreds of years in the growing, had been bulldozed to make way for a carport or a clothes hoist—and that people said casually, "What! That old tree! Does nothing but shed branches the whole time." He had been tempted at times to say, "Well, you shed all the time—but no one bulldozes you and puts you through the chipper." Maybe he was greener than he'd realised …

"Well, what is the mark of an educated and sophisticated person?" Pauline said cautiously.

"Say you asked Dinny if he'd ever heard of, say, David Malouf—or Thea Astley—or Patrick White," Rae turned to Fiona, "and I'll bet he'd turn round and say 'David Malouf? Isn't he that new bloke up at the butter factory?' I'll even bet you a tenner." They all found that amusing though Joanne noticed Fiona only managed the slightest of smiles.

"And is it true that they're going to dig up old Bernie Goodrick?" Vince said. "One of the nurses was out to pick up her cat this afternoon and she said she'd heard that."

So was that where the two men and their equipment were going, Fiona wondered. What a horrible job. But it was a kind of vindication for Dennis. They wouldn't agree to such an operation unless he'd come up with some pretty compelling evidence. She wanted to say something but the conversation rushed on and she let them talk about holidays and travel and the local doctors and rumours of funny business out at the dam site and old Ma Morton being abandoned by her new husband, or so it was said, and only catching him again somewhere on the road to Garramindi …

Should she ask, Fiona wondered next time she found herself eating stew and watching TV with Dennis: if she did she might manage to embarrass them both. If she didn't it would continue to hang fire and Rae would say she was afraid to spark a demonstration of his ignorance and lack of interest in culture. Afraid to lose ten dollars even …

She tried to make it sound like something just mentioned in passing. But he looked at her in surprise then said slowly, "Writes books, doesn't he?"

"Yes. Have you ever read any?"

"Nope. I don't have much time for reading novels. Why? Should I?"

"I suppose it would give you a different perspective on life."

"Why would I want a different perspective on life? What's wrong with the one I've got?"

Rae might cry "Quite a lot!" but Fiona found she couldn't answer the question. "The things that interest me … it would be nice sometimes to share them. Like music. Or books."

"Okay. Turn off this drivel on the TV and put on some music."

Put on the spot she was tempted to say, no, it really didn't matter. And Classic FM might be devoting its evening to an avant garde composer with a passion for dissonance. But she went over and turned on the radio. It was a concert of selections from the old Italian masters, Vivaldi, Guiliani, Monteverdi … he sat back into the sofa and closed his eyes and at the end of it he said, "Very nice"; but then he spoiled the moment by saying, "So what comes next? A gallop through an art gallery? A talk on modern sculpture?"

"Of course not." She said it with a smile but she felt a tension in him. The issue hadn't gone away.

"So whose idea was it to ask me if I'd heard of David Malouf?"

"Oh … it was just one of those silly things that come up in conversation … "

"I asked who—not what."

"Dennis, it isn't an issue. Truly. But Rae said something about how you would ask if it was someone working at the butter factory."

"You're forgetting—I know all the guys at the butter factory. And it wasn't that, was it?"

"What do you mean?"

"The whole lot of you—you were all sitting there in the restaurant as usual—all sniggering away—let's see if that old hick Dinny ever reads a book. A laugh a minute."

"Did—did Bill say something?" Then she wished she'd kept her mouth shut.

"Give me *some* credit for knowing what goes on around here." He eased himself away from her, stood up, picked up the tray with their empty plates on it. "Fiona, I've got a fair bit on my plate at the moment. So I'm going to wash up and turn in."

He went out and a minute later she heard him running water in the kitchen. Then a door closing. She got up with a sigh and walked back down the hall to the kitchen where her bag still sat on the table. He had only gone to the bathroom, not back to the station as she'd first thought, but the result was the same. He had as good as told her to go home.

She longed to stay and apologise. Of course he had every right to feel upset. But she had the horrible feeling an apology might only make things worse. All these months she'd seen him get angry and irritated with other people but she alone seemed to exist in that little magic circle where she felt safe and protected from the storms and jeers … and now she'd been thrust out into that big bad unprotected world to join the masses. Perhaps … in a few days … he would decide that however unfortunate her question … still, he *had* over-reacted …

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George Hickman when he joined the other men in the small dusty paddock with its sprinkling of marble and concrete and wood to mark out Buckton's dead had no better news to share. He still hadn't found the missing papers. Guy Briggs stood beside Dennis and listened and watched Chad Scully, who got the occasionally job digging graves for Godfrey Waddell, and the dew dried on the grey-white grass around them and the big Bunya pine by the front gate still threw a long shadow. He had suffered horrible dreams in which they uncovered Bernie's ghastly bloated green face at which he lost control and screamed; the reality was much less terrible.

Though the grave had begun to settle it wasn't hard digging and Chad Scully seemed to find the attention of the group around him quite invigorating. His spade flew in and out of the dry brown earth. The plain pine coffin was still in good nick when it began to show through. A half hour later it had been raised and one of the men from Winville had climbed down into the grave to take samples of the soil.

"Do they open it here?" Guy felt the resurgence of his unease.

"It seems not. It'll go to the morgue. We've done our part." Dennis seemed to have lost interest in the exhumation. Other people would now have the job of determining whether Bernie had died from arsenic poisoning—and, if so, how had it got into his system? "You were saying, George?"

"I was thinking, when I went to bed last night … well, I usually have a fair bit of mess in there."

"True." It amazed most of Buckton that George managed to bring out a coherent publication, and on time, every month. His chaos was proverbial. His long dead wife had kept Armageddon at bay—but only just. "You've been tidying up."

"I have. When I first heard about Rick—well, I just started to think about the job someone else would have if I pop my clogs … and so I thought, here goes … and I really got stuck into sorting the old stuff out to go to the little archives at the library here … and getting things a bit tidy. I don't know if other people took much notice."

"So you're saying—if this had happened last week you'd just think it was your own mess—and that you'd mislaid the stuff?"

"That's about it. And I probably would've dropped the story and ran with something else. No big deal. I've always got more stories than I can squeeze in."

"So who knew you were having your big tidy out?"

"No one, really. Thing like that—it's not a good idea to tell people in case you give up halfway through. Then they'd be saying 'I thought you said you were going to tidy all this up' and I'd be saying … well, you know how it goes."

"Sure. So what exactly do you think is missing?"

"I got a bit of stuff on the company, just the stuff that's on public record. And I'd used that to nut out a few questions. What their plans are, a little bio of the new manager, a bit about the company structure, how they see the markets. Nothing deep."

"So where does the Farm Stay place come into it?"

"I was just going to mention them as part of my lead-in on the changes to Japana. They haven't asked about advertising with me so I didn't want to give them a lot of free publicity. I was just going to mention the Rogers—and I don't believe that Adam and Eve stuff—and say the place is being developed to provide farm-style holidays."

"You don't think blokes named Adam tend to go for women called Eve?" Dennis said, aware that his constable was watching them both with heightened colour and a slight frown.

"They'd be mad if they did," George said decisively. "So what should I do? Just collect the material again?"

"If you like. Run a small piece giving the details of the break-in, say what has gone missing and your plans, ask for public help. Anyone sighting anything along your way that night to contact us. Guy can do a house-to-house this morning. But no harm in involving the public. And ask for stories and background on this Bruloder outfit. If they operate somewhere else in Australia someone might have personal experience of them."

Although Constable Briggs did his trawling up and down the side streets conscientiously he couldn't come up with a definite sighting. Several people had heard a vehicle. One person said there'd been a car parked out the front of the Uniting Church, he thought a dark sedan, "but I wouldn't like to swear on a Bible."

"Okay. Write those bits up and you can check Bruloder in more detail. See if you can get the names of the senior personnel and run them through … but I don't totally trust George. This born-again tidy fella is a bit hard to believe in. I couldn't get any footmarks because he's got concrete outside his laundry window. But there never was a burglar that didn't leave something, no matter how small … "

When Guy Briggs went back to the Bruloder site on the computer he found most of it had disappeared and an apology: "We regret any inconvenience while we revamp and expand our business site. Please visit us again soon." It still contained the information that their head office was in Chicago and still contained some images of cattle standing knee-deep in waving green grass; images vastly different to the reality of the cattle penned at the feed lots …

"I think," Sergeant Walsh said at last, "it just might be worth us getting on to the companies' office ourselves, not wait for George to retrace his steps. So long as there is the slightest chance they had something to do with the break-in we'd better stay suspicious. If they wanted to delay the article … but they couldn't guarantee that unless they have a pretty good idea of the way George works … and is there something significant happening in the next couple of weeks that they'd prefer to keep a low profile … or they just hoped George'd lose interest … "

He was musing more to himself than to his constable. But Guy Briggs said, "I've got a friend who works in a stockbroker's office in Brisbane—maybe I could ask him what he knows. The company isn't publicly listed but that might mean it's a subsidiary of something which is listed."

"Okay. The more info the merrier."

*

Kieran Dobbs was out walking his dog Ripper when he ran into Dennis Walsh at the far end of the main street. Dennis had strolled round past the cricket and the children playing in the park next door. It struck Kieran that there was something of the father in the way that Dennis watched over the town; not the sort of dad who got down on the carpet and romped with his children; more the stern Victorian *pater familias* who demanded an accounting from each of his offspring at the end of each day.

"Dennis!" It was easy enough to talk weather and farm news with Walsh, he knew what he was talking about; less easy to refer to anything more personal. Kieran mentioned that he'd been going through the old records from when the DPI Extension Service started up here in the post-war years and Dennis might like to browse sometime. "Quite interesting to see the way attitudes have changed." Then he took his life in his hands and went on, "Not my business but I assume you and Fee have had a tiff. Unless it's Hilton Browne. She's been going round looking—well, you know how she looks when she's down."

"Yeah. She does it pretty well."

"Does what?"

"That look—all the sorrows of the world. Her name should be Deirdre." Dennis didn't sound particularly interested.

"And you don't care?"

"Not particularly. Should I?"

This was Dennis at his most off-putting and offensive; but Kieran found himself wondering if it was a mark of his feelings … or a mask for them …

"She's a very nice woman."

"Then you lot can cheer her up again."

"What do you mean—'you lot'? Do you mean me?"

"Look, I don't care what anybody says to my face. I can give as good as I get." Kieran didn't doubt that. "But all this sniggering behind my back—Fiona wants to think it's funny—along with the rest of you—go for it. But don't come round telling me Fiona is upset."

Kieran nodded. They hardly kept their conversations a secret. Though whether someone had told Dennis something specific or he'd just heard some general comments … it wasn't as though Rae ever kept her views to herself …

"I see. But it's Rae, not Fiona. I'm afraid Rae won't be happy until she's broken the two of you up and steered Fee back towards Jon or Vince—and she knows *exactly* which buttons to press. Fee is too sensitive to image and presentation, not to respond. She told us when she was a child she was never allowed out of the house until she had been checked from top to toe. Everything had to be exactly right or the outing was cancelled or she was sent back to her bedroom. It's not surprising she's too self-conscious for her own good. And she feels she owes Rae—for all sorts of reasons."

"My heart bleeds," Dennis said drily. "Anyway, I'd better keep going. See you around."

Kieran walked on slowly with the little dog, musing on the situation, but over dinner with Rae and Fiona two hours later he said quietly, "I think you've got problems, Fee. You're going to lose Dennis unless you mend some fences. Is that what you want?"

"Oh *goody*," Rae said vigorously, "at last. I always knew it was an aberration. A short circuit in the brain or something. You can see from a mile away that Jon would rather go out with you than with Pauline."

"But that's not the point," Kieran suddenly gave vent to his irritation. "And if the choice is between Jon and Dennis—"

"Then it's no choice," Rae sounded like a golfer landing sweetly on the green. "Jon is the sort of man who will fit into Fee's life."

"Sort of colour-matched? That sort of thing. Computer-checked?"

Kieran sometimes found himself on the verge of getting cross with Raelene—yet she always seemed to defuse it. Something about the good-natured rather droll way she so casually intervened in and reorganised other people's lives. They meant to get annoyed—then they somehow found themselves letting the matter go …

At last Fiona said, "I wanted to go and apologise but I was afraid he might still be upset and it would only make things worse. And then the evening I was going to go—I saw him go into the station with Hilton's wife—and Hilton got really upset and went rushing in after them—and then he was told he would just have to sit and wait till his wife had been interviewed—I imagine it has something to do with the case as he's going to be a character witness for Margaret Elliot … and Dennis just ignored me—and Hilton was so rotten to me all the next day I was nearly ready to

throw in the towel and resign … but I don't blame Dennis for being upset. He knows we laugh at him behind his back. I'd be upset if it was the other way around."

"The difference being," Rae said with spurious sympathy, "you're not a bully and an oaf and a slob—and if you've got the makings of a beer gut then you're doing a wonderful job of hiding it."

"Maybe. But no amount of culture would've saved Fee from Artie or found her out in that bushland—"

"I'm not saying it would. Be as grateful to Dennis as you like for him doing his job properly—but just don't get serious about him."

"We're still missing a point here," Kieran sounded sharp. "Whatever he is or he isn't in the dating game—he is one of the straightest and most honest people you'll ever meet. Okay, so maybe he will look like those cops you see with their belly over their belt and their jowls down to their collar, in another ten years, but that doesn't alter the fact that saying silly things behind his back *is* pretty juvenile." It wasn't something he'd given much attention to but he thought Dennis was pretty fit for his age. "And who is to say I won't go down the same road and look like that too? Instead of Sean Connery I might end up looking like Russ Hinze when I'm fifty."

"And this is what you want for Fee?" Rae said with quirked eyebrows.

It shouldn't be an issue, Kieran realised, but he did understand her reluctance to accept the 'romance' of that relationship; because of that quality about Fiona which seemed inimical to any sense of the gross, the sloppy, the slip-shod, the messy, the slap-happy … that something which always strove for a sense of the perfect, someone with that aura of the ethereal, something faintly other-worldly. Dennis was too solid and down-to-earth and blunt to ever seem the obvious life-partner …

*

It was Dennis who threw the rope bridge over the chasm, as Fiona still grappled with her sense of regret, trying to decide what to say and how and when. To lose Dennis in such a way and for such a reason was too painful to contemplate. She had never thought of herself as underhand … yet the memory always got in the way of explanation or apology, the knowledge that, in her first months in Buckton, she had been as willing as anyone to criticise Dennis for his heavy-handed approach to things, to jump to conclusions which she now thought were wrong, to accept the gossip that swirled around town as indubitable fact. Now she felt she understood exactly why people blurted out details of the affair they were covertly conducting—hurting and humiliating the unsuspecting spouse. The burden of wrongdoing, of secrets, of subterfuge and lies, lay across the spontaneity and joy of life, a burden they always wanted someone else to help them carry …

He got Raelene when he rang. She said briskly that Fiona was at choir practice at the Uniting Church. They had taken to practicing on Sunday evenings. "I'll get her to call as soon as she comes in. Maybe another half hour."

After she'd hung up, and Dennis wasn't big on 'thank you' or 'bye now', she turned and said to Kieran, "Dennis. Wanting Fee. I wonder if it would be kinder not to tell her … "

"Don't you dare." Kieran wasn't sure if she was serious—or just enjoyed getting a rise out of him.

Fiona's response to the message was to go straight back out to her car and drive round to the station house and knock on Dennis's back door. He came through. "Come in, if you've got time. I was just cooking." She had on a black crepe blouse with orange poppies and a wide neck frill, a broad black belt, a slim black skirt, black shoes with medium heels. Although he didn't really like black on her she still managed to look stunning. The men in the choir probably had difficulty concentrating on their words …

She came into the kitchen still trying to decide how best to launch the conversation. The place hadn't got any brighter or more cheerful in her absence. But she knew she had missed it all the same. Missed Dennis. Missed their times together. "I know there aren't any right words, Dennis, you had every right to be upset. But life without you in it doesn't seem to be worth living." Was that an exaggeration? Perhaps. "Can you forgive me for being such a—such a pretentious little pain—"

"It isn't that, you know. You're better educated, know more about such things. That's a fact of life. You don't need to apologise for that part of things."

"It's the way I used that though. That was the part I don't feel proud of." That was to put it mildly. But he was no more immune to the way she looked at him now than he'd ever been; as though her eyes said the things she couldn't get settled into words and sentences.

"What say I turn the stove off? I can cook this stuff later."

"You shouldn't be the one making it easy for me, meeting me three-quarters of the way along—"

"I don't want you to feel you need to come round and grovel—"

"I think I would like to do some groveling—sore knees would really bring it home to me how easy it is to hurt someone … "

"It's just—I don't like to think of you laughing about me behind my back. Or maybe the real issue is—laughing with people I don't think a lot of, like Pauline and Vince. But let's not talk about it any more."

Maybe it was psychological; that his arms, his embrace, the feel and smell of him would always constitute some kind of haven, some sort of buffer against the world out there. Maybe the sources of her insecurity lay too deep to be resolved, just protected from harsh intrusion. She didn't really want to try and dissect those aspects of her secret doubts which made it easier to go along with the conversations and the laughter and the poking fun the others indulged in so readily. Easier to give him pleasure in bed, to love him and hold him and cherish him than agonise over words and ideas …

Except that as they talked drowsily in the aftermath she felt him grow limp and heavy and his words seemed to trail away. For a moment she was tempted to say, "Dennis, don't go to sleep on me" and then she simply lay back for several minutes and let him rest. It might be a passing catnap. He *did* have a lot on his plate. He did make himself available seven days a week, day and night, and if he grumbled about being tired very few people really took much notice. But Sister Kath was right. He had never seemed to have regained quite his original level of zest, of sheer electric energy, that he'd had before his illness. Maybe it was an awareness of age. Other men were seeing children leave home, first grandchildren, that sort of thing. Other men took a lot for granted …

At last she eased herself out quietly, her arm was going to sleep, and covered him with a sheet, dressed, kissed him gently on his forehead, and went out to the kitchen. Possibly he needed sleep more than he needed food. The saucepan contained sausages and diced potato and pasta and baked beans. She put it into the frig. The night was still warm and rather muggy. Then she let herself out. Black crepe and orange poppies would not endear her to Mr Hilton Browne. But then not even sackcloth and ashes would do that. As a workable team they seemed destined to be an enduring failure …

Case No. 4: Character

The case of the Crown versus Margaret Elliot opened a week later in Winville. Both Fiona Greehan and Sergeant Walsh had been called by the Prosecution so they couldn't sit in on each other's testimony. Fiona presented her information in a calm quiet manner, too calm perhaps, as one juror later described her as 'a cold fish', but others did not doubt that she struggled valiantly to stay calm as she presented the facts of her abduction.

Sergeant Walsh, too, was allowed to recite the facts of returning Ms Elliot to the scene and finding Fiona there with little in the way of challenges to his memory or his veracity. The one aspect which the Defence might've been able to use to good effect—that he had handcuffed and restrained her—had been ignored by Margaret in her long briefing sessions with her lawyer. She wanted to present herself as acting under duress from an out-of-control Brett Foley, not as a woman who required restraint. Handcuffing made a prisoner particularly vulnerable in the event of an accident; and the image of bullying and 'overkill' might've worked to Margaret's advantage.

The real excitement of the trial, particularly for the various people from Garramindi who had made the long drive to see, if not support, two once popular local identities, came when Hilton Browne took the stand to present a glowing testimonial to his deputy. Fiona was back at the bank but Dennis Walsh sat at the rear of the court room beside a rather nondescript woman in her fifties wearing a plain summer frock and carrying a brown handbag. Several people recognised Hilton's wife and wondered what she was thinking. To others she was just a face in the crowd.

A year ago Margaret could probably have found a dozen people willing to say she was a decent honest woman but the number had now dwindled away. Garra folk were not totally convinced she had done anything wrong but neither were they certain that she was the paragon Hilton presented to the court.

Character witnesses were usually accepted with a pinch of salt then seen as largely irrelevant; people naturally chose people who would speak well of them. Hilton had not expected to be kept long or seriously challenged. He was a little thinner, a little paler, than his old customers remembered but otherwise he remained the epitome of an old-fashioned banker, honest, reliable, mildly avuncular, just the man to take on the mild motherly-looking Margaret Elliot as his assistant.

The Prosecution, unexpectedly, chose to cross-examine him. He showed no sign of worrying. He knew that he was vulnerable to the unimportant charge of hiring too close to home but he felt certain he could present his decision in a very positive light.

"I would like to have you look at this document," Giles Hardy said pleasantly, "and tell me if you think it is correct in every detail." He handed Hilton a copy of the birth certificate for Julie Lorraine Elliot.

After a minute, Hilton said, "Yes, it appears to be."

"You are absolutely certain of that?"

"Quite sure."

"It definitely is a birth certificate for the daughter born to you and Margaret Elliot and hired by you to work in the bank as soon as she left school?"

"Yes."

The lawyer took the document over to the jury and it was passed around.

"So in a bank with four permanent staff including you—two of them were your mistress and your love child."

Hilton looked faintly annoyed but said "Yes".

"Why did you hire Julie Elliot?"

"Because she was a bright intelligent girl, willing to learn and work hard, and I believed she would be a credit to the bank."

As most people on the jury and in the court room were well aware that Julie Elliot was doing time for bank robbery Hardy did not belabour the point. "As her father it would be unsurprising if you didn't think that. Was the position advertised when it fell vacant?"

"Yes."

"And how many young people applied?"

"I don't remember. A couple, I think."

"More than just your daughter?"

"Yes."

"And who did the interviewing of the applicants?"

"I did."

"You did not suggest that an independent interviewer might be more appropriate?"

"There was no need. Julie was by far the most suitable and qualified applicant."

"Naturally. Now, just staying with this question a minute longer you will be interested to know that Julie Elliot agreed to a blood test to set any doubts as to her paternity at rest. You, Mr Browne, I believe are O positive, as is the defendant. But your daughter, surprisingly, belongs to blood group A. Given this anomaly we had the results double-checked. There is absolutely no doubt about it. Julie Elliot cannot be your daughter."

Here Margaret's lawyer intervened to state that anything about Julie Elliot was irrelevant to the case.

"I am seeking to show," Giles Hardy said with a look of long-suffering patience, "that in a case where the truthfulness or otherwise of the defendant is a key issue—someone was telling porkies. It may be that Margaret Elliot told Mr Browne he was the father of her daughter when she knew he wasn't. It may be that she told the Registrar that Mr Browne was the father of her daughter when she knew he wasn't."

Margaret's lawyer intervened again to challenge this line as irrelevant. He stopped short of suggesting that it was possible that Hilton Browne could not know the answer to these questions; that line might soothe Hilton's ruffled feelings but it would not help his client.

"Then—may I ask Mr Browne just one more question which could resolve this issue?"

The judge assented.

"Mr Browne—were you ever aware that Margaret Elliot had another man in her life, and indeed in her bed?"

"No, I wasn't."

Margaret Elliot's expression was unreadable. But there was a faintly discernable buzz of speculation round the court room. "So in a place as small as Garramindi the defendant, this upright and honest woman, or so we've been told, successfully managed to encourage you to cheat on your wife at the same time that she was also cheating on you. Is that correct?"

"It wasn't like that." Hilton, up to now urbane and grave, had begun to sweat.

Margaret's lawyer intervened to point out that Margaret's long-time boss was not the one on trial here.

The judge agreed. A minute later Hilton Browne was allowed to step down and the court adjourned for lunch. Giles Hardy was not disappointed to leave the situation unresolved. Doubt could be a potent factor when left to run wild in a jury room.

Dennis Walsh and Patsy Browne were the last to leave the court. Sergeant George Stadler came over to join them as they came out on to the street. Both Dennis and George had seen the very unbankerly look Hilton had given his wife as he left the court.

"Can I shout you two lunch?" George said cheerfully. "If it's confidential I won't ask—but I *would* like to know what the heck is going on."

When they were settled in a nearby café with lunch in front of them Patsy said quietly, "I don't mind if George knows."

"It's all very simple … well, maybe simple is the wrong word." Dennis took a card out of his shirt pocket and handed it over. "It's not mine—but it got me thinking. Why did Hilton want a daughter if he never gave that daughter the time of the day? The simple answer seems to be that he's infertile. But he preferred to jeer at his wife and call her barren—rather than do the decent thing and get himself checked. And when Patsy went and had tests—he set up an elaborate scheme to have a child with Margaret—just inserting another man at the key moment. I assume Margaret was a party to the deception. End result—he could keep on pointing the finger at his wife and blaming her. And poor Julie ended up without a real father or even the fake sort to give her a bit of affection. With luck it's not too late to get something sorted there. And Patsy here has wasted the best years of her life on a man who wasn't worth any of that care and … devotion."

George digested all this in silence. Patsy said rather awkwardly, "I'm afraid the devotion just faded away a long time ago. But I was brought up to believe in for-better-for-worse and so on. I suppose people will say that at least I had a nice house and garden and I never had any money worries. But I will always regret not having children … "

"I'm not much chop as a ruddy social worker," Sergeant Walsh said drily, "but if the two of you felt up to putting a bit of time into Julie Elliot I think there's a chance she can still get her life back on track and make something of herself."

*

"Mavis! How's things?" Dennis called into the local service station on his way back from Winville.

"All the better for seeing you, Dennis. Time for a cup of coffee? I just put the jug on."

"Okay. Thanks." He'd gone back to pondering on Randall Spink's stallion during the drive back to Buckton. Guy had handed him a list of vague ideas. The trouble with all of them, though

they might change a horse's coat slightly, all of them, without fail, would also undermine the horse's performance. He wouldn't be up there winning top middle-distance races …

Though there was the intriguing suggestion that neat vodka could help cure ringworm; Guy wasn't sure if you were supposed to rub it on or give it to the horse to drink …

Buckton's small council library was not exhaustive in its range. He could talk to Vince Bromby but he wasn't sure of the local vet's discretion. He could ring a university veterinary department or the nearest agricultural college. He could talk more generally to animal health people. None of these various lines of enquiry really gripped him …

Mavis handed him a mug and a biscuit from the box she kept in the small office. A faint tang of petrol clung to it. "I s'pose you've heard that Cherry Morton'll be out on parole pretty soon?"

He nodded gloomily. "That is one woman I thought I'd got out of my hair. Seems I can't stop the bad eggs returning."

"Never mind. Perhaps she's learnt her lesson. And speaking of hair—I hear she's turned herself into a beautiful bottle blonde, a real Marilyn Munroe look-alike. But Jim's got the bakery up for sale so I don't think there'll be anything happening on that front." Jim White had made a fool of himself over Cherry Morton; whether he might again be susceptible to her charms as a Marilyn clone was a question Dennis hoped would always remain hypothetical.

"Mavis, this may be a stupid question—but what exactly is a bottle blonde?"

"These days there's all sorts of things you can use. But when I was a kid it just meant you'd bought a bottle of peroxide at the chemist and given yourself the treatment. I tried it once but it wasn't worth all the worry and fussing. If you let it grow out people say 'Ooh! *You're* not a real blonde'—because they can see your roots. But if you keep doing it it makes your hair rather dry and brittle."

"And what else might you use it for, do you know?"

"People used it to clean their teeth with, if their teeth were stained, and I can remember my mother putting a few drops in the rinse water when she'd run out of bluebag. I seem to think people used it on things like mange and ringworm if they had nothing better to use—but I wouldn't like to say whether it worked or not."

"So would it work on an animal, d'you think. Make their coat lighter I mean."

"I've never really thought about it. But I don't see why not. You'd need a lot though. Bottles and bottles. Why? Are you wanting to turn a chestnut into a palomino or something?"

Noel had come in the back way and was wiping his hands on a rag while he listened in. "This wouldn't be about Randall Spink's horses, would it?"

"Who told you that?"

"No one *told* me that, mate," Noel said with a grin. "I didn't even have to listen in to your radio. I just need to keep my eyes and ears open. You're as good as a traveling roadshow, Den."

"Well, try to keep your trap shut—or he'll accuse me of blabbing his business all around the district."

"Sure. And he seems to be a big hit with *some* women," Noel said with a pointed look at his wife, "but *I* think he's a supercilious twit."

"Doesn't matter what he is. You don't happen to know anyone who's got an old pony they're not using?"

"You could try Dave Hickman—or the Porters. Is it true the old bloke up there thinks he's a wolf?" Noel raised a finger to his forehead. "Or just more gossip?"

"He just needs someone to listen to his yarns about being a young tearaway in Canada sixty years ago."

"That so? Well, send him down. I don't mind hearing a good yarn when I've got some boring work to do—and I get sick of the radio yammering away … "

"I know!" Mavis said suddenly. "Those two old ponies in the Pound. If no one claims them soon they'll end up going for petmeat. No one has owned up to them and they've been there for a while."

"Good idea."

Although one old pony was black and the other bay they were quite good test subjects. They didn't know there was a trade off: a life of ease at the stud in return for allowing strange chemicals and herbs (though Dennis refused to buy any vodka to try it out), beginning with hydrogen peroxide, to be tested on their coats. But both of them stood placidly in the middle of noxious fumes and mysterious discussions—and like most animals they seemed to feel safe under the mantle of calm authority Dennis Walsh projected.

"I think you've got yourself a scratcher there," Dennis said to Randall Spink. "I think someone during his racing career resorted to over-desperate measures. Does he scratch here?"

"He does a bit. I thought he'd got himself a touch of Queensland itch and I put stuff on him in the hot weather."

"Doesn't seem likely he had it in England. It could be worth getting blood tests and allergy tests done—or he's had something in his system that's still bothering him."

As he drove away he felt a vague unease. Randall Spink gave the impression of someone born to the saddle, an effortless 'horsiness', but it was possibly a veneer. He had called in the police who could be expected to have sharp eyes but no expert horse knowledge instead of a specialist horse vet, such as Ron Oliver in Winville. He had some enthusiastic young jilleroos to help him and extra hands during the breeding season. He was said to be a good rider himself. But it would make much more sense to put on a top-notch stud manager. Was this lack because of the costs involved … or because he was afraid of being caught out or shown up by a more knowledgeable person?

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Sergeant Walsh didn't sit around waiting to get some news from Winville on whether or not the amount of arsenic in old Bernie Goodrick was suspicious and could have been the cause of his death—and, more problematically, had it been given to him with clear malicious intent. Dennis Walsh rarely sat around. He kept his paperwork reasonably up to date but no one could say he had missed his true vocation in the secretarial world.

But in occasionally quiet moments he sat and pondered on a different problem: not least because it seemed too nebulous to be grasped. How did Pastor Kramer know about the brief encounter between Constable Briggs and Eve Rogers at the Caritas Farm Stay venture? What did a sexy sophisticated apparently promiscuous woman from Sydney have to do with a hellfire preacher from South Africa … whose second favourite word appeared to be 'fornication' …

He could of course simply go and ask. But this was tricky. His constable would feel that something mentioned in confidence should not be spread further afield. It was possible that George Hickman had misunderstood and the clergyman had merely been drawing inferences from the existence of Rita Jackson and Joanne McNally in his constable's life. But it certainly sounded much more specific.

There was a simple readymade reason to go around and chat with the minister. If Artie Kees was making a nuisance of himself at the church then it was time he knew the details. Artie hadn't given up his love affair with chisels. So was he focusing on another woman, maybe stalking her with the idea of bailing her up somewhere, frightening the daylights out of her at night, even something worse …

Eric Kramer was a man of white hair, high colour, rather bulbous blue eyes, and could be anywhere between forty and seventy. He appeared to have no wife or children, indeed any relatives, in his life. Yet he didn't give the impression of a loner. He often invited people home from church. He smoked small cigars on the grounds that it wasn't exactly smoking; he kept an array of South African wines on his sideboard. Seen outside of his dramatic monologuing on sin and moral danger there was something slightly soft and sensual about him. Dennis Walsh didn't particularly like him but he found it hard to decide exactly what it was which sparked an antipathy. He expected ministers to exhort and harangue their congregations. Far better for men like Pastor Kramer to urge people to live good lives than to leave it to him to come along later and hand out charges and threaten punishment …

The house, out on the Winville side of town, was a pleasant white weatherboard building with oleanders and plumbago screening it from the road. This pleasantness did not flow into the occupant. Eric Kramer met him at the door and said categorically that he had told Artie Kees not to

come back and that Artie had not been back to church since. That, he said, was the end of the problem and there was no call for the police to come snooping around.

"Snooping?" Dennis Walsh said sourly.

Eric Kramer seemed to reconsider slightly. "A little strong, I grant you, Sergeant, so let me just reassure you that the man has not given us any further trouble."

"Any *further* trouble. What was the initial trouble? Did he threaten someone?"

"Some of the women in my congregation felt rather uneasy. Gaining converts should never take priority … and I understand that Mr Kees is not capable of understanding theological concepts."

"Such as fornication?"

"Exactly. Now if you will excuse me—I have several appointments."

"Any more troubles with your prowler?"

"No. I was possibly a little hasty there. It may have been, as you suggested, that wolfhound from next door."

There was no point in prolonging the conversation. But Dennis Walsh stood by his car for several minutes before getting in and driving away. He did not doubt that the wolfhound did occasionally come into this yard … but why had Eric Kramer been so quick to get on to him? A naturally nervous disposition? If so, it wasn't much in evidence. But there was another possibility he hadn't canvassed: Eric Kramer had someone there. Noises in the garden had worried him. Was someone out there spying on him, watching, waiting for the other person to leave. Was Eric Kramer doing what the American tele-evangelists seemed to do on a regular basis …

There had been several cars parked along the roadside. He tried to call them to mind … nothing obviously unusual or suspicious about them … or not that he could remember …

*

Back at the station he found Greg Sullivan talking to Guy Briggs about Bernie Goodrick. Sullivan turned as he came in and said cheerfully, "I was just telling Guy he was full of the stuff. That's the good news. The bad news is that there's no indication how it got into him. Looks like he'd been taking it for nearly two months. We've ordered a health check at the hospital. But as no one else appears to have suffered … and the other problem was … the old coot went out quite often but no one took much notice of where he went or what he did."

"You're saying it'll end up as an open verdict?"

"Looks like it. You'll get the lab reports next week. So you can tackle his rellies to your heart's content. But I'm really here to say that Doug isn't pleased. He's been expecting you to get on to that business about the kid in the tree."

"Is he now? Well, when Doug's ready to come here and catch drunks—tell him I'll solve the problem for him. But I have got one suggestion for you. They've sorted out and filed all their old DPI reports here, or Kieran Dobbs has, so you might like to go and have a browse."

"And what's that got to do with anything? Who cares if they decided to change from growing corn to growing sorghum?"

Dennis shook his head slowly. "If you can't see any advantage in that approach it's not for me to say different. So what do you know about the kid?"

"Little girl. They say she was about five but very small for her age. They also think she was Abo … or part. Seems they can get a fair line on it from her hair and her teeth … though they haven't found all the bits. Most of the skull. All but the very small bones. I've brought you some photos."

"So could it have been an accident? She tried to climb up inside the tree and got stuck? That sort of thing."

"Probably not. A fair bit of room inside. Though bark and leaves and stuff had fallen down and covered her. Quite nice compost. They only found her because the family needed some firewood and thought they might as well cut those last couple of dead trees down by the creek."

"Had the trees been ringbarked?"

"No. No sign of that. Old age maybe."

"Have you got any idea how long she's been there?"

"Before 1960 they reckon. They haven't narrowed it any further yet."

"And you've got the list of people who owned the farm?"

"All in the folder. But no sign of a girl anywhere. It looks like she came on to the farm from somewhere else."

But after Greg had gone again, whistling cheerfully, as he got into his car, Dennis Walsh said, "Right. You can go over and have a look at those old records. They did some aerial photography. People got a buzz out of seeing their land from the air. Also some work on Buckton Creek when they were keen on getting more irrigation going."

"So what am I looking for?" Guy asked this question regularly and it always made his boss uneasy; to tell someone what to look for always ran the risk that they would discount or ignore other possibly more useful information.

"I want to know when and why those trees died. If they didn't get ringbarked then did they poison them. It doesn't seem very likely. Not if they left them there instead of clearing and ploughing that extra land. The most likely thing, but keep an open mind, is that the creek flooded and they stood in water for too long—"

"How do you know they weren't already dead?"

"They could've been. But not for long if the child got covered by leaves and bark." Guy nodded. He still couldn't see any significance in the history of the tree. "Check on what sort of people owned the farm … in terms of getting advice, trying new crops, wanting to increase yields, any of that. And if not them … look at the farms nearby. It beggars belief that a child could be there for thirty odd years and no one notice. So they either knew the skeleton was there … or they were the sort of people just content to potter along leaving things pretty much as is."

"And if she was Aboriginal—"

"Could be adopted. Fostered. Someone working there for a while who had a child. I don't like what I'm thinking … but we need some facts first up. No luck with Kieran's stuff … you can get on to it from the land titles' side."

Guy still felt a bit helpless as he took a clipboard and pen and went out. He could only hope that Kieran Dobbs would be willing to give him a bit of a hand in homing in on the most useful records and he was unsure whether he could read aerial maps of the farms out there along the distant reaches of Buckton Creek. But his good fairy was in attendance and Kieran was interested and helpful and seemed to understand why it might be worth trying to track down the life history of a dead tree.

He wrote up his notes back at the station. Dennis, when he returned in the late afternoon and looked through the material, said only, "Good lad. Now you'll need to track down those three lots of people. If they're dead, try to find people who remember them, their character, whether they joined local things, any gossip."

Guy wasn't sure that he really wanted to be called a 'lad' when he was already twenty-eight. But praise from Dennis was a rare thing and always brought with it a curious glow of achievement.

But the glow didn't survive his arrival home. There was a small parcel in his mailbox next to Betty's box. It had no sender's address on it. But his first thought was that the person, possibly his mother, had simply forgotten. He took it inside, opened the 'tough bag' and took out an unlabelled video. Still unsuspicious he popped it into his video machine, got himself a drink and some biscuits, and settled down to watch it …

*

It was Mrs Clarke out at Burleigh who rang the police station before breakfast to say there had been an accident near the Environment Park. A car had hit a tree and gone off the road there. She had rung the ambulance as well. She wasn't certain but she thought the driver might be Constable Briggs.

"A black Monaro?" Dennis Walsh asked.

"I'm not good on cars—but black certainly."

"I'll be straight out."

But as he drove he found a sense of unreality in the whole thing. 'What the hell was he doing out there last night?' Nothing had come into the station. Had someone who knew Guy rung him directly and, still half asleep, he'd gone out to see what the problem might be?

Sure enough it was the Monaro. It looked as though he had decided to turn into the park but had been traveling too fast or had misjudged the turn. The car had skidded in the loose gravel and slammed into a tree but only a glancing blow, then on down into the ditch.

Mrs Clarke came over to him. "The ambulance left about ten minutes ago. They said he'd most likely hit his head on the windscreen and knocked himself out."

"I passed it. I wonder what the young idiot was up to out here?" And why he wasn't wearing his seatbelt …

But that was a question she couldn't answer. Nor could the hospital after he had quartered the area, photographed the car, then called Winville to get their traffic officer on to it, and eventually returned to town. The car was salvageable. Noel could tow it later.

But it worried him. How many men had passed it on their way to work at the dam? Or had they simply not seen it down there in the shadows? And as well as no seatbelt … had Guy been drinking, speeding, driving recklessly?

And why Burleigh?

Sister Martin at Buckton Hospital said briskly. "Dr Davis has been and gone. He says it's concussion and bruising but he should be okay to go home tomorrow."

"Good. He's got some explaining to do."

Before she could stop him Dennis had marched past her and into the small side ward and bellowed, "Okay, son, just what the fuck d'you think you're playing at?" It was hardly the best of questions to put to a road accident patient, concussed and possibly traumatised. But she had no intention of intervening. Time later to dish out some sympathy.

Guy Briggs looked increasingly purple around the face and had a small cut treated with a small piece of plaster. But it was his whole demeanour which suggested he wished he could simply have gone out with a bang.

"I'm sorry." It was little more than a whisper. "I only meant to drive and … and think … "

"Without a seatbelt and going like a bat out of hell? Were you drinking?"

"No."

"So what the bloody hell sparked it all off? Bad news from home … or one of your lady friends?"

"No. Someone sent me a video."

"You having sex with Eve Rogers?"

He couldn't hide his surprise but at last he nodded very slightly. The movement made him wince. "But it was more than that. They had spliced the film with some other material."

Dennis opened his mouth to ask the obvious question then closed it again. "You're sure about that?"

"Yes."

"So where is the video now?"

"I … hid it."

Dennis Walsh waited. When Guy showed no sign of expanding on this his boss said simply, "I'm hardly likely to invite half of Buckton round for a public viewing but I do need to know what the fuck is going on here."

At last Guy seemed to accept this. He whispered instructions on how to find it. Dennis stood up again. "I'll charge you with careless driving tomorrow." He went out. Guy closed his eyes. Betty Cronk only went in once a week to change his sheets and run the vacuum cleaner round. But the image of her finding the video and having a little private viewing of her own horrified him. He wasn't sure but he thought she probably did look through his mail sometimes.

*

Dennis had arranged to meet Ray Gould at the station after Ray had checked the accident site; but there was time to call by the Cronk house first and get the wrapping from the video and get it

into the station safe for checking later. The luscious Eve might have her prints on it. Then again someone else might be selling, distributing, giving the things away as free gifts …

The crime involved wasn't clear. Sending obscene material through the post? Or would there be a blackmail demand in a few days? Someone might well have decided that Guy's family was sufficiently well off and sufficiently in the public eye to be worth touching for a few thousand. Or did it have to do with an investigation? Except that the Rogers weren't under investigation …

Weren't under investigation *here* …

Betty Cronk came bustling out as the police car drew into the driveway. "What an awful thing to happen, Sergeant," she said without preamble. "That poor boy. Was it one of Ken McLaren's cows on the road again?" She made no bones about her curiosity.

"They're investigating the accident. Charges will have to be laid. Now, if you wouldn't mind getting your spare key, and letting me into his flat, I've got some things to get."

"But—" She opened her eyes wider. "They only came from the hospital a little while ago, just to get his pyjamas and things."

"Who did?"

"Two men. I don't know their names. I've never seen them before."

"You let two total strangers into a police officer's home?"

Put like that she suddenly had doubts. "I thought I was helping. They said he had had a serious accident and would be in hospital for a few days." Her voice took on a slight whine.

"So what did they take?"

"I didn't go in. I think … just his towel and pyjamas and dressing gown. Things like that."

The desire to fall on Betty Cronk and try to shake some more information out of her, if not some sense of responsibility into her, faded. And he wasn't sure he believed her when she said she didn't go in.

"Describe the men."

"Just men. Maybe thirty or forty. Fairly big."

"Have you ever seen either of them around?"

"I don't think so. I don't go out much."

"What about their car?"

"I didn't really look. It was fairly big. A bit posh."

"What colour?"

"I don't know. A dark colour. Dark green maybe."

Here was a woman whose little beady eyes had watched Buckton going about its business for sixty years and she was almost useless when put on the spot; but he understood that it wasn't the physical details that interested her, it was the moral inferences she could draw from observed behaviour—not least to bolster her sense of herself as an upright Christian woman.

"Then let's get one thing straight. No one is to go into Constable Briggs's room until he gets home. You can go in only if you have an absolutely essential reason to go in. Got that?"

She was deeply offended by this plain-speaking. But he hoped she had got the message, loud and clear. Who were the men, was the first question, but equally importantly: how had they known Guy was in hospital? He did not doubt that they had come in search of the video and that they hadn't been able to find it. But then, as the video was in his car not in his video-machine, that wasn't surprising. He went round to see Noel Barnard about getting the car towed.

"I can come now, if you like, Dennis."

"Okay, I'll follow on. I'd better just check first for messages. The car is next to the turnoff to the park. We'll probably pass Ray Gould on the road."

Dennis, as he drove, mused on the whole business. Had Guy planned to do himself some harm or had he simply planned to throw the video away into the lagoon or something? Had the video been sent to him to rattle him, to compromise him, to let him know it existed and could now be reproduced as and when …

Or had it been sent to him by mistake? And they were trying to get it back?

It wasn't hard to find where Briggs had slipped the video into a little pocket under the seat, to take it out and put it in a plastic bag. Fingerprints seemed unlikely but he would go through the motions.

"Noel, you don't happen to know a local car that's big, posh quote unquote, and possibly dark green. I don't know if 'posh' means we're looking at a Daimler or a Jaguar, that sort o' thing."

"Not off hand. Would you like me to keep an eye out?"

"No harm."

The video would have to sit in the safe at the station for the moment. He wanted to go out to the Rogers and see what they drove. Two men. How reliable was Ms Cronk? Presumably she wouldn't mistake a hefty woman for a man, and certainly not for Eve Rogers …

A guest then. A colleague. Someone who messed around with films …

But he had no joy at the Farm Stay place. Eve Rogers came out as he drove in. She smiled winningly, she said her husband was out, she asked how she could help. A dark green sedan? No, they only used the utility around the farm and a four-wheel-drive, a darkish blue, for business off the farm. She was sorry she couldn't be more helpful. It might be a guest. But she hadn't noticed particularly what any of their recent guests were driving.

"Would you like me to keep an eye out?"

This time he was a little drier. "No harm."

He drove away. So that was the luscious Eve. He didn't really blame Guy for throwing caution to the winds. But he felt there was something calculating in her whole response to him, as though she was weighing the possibilities. Was he seducible? And if so—how, where, when?

He turned on to the road past. This place would be visible from some parts of the Japana yards. But the only other obvious viewpoint was the farm the other side of the road and set well back into the long grassy slope. They might notice cars on the road, even if they didn't have a good view of the car park at Caritas. He turned right instead of left and drove along as far as the bridge over the dry gully then turned back. Eve might be watching but he couldn't give her more than a few minutes to go inside and forget about him. He turned into the farm gate and drove up the slope.

Erica Firkin came out to the garden gate. She was in her forties but looked rather pale and bloated and unwell; something dragged and worn about her face. He got out and went over. "Sorry to bother you, Mrs Firkin, but I wonder if you've ever seen a big car on the road there, probably dark green, maybe something a bit upmarket. Or turning into the Farm Stay place."

"I have. Quite often. I don't know if it's them or a long term guest or even one of the Japana people who come round regularly."

"You've seen them today?"

"No. Not today. But I've been trying to get everything in order before I go back to hospital."

"Sorry to hear it."

She briefly touched one side of her chest. "I had one off. I had chemo. But now they say the other one has to go." She seemed to need someone to tell her worries to. "Rod keeps calling me 'damaged goods'. I s'pose I am. But he doesn't need to go on about it."

"Then the man's a fool. He doesn't deserve to have a nice wife. But I won't keep you. Just—if you do happen to notice anything, give the station a ring. You can leave a message if I'm out. I think that car may have been used to commit a crime. But just keep it to yourself. No need to tell Rod unless you'd like to."

How would he feel about Fiona if she had to have both breasts removed? He looked at the question from various angles as he drove. And the answer was simple. He would feel sorry for her, worried about her, but it wouldn't make a blind bit of difference to how he felt about her.

He called in to see that the car had reached the garage safely. "It's still driveable," Noel said straight off. "But it'll need new lights and a fair bit of panel-beating on that side. Is Guy okay?"

"I'd say so. The fool doesn't deserve to be. But I'd better keep going. This has shot my day to pieces."

He got on to the Council. But the farm where the child had been found came within the ambit of Winville. Though their next door neighbours this side came within Buckton's reach. He lifted the

phone and got DC Ali Deane in Winville. He might as well pass the information Guy had collected straight on to the CIB team … not wait for Guy to finish his research.

"Message for Greg. Tell him I'd say the little girl got put in the tree sometime in 1952 just before Buckton Creek flooded. It was a very wet year. Go to the Council there and check when Cyril and Annie Begg and their children moved. The date of the death is probably just months, even weeks, before that."

"Do you think the Beggs had anything to with her death? They rented the farm to his cousin for the next thirty years. The cousin had no children."

"I would say the Beggs probably had a lot to do with the death."

"It has … I mean you've been reading things into the landscape, haven't you?" She wasn't quite sure what the significance of the flood was. The tree. But she went round to the library in her lunchbreak and asked to use the microfilm reader. They had a complete set of the 1952 *Winville Courier*. And yes, Dennis was right. It had been a very wet year. So wet that springs broke out in some of the paddocks adjoining Buckton Creek and some farmers virtually had to abandon their usual ploughing. Trees died. Long shallow lagoons lay for months in low-lying paddocks. People said they saw the occasional pelican.

*

Erica Firkin rang Dennis Walsh late that afternoon. She had seen a dark green car turn into Caritas. It had come out again about ten minutes later, she wasn't sure, then driven towards the creek. She had been helping her husband get a new paling fence up along the fowl yard and hadn't been able to duck inside. But the car had returned in about half-an-hour and she hadn't seen it leave again, though she couldn't guarantee that.

"Thanks for that. I appreciate it. You don't happen to have any idea what sort of car?"

"Yes, I think it's a Volvo."

"Don't know if I'll be able to get out again today. Things have got on top of me a bit. But if you do see it leave again—I'd appreciate knowing."

"I'll try."

He couldn't very well tell her that he needed to watch an R-rated video before he decided what to do next. In the late afternoon he rang the Hospital. "He's quite okay," Sister O'Brien said firmly. "Just feeling sorry for himself."

"Right. Well, the sorrier the better, and you can just tell him his property is safe."

Safe? When hundreds of copies might now be doing the rounds?

Dennis closed up and went over to his house and unenthusiastically slipped the video in. He had bought the video-player thinking Fiona might occasionally like to choose a film and watch it. To put this in might be to sully it …

Guy was right. It had been cleverly doctored. Now it looked as though Eve and Guy and a large male Dobermann were having a very rackety time 'together'. The whole thing offended him, not least the knowledge that Eve Rogers must have a very sophisticated filming arrangement in her bedroom. It wouldn't be difficult. The room looked to be crowded with knick-knacks, mirrors, furniture, pictures, any number of which could contain hidden cameras. The lack of openness and accountability, something sordid and sour in the whole set-up, the attempt to wreck the life of a young man …

He re-wound the video and put it away. The whole thing made him want to go away and wash. And there were people who jumped up and down and demanded the 'right' to watch such material. That was probably the hardest thing of all to believe …

There was a knock at the back door and Fiona's voice. He went to let her in.

"Dennis, I won't stay if you're busy." She went to kiss him and for a fleeting moment he wasn't sure he could simply accept it, then the sense of what he'd just watched passed and he said calmly, "Come in."

"I heard that Guy's in hospital. You *are* safe though, aren't you?"

She looked him over with anxious eyes. "Nothing to do with me. The idiot ran into a tree."

She looked at him. Something a little … brittle about him this evening. But she went over and turned the kettle on. "He'll never live that down, I don't suppose."

He was tempted to say 'shit happens' but in the end he only said, "Not if I've got anything to do with it. I'll charge him tomorrow. Or at least a caution. I don't know that I can get anything stronger to stick. There weren't any witnesses."

She couldn't interpret his mood. Was he angry with Guy? Angry about having to charge him? Angry at the extra work? Or was it something quite different? At last she said, "It isn't just about his driving, is it?"

"Are people saying things?"

"I'm sure they are. But I haven't been home yet. That's when I'll get the lurid latest from Main Street … "

He put on a sliver of a smile. "Don't know. But he may have compromised himself beyond repair. There's only so much I can fix."

She went over to make the coffee and get milk from the frig.

"Don't go talking about it though. Sure he's an idiot. But I might've done the same thing at his age … "

She nodded, unsure what was going on, but always willing to accept that there were things which shouldn't go beyond this spartan room. She handed him a mug and sat down at the kitchen table.

When he spoke again it was to say unexpectedly, "I'm not a very exciting lover, am I? Not many ideas when it comes to … "

Was this a throwaway line or something important? "I think you're the nicest lover in all the world—"

"And I can spot perjury at sixty paces."

Should she try and expand, convince, reassure, laugh, change the subject …

"Can you now, Mr Eagle-Eyes?" She gave him a quick grin. "Still, I think ideas are what people fall back on, hoping it will pull them through, when there's no love around. Sort of second best … "

"Maybe." But if he'd been going to say more it was drowned in the shrill of the telephone. He answered, listened, then said, "Okay, thanks for that. Take care now." To Fiona he said, "I'm sorry. I've got to go out. With luck, I—"

"Won't be long. I know, my darling. But I will go home for a while and do my ironing. You could ring me if you get back sooner than … "

"Expected. Yeah. We'll have the drill down pat pretty soon."

But he didn't seem to find the idea amusing. He shrugged himself into his old brown parka and went out to his own car and drove away a minute or two later. Erica Firkin's message was a simple one. She had noticed a car, probably a Volvo, come out and turn left. She thought, but wasn't sure, it had then turned right on to the road to Buckton …

*

If the car had not turned off again chances were they were coming into Buckton. But who was their contact here? And who were 'they'? Adam, if not Eve? The contact had to be someone who knew for certain that Guy was in Buckton Hospital and that he had gone round to see him. The trouble with that was—half the town probably knew. But knew soon enough to act so swiftly on it? Hospital staff? The Doctors Davis? Regular visitors? Delivery people? The ambulance men and their families?

He chose a little side road with some bushes and trees to hide him on the Dinawadding side. Killed his headlights, and sat back to wait. He would give them another twenty minutes. If the car didn't pass (and Erica Firkin might not really be any better at recognising makes of cars than Betty Cronk) then he would have a quiet trawl around town and see if he saw a likely car parked anywhere.

It wouldn't tell him what to do about Guy. It wouldn't even tell him what sort of operation he was looking at. If they had doctored the video for private use, if it had been posted or hand-delivered by mistake, the case he could make for invasion of privacy or any other possible charge would probably be so flimsy it would be thrown out of court. And to go round saying that wasn't

the way decent people behaved wouldn't cut any ice. Even Fiona would probably see the whole thing as distinctly unfair to Guy but hardly criminal. Sordid but not real porn …

As he sat musing his target flashed past. Mrs Firkin *was* right after all. It was a Volvo. He pulled himself together and eased quietly out on to the bitumen. The car ahead slowed a little as it reached the outskirts of Buckton. It turned left. He followed. It ran down past the high school, turned again.

Just possibly they were heading through town and on towards Winville. He upped his speed a little, not wanting to lose them. A minute later they turned again, then he saw the lights go off. He pulled in to the verge and got out. There was a street light on the corner, but the houses further down were in darkness except where people had put their inside lights on. He walked past the Church of Christ. The Council had seen fit to plant kurrajongs along the grassy verge. The car was parked just a half-house-length past Eric Kramer's house and half-hidden in the blackness of the trees. He stood quietly for several minutes. He didn't want to start the wolfhound off. He didn't want to alert the car's occupants if they were still sitting in it.

The pastor's house had several lights on. He was fairly sure blonde Eve had been in the front passenger seat as the car passed him. And the thought of Eve Rogers and Eric Kramer was a little hard to process. Maybe he was trying to save her soul. Maybe they were in some way related. Maybe it had nothing to do with her and it was her husband …

The night was warm and a mosquito came and whined around him. Nothing made neat nicely-tied-up sense. Caritas and Bruloder had some connection. Caritas and Eric Kramer, or the Rogers and Kramer, had a connection. Which might, or might not, suggest that Kramer had a connection to Bruloder. He would talk to George Hickman tomorrow and see if he had turned up anything more on the company …

The front door opened five minutes later. Two people came out and down the front stairs. He had taken the car's number plate and had a quiet look around it. Possibly the green was a recent spray-painting job. Where someone had scraped there was the hint of a lighter colour underneath. But it wasn't a crime to change the colour of your car. He moved over to the front gate to wait for them. As he did so he heard a door at the rear of the house close and footsteps as of someone hurrying downstairs …

"Mrs Rogers. How nice to meet you again."

She was dressed in a shimmery thing with narrow shoulder straps. It might mean she and her husband were going on to a function somewhere. Her response to his sudden appearance out of the gloom was to gasp and bring up a hand to her mouth. Her eyes seemed to pop. Afterwards he debated the exact description. Could people's eyes pop? Her husband put a hand on her shoulder.

"Mr Rogers?"

"Is there a problem, sir, or were you just out 'on the beat'?"

"Both. I asked your wife earlier today if you or any of your guests had a dark green car? Your wife said no. Six hours later I find her driving round in the bloody thing. You might care to explain."

"I know she isn't very clued up when it comes to cars but you could've told the sergeant, sweetie, not have him think you're a moron."

He seemed to tighten his hold slightly on her shoulder. She gave a high tinkling laugh. There was something about her, Sergeant Walsh decided, which suggested she had taken something. A hyped up quality. Eve Rogers wasn't really sharing in this moment. Did they come here for some kind of support or counseling if she had a medical problem? Manic-depressive. Some form of addiction. Schizophrenia. His ideas ran out.

In the distance he heard a car start. There was a hall behind the church. Possibly Eric Kramer kept his car out the back and drove up that side lane. Was he going somewhere in particular or just downtown to eat …

"Excuse me … but is there an actual problem with the car? We are on our way to Winville and don't want to be late. But we can set a time to discuss this further."

"We can. Mrs Rogers, was it you who sent a pornographic video through the mail to Constable Briggs?"

She stared at him. But he still felt she wasn't really processing the question.

Her husband laughed. "You're not suggesting … well, I am not sure what you are suggesting. We watch a little raunchy stuff occasionally. But all perfectly legal I can assure you. Buckton may be a little bit behind the times and prudish but nothing that would upset liberal-minded people."

Eve Rogers managed to pull up a dazzling smile. "It's about bodies, Sergeant, enjoying them, playing them, they are like finely-tuned instruments … you must try it someday. The missionary position," her blonde hair shone as she shook her head slightly, "is … like … yesterday. Sharing and caring, that's us." She giggled in a very engaging small-girl-way.

"It isn't a crime, sir," Adam Rogers twined his fingers with those of his wife, "but perhaps we are a little too far ahead of the community for real understanding."

"Then you'd better try to rein in your bloody horses," Dennis Walsh said sourly. "And next time I'd like to hear the truth straight off—not have to chase you round the countryside to get it."

As they walked away to their car, still sounding light-hearted and happy, he went round the corner to his own car. So he didn't see Adam Rogers slap his wife's face. But then if he had stayed to watch them leave the slap would simply have been postponed.

*

He drove straight round to the Cronks' house and pulled into the lane. The door to Guy's flat was open and the light was on. He was out and running.

"What the fuckin' hell!" For the second time in an hour he managed to startle someone into near heart failure. Betty Cronk squealed and stepped back. Over the far side of the room was Eric Kramer.

People on the other side of Buckton were later willing to swear they heard Dennis Walsh yelling at Betty Cronk. "I told you—*I told you*—this flat was off limits. And here you are letting more stupid men in. I am going to charge you, Mr Kramer, with trespass. Renting out your property, Ms Cronk, does *not* give you the right to let people into it. And as for you, mate, I want to know what you're doing in here."

"I came round to help Betty. She saw a light in here and was frightened that someone might've broken in."

"Balls! If she saw a light she could get on to me. Why ring a moron like you! And I told you, Ms Cronk, that this is to be treated as a crime scene. What's the matter with you? Don't you ever listen to a thing you're told?"

Eric Kramer put down the video he was holding. It was a copy of *Star Wars*.

"You'd better clear out, Mr Kramer, and I expect to see you round at the station first thing in the morning. As for you, madam, you'd better give me your keys to this flat seeing I can't trust you not to invite half the fucking town round to help themselves to Constable Briggs's belongings."

"How dare you speak to me like that!" She seemed to have decided that attack was the best form of defence.

"Easy. You associate with sleazebags you've got to expect to be treated like one. So give me that key and then we can all go home. I'll give you a receipt."

He stood and watched the minister drive off. Betty Cronk, bereft of her supporter, her pastor, her shepherd, became more conciliatory. "He *is* a minister, Sergeant. I was brought up to think well of clergymen. To trust them."

He didn't feel the point was worth arguing.

But the evening *had* given him one curious piece of information. Adam Rogers was undoubtedly another South African.

Case No. 5: Lost Causes

On his way out to the hospital next morning Dennis Walsh detoured to see George Hickman and ask him whether he had either found the missing material or re-assembled his material on Bruloder.

"'fraid not, Dennis. I've got a bit on Bruloder. Seems to be run from the USA—"

"Are you sure about that, George?"

"Not sure, no. But I rang their Brisbane office and they said I would need to ring the USA to get details on the company's plans."

"Which you then did?"

"Of course not. You think I can afford international phone calls, mate?"

"What about the Australian personnel? They must have some listed."

"They do. But their details aren't given out to the media."

"No requirement that they be listed?"

"It's not a publicly listed company."

Dennis sat down heavily on the spare chair in George's 'office'. It still didn't seem to add up. Why would anyone want to pinch some of George's messy notes? But there had to be a reason. "George, when you contacted the company at Dinna—what exactly did you ask them? What sort of information were you after?"

"Anything really." George also sat down and seemed to cast his mind back. "But I did say I would be interested in knowing more about the people running the company. After all, people were pretty upset about the misinformation that surrounded Japana and the way the Hoysteds used those other small companies to hide their interest. You know—Chandos which was owned by Gresham's which was owned by Hoysted Holdings? I hoped that these new people would be more open and upfront … "

"I think you're whistling in the wind. If anything … " he dropped back into silence for a long pause then he said suddenly, "George, what language do they speak in South Africa? Apart from English, I mean."

"Well, Afrikaans. It's similar to Dutch. And native languages … Zulu … or do I mean Zhosa? I could look it up for you."

"No. We're looking at white South Africans. Could Bruloder be Afrikaans, do you think? Or something similar. I don't know. Bruj—Brun—I'm only guessing."

George, after looking surprised, suddenly clicked his fingers. "I wonder … you just might be on to something there, Den. It struck me as odd that they would say, if they *were* Americans, 'Chicago, Illinois, USA' as if they didn't expect people to know where Chicago was … is … but what if it is only window-dressing? And Brisbane is only a box number and a mobile phone."

"I don't know, mate. I feel like someone grubbing round in a rubbish dump. I don't even know if we're looking at people who're just a bit touchy about their privacy … or something seriously off."

"Let me do some hunting round in that part of the world. You never know. South Africa is either going to change peacefully … or implode. Don't ask me which. But there has been a constant stream of wealthy whites coming here, getting out before crunch time comes, and a cattle operation just might appeal. They have lots of cattle there, don't they?"

"I'd say so. But ask an expert. Two other things. Both Eric Kramer and Adam Rogers are South Africans … and they appear to be friends and Caritas appears to have some sort of link to the feed lots … maybe just a spot of R and R but maybe something more. A nice quiet little country place, well out of earshot, to discuss ideas … talk about things back home … who knows?"

*

But there was no time to spend more earnest discussion on these questions. When Dennis Walsh got round to the hospital it was to find that Guy had been discharged. He wasn't at his flat so Dennis returned to the station. His junior was sitting there looking rather wan and sorry for himself.

But he said as though to ingratiate himself again, "Greg Sullivan has just faxed through some material about that farm, the people who lived there, and he's even found one of them, a Mrs Begg."

"Fine. You'd better get on with some routine stuff till you pick yourself up. Eric Kramer is s'posed to be coming in. Charge him with trespass. I found him in your flat last night guddling through your video collection."

Guy Briggs snapped out of his mournful state enough to say, "In my flat?"

"That's what I said. What did you do with the wrapping or the bag that the video came in?"

"I … I just left it on the bed. It was one of those postbags. It didn't have a return address. I didn't look at the postmark. I thought it might be from home. I've got some videos of dad racing, being interviewed, that sort of stuff. Mum tapes things and sends them. And then I … when I saw what it was … it was like … I just wanted to … " He dropped his head into his hands.

"So we've got the video. But it looks like they carried the wrapping away in one of your towels … "

"What are you going to do? Are you going to tell Winville?" It wasn't hard to see that Guy regarded that as a fate nearly as bad as death.

"Probably not. Or not for the time being. If I say it is an obscene publication people will jump up and try to convince me it's no more than a sexy romp. And I don't see how I can prove that you didn't give your consent."

"I didn't consent to being filmed—"

"Didn't you? You look pretty spaced out to me. Glazed eyes. Super-hyped. I'd say your friend Eve fed you some speed in your coffee or your cake … She's probably got you on tape agreeing to anything she wants to do … "

The suggestion seemed to send Briggs back into deep depression. But his boss told him he could go out tomorrow and do some interviewing round Dinawadding. "Just find out if they're making offers people can't refuse, that sort of thing. I've heard rumours that they're trying to buy up what's left of the town. You can imply that we're still looking into the Japana business, maybe more charges, something like that. It might put a damper on their plans. Nut out some basic questions when you've got a moment." Guy, however, showed no enthusiasm for going anywhere within the reach of Caritas and Eve Rogers.

Then Dennis picked up the phone and rang Winville. "What's happening your end, Greg?"

"I'm just putting together some more background details. Then one of us is going to have to go and see this Annie Begg. She and her husband and two young boys lived there in 1952. They arranged with a cousin to take over the farm. He lived there for nearly thirty years. Bit of an antisocial old so-and-so from what I've heard. Then he moved out, a nursing home I think, and one of the Begg boys lived there for several years. His father died and he moved straight off the farm and he and his brother who were joint heirs put it up for sale. A man called Crofton bought it about a year ago. He found the skeleton when he got at that dead tree with a chainsaw. But it doesn't tell us how the little girl got in there. None of the surrounding farms had any blacks employed. I wondered if the kid might've been fostered for a while. They didn't keep proper records for a lot of that stuff. Just parceled kids out to anyone who'd take them. The Beggs' two boys weren't at school. Only toddlers then. So if this kid wasn't at school either … well, she probably just dropped through the net."

"That kid was seriously undernourished—if that material you gave us is correct. You're looking at neglect at the least."

"I know. I've been trying not to think it all through. But all Doug wants is a name and a rough idea of what happened. Then he can close the file."

"What d'you mean—close the file?"

"I mean pass it on to the coroner with his assessment that this was an accident. Kid climbs into a tree. Can't get out again. Or there was a brown snake in the tree. End of kid. They haven't found a cause of death. No damage to her skull. No broken bones. That sort of thing."

"Then there is a good chance that she was starved to death."

"We're not going to be able to prove that."

"No? What about this Mrs Begg? She's had forty years to work up a bit of remorse."

"Maybe. Do you want to come and see her with me."

"Don't mind if I do. Where does she live now?"

"Ipswich. I'll ring you when I've got things sorted this end."

Walsh put down the phone. Sorting things his end didn't strike him as a simple operation. But Guy had diverted him from other difficult questions by asking whether 'unauthorised entry' would be a better charge than 'trespass' …

*

Fiona Greehan had seen DS Sullivan come by and pick Dennis up. She was deeply curious because Dennis had been distracted and a bit distant these last couple of days. She assumed it was a big case and he would tell her when he could. If he could. Bit by bit she was learning to accept and live with her curiosity and get on with things.

But an odd little thing happened when she called into the Council library after work. She felt she should at least read another David Malouf after putting Dennis on the spot like that. She took *An Imaginary Life* off the shelf and took it to the desk. But Adrian Short said straightaway, "Seems to be the week for Malouf. Someone took one out only a day or two ago."

"Oh? Who was that? Sorry, I don't mean to get personal. But I've been thinking it would be rather nice to start a book reading group here … "

"As a matter of fact—if I remember rightly—it was Dennis Walsh. He borrows books but not usually novels." His assistant, Christy Low, came over to join them. But she wanted to discuss the idea of a reading group—not the reading habits of their local sergeant.

The questions for Greg Sullivan and Dennis Walsh were far more fraught than the way in which an informal little book group might be set up. They could not say whether the child had died by deliberate malice or whether it had been a matter of a long illness, accidents, even a mistake by the team which had put an age of approximately five years on the little girl …

Mrs Begg came to her door, a big woman with some piled-up unnaturally red hair, and stood there rather aggressively. She must only have been in her early twenties when she lived on the farm. She was in her sixties now. Greg asked if they could come in and discuss the finding of a body on the farm with her. She said no. "If you've got something to say you can say it here."

Greg looked slightly disconcerted. It was a long way to come to meet firm obstruction. But Dennis leaned a hand up against the door jamb and said, "No worries. They'll still be tough questions."

"What do you mean? I don't know anything about bodies."

"Small girl. Aboriginal. Or half-and-half. We don't know yet if your husband contributed the white half. But there's a good chance he did. And a good chance that you weren't too happy about it."

She looked from one big man to the other and her face suffused with angry colour. "How dare you come here and say that!"

"Say what? That we've found a little girl. No doubt about it. Her parents are still a mystery. But with luck they can use this DNA stuff to track that side down. Not my expertise. But it would save us one heck of a lot of time and money to hear the story straight from you." Dennis continued to lean a big hand as though he had all day to rest up …

She seemed to think that Greg Sullivan was less fierce than Dennis Walsh. She turned and said to him, "Okay, you can come in. But I don't know anything about any bodies and it doesn't matter how long you stay, I won't be able to tell you anything."

Her front room was full of furniture, photos, souvenirs, soft toys. She pointed them to chairs but offered nothing more. Her aggressive stance was back in full force.

"Now, if you would just tell us the dates when you lived on the farm?" Greg Sullivan had jotted a few questions down.

"Couldn't say, not exactly. It's a hell of a long time ago. About four or five years. I don't remember. We left … I think it was just before the Queen's coronation."

"Say about 1953?"

She shrugged. "Could be. But there was just us. Just Cyril and me and the boys. So I don't know anything about bodies."

"And you came here?"

"Yeah. We came here. We had a pub. Cyril was older than me. He died. He never said nothing to me about any Abos … you're making that up. Weren't any anywhere round there."

"You mean—there weren't any living on nearby farms?"

"I never saw any. And I wouldn't of given them the time of day—"

"You avoided coloured people?"

"We never went out. I was busy. I had two kids. We had the farm."

"What sort of farm?"

"Vealers. I hated being there. I wasn't a country person."

"You hated the farm. Or your neighbours. Or the work. Or your husband."

She shrugged. "It wasn't much of a life. I said we should leave."

"Your husband always did what you asked?"

She seemed to be surprised by the question. "Sometimes."

Greg continued to ask questions but he had the awful feeling he was no match for this woman's stubbornness. And he couldn't very well hand over to Dennis Walsh. He was supposed to be the detective. He began to feel his sense of failure as a prickling irritation.

After another ten minutes, Dennis cut in suddenly, "Tell us about the tree with the hollow down by the creek, Mrs Begg."

But it was Greg Sullivan who suddenly said in a spurt of annoyance, "Forget that bloody tree! It hasn't got anything to do with—anything! I'm sick of hearing you carry on about it!"

Dennis had been looking at Mrs Begg as Greg suddenly burst out in frustration. It was just a flicker, a sense that she got pleasure from his senior turning on him, a hint that Mrs Begg liked to watch other people slapped down. Unexpectedly it reminded him of a kid from his schooldays, a good kid, a kid that never got into trouble, a kid who'd liked watching others getting the cane, a kid who wore a discreet smirk when he thought no one was watching. He didn't want to read too much into the flash of insight …

"But you do know all about that tree, don't you, Mrs Begg? Just as you know all about that young woman that was there with her child and you loved to watch your husband give them a hard time—because he left you alone when he was getting stuck into them, didn't he? What was her name, Mrs Begg?"

For a moment she stared at him; the image of something mesmerised by the unwinking stare of a dangerous snake occurred to Greg Sullivan. When she said she didn't know what he was talking about it ceased to carry its former sense of conviction.

"Yeah, you do, Mrs Begg. You know exactly what I'm talking about. All we need is a name for the woman and a name for the child and then the file on them can be closed. You know the young woman's name. It's written all over your face. So spit it out and we can leave you in peace."

Annie Begg seemed to drag her gaze away from Dennis Walsh as though to find comfort and help in DS Sullivan's pleasant square face. "I don't know what you're talking about. There never was any woman there. No child."

"The name, Mrs Begg."

Sullivan schooled his face to look blank and unhelpful. He knew now that there was a woman and child waiting to be revealed. She was still determined not to give in but her body language increasingly showed her struggle to keep her firmly obstructive wall in place.

Dennis sat back slightly and sprawled his legs out. His stance suggested he had no objection to staying all day, that he was in no hurry to drive back to Winville. But Mrs Begg was made of stern stuff … or she was afraid of letting any barriers down. She had put away the past and she had no intention of calling it up again.

"The name, Mrs Begg."

Traffic passed on the road. A conversation next door floated in faintly. Time passed. At last she said, "You'll have to go. I've got to go out."

"Yeah. But we're still waiting, Mrs Begg. This body has hung around for a heck of a long time. We want to give it a name so it can be laid to rest and the matter finished."

In the end she said in a sudden spurt of anger, "Her name was Gertie Bertie! Her kid was Dilys. She was a lazy dirty little so-and-so. And I wasn't sorry when she took the kid and ran away. She wasn't worth the price of … "

She seemed to regret the words the minute she'd let fly. But it was too late to grab them back.

"She worked for you?"

"If you call it working. She did nothing but sit around and whinge. My husband had to get stuck into her to get her to do anything, even help me a bit."

"You paid her?"

"My husband did all the money side of things. It's no good asking me."

"We'll take that as a no." Dennis Walsh seemed to tense up as though he was holding in a sudden rise of anger.

"And this woman and her child left the farm in about 1952?" Greg felt he could now afford to sound conciliatory.

And more so as he saw a very long shot get results.

"I don't remember. I hardly remember her."

"But you do remember her name?"

"Wouldn't you? A stupid name like that." She stood up. "I've got an appointment. You'll have to go. And I don't want to see you back here."

The two men got up and went out. But at the car Greg Sullivan said with a frown, "They didn't leave, did they? But that'll be her story and she'll stick to it now. We won't get her to budge, will we?"

"Doubt it. But if she was telling us the truth about the woman she must have left a trace *somewhere*."

*

He had been distracted and a bit distant since his return, from wherever Greg Sullivan had taken him, but Fiona accepted that he had a sometimes difficult and traumatic job and that he couldn't always be his version of sweetness and light; not even towards her. To refer to the copy of Malouf's *Johnno* sitting on his kitchen table might make things worse again. To ignore it might be a bit … pointed. She gestured and said lightly, "Any good?"

"It's pretty dull. My own life is a lot more interesting. Why bother with someone else's?" He had been rooting in his kitchen cupboard as he spoke, searching for a suitable tin of something to add to the meal of leftovers. He turned back to her. "Uh oh! Dismal Dennis drops another clanger."

Fiona couldn't help laughing.

"Okay. I'll persevere. It might get better as I go along."

"How much of it have you read?"

He waved a hand to where the book sat at the far end of the table. She picked it up and saw from his marker that he was already more than three-quarters of the way through. "Dennis, give up on it. I really think it's a lost cause … "

"No. I always try to finish the things I start." But something seemed to come over his face, a sense that something had shifted slightly in his perspective. He came over and sat down heavily, still holding the can of soup. "Lost cause … "

She was curious but left him to his thoughtful silence.

"I s'pose there are people who accept that a cause is lost … and people who don't." He had been told to leave the question of Bernie Goodrick. He had certainly been given arsenic, but the care with which the hospital staff had surrounded him after they'd been warned to watch what his relatives gave him, mitigated against a successful claim that he had been deliberately poisoned … and Bernie had so many other things wrong with him, from emphysema to an enlarged prostate, that it would be almost impossible to mount a successful prosecution. He was sorry about that. He had itched to find a way to nail the Goodrick clan. But at least they hadn't been able to find a way to overturn Bernie's will; John Goodrick was going to have to share the motel profits with all the staff at the hospital. And he had enjoyed seeing the look on John Goodrick's face when he told him what the police lab had found. There were lost causes and lost causes.

"I'm sure that's true." Fiona resisted the temptation to ask questions.

At last he said, "We found who Bruloder was. Or George did. Quite cluey, George, when he puts his mind to it."

"The company, you mean?"

"There was a man called Hendrik Bruloder." He proceeded to tell her the story; the senior policeman in South Africa, also apparently a member of Eugene Terre'blanche's extreme right wing AWB, who was said to have tortured and killed several black suspects and who, in his turn, had died by falling from a railway platform. It was tentatively ruled an accident. But a group of

supporters, with chapters in Australia and the USA and elsewhere, had vowed vengeance for his death believing it to be the work of ANC activists. Along the way they had also set up some social and business operations to keep their small but far-flung membership active. George had culled this material from several web-sites but he said he couldn't guarantee it as a lot of it was in Afrikaans, and a bit of schoolboy German only provided him with what he hoped was the gist of the story. The Australian group of supporters, initially calling themselves the HB network, had bought into a number of commercial businesses, including feed lots and meatworks. At the end of his explanation she said, "So it's really a sort of little safe hideaway for a group of white supremacists, old men who can't accept that it's time for a change?"

"Looks that way. We think we've found five other ex-cops from South Africa involved so far. Not sure how you become a member. And Adam Rogers is a South African."

"So you've found out something about him?"

"No. I don't think it's his real name. But I heard him speak when he was round to see Eric Kramer." And Eric Kramer like the other local clergy was an informal hospital chaplain and made regular visits …

"Who is a South African." And had these people seen Dennis and the Winville men as old slow-thinking probably racist country cops and felt they would be safe here, even protected? "So where does Eve come into this?"

"I think she's a drug addict. Or at least a drug taker. Some sort of amphetamines maybe. Speed. I'm sure she's the one that sent that video to Guy but I'm not sure if that was accidental or she's trying to warn him away—or even if it's some kind of cry for help, that she's got into something she can't handle. But there's not much I can do but keep a sort of watching brief … "

He had been in two minds on whether to mention the video to Fiona; but she had accepted his statement of a doctored video done apparently as a way to try and compromise Guy. And he had come to trust her kindness and discretion. It wasn't something she would casually mention over dinner.

"If it's any consolation … I think I'd be shaking in my shoes if I thought you were keeping that sort of an eye on me."

"Very funny. I think they see me much as Raelene sees me. Someone to poke fun at. But if they put a real foot out of line … with luck we'll find a way to nab them. You know, I sometimes have this secret longing to be able to catch Raelene speeding or parked on double lines or a point over the limit … "

"I know you do. But you do know what the real problem is, don't you?"

"No. What is it?"

"She has always fancied you. But she refuses to admit it, even to herself, and her constant criticism is very effective camouflage. Kieran is a very nice man, reliable, dependable, safe—but you are the hint of sex and danger and excitement which she knows is missing from that relationship."

"You've been reading too many of those bloody novels."

"But you *are* a sexy man. You don't see yourself through women's eyes, some women's eyes, and you're too busy to be wondering about how people see you … but I'm certain it isn't just me."

"I'll take your word for it. But you're the only one I want."

She came round and took the can of soup away from him. "Dennis, I've got just one more question. Why did you tell Kieran my name should be Deirdre?"

"Deirdre of the Sorrows. You know—the dame that was given a hard time by the blokes in her life? She probably started out as Deirdre of the Cows … "

She continued to look puzzled. "You mean … as in folklore?"

"You mean to say," he tried to put on a shocked expression, "you haven't got all this culture business taped?"

She had never learnt to laugh at herself; it wasn't something which would have occurred to her parents as a useful life skill. But she couldn't help laughing now. It was later when she said more soberly, "But you know I *was* sad … I felt I had done something stupid and hurtful and juvenile … and I wasn't sure what to do next."

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"We've got problems," Greg Sullivan was also sober, if not downright gloomy, when he rang. "This dame is now saying we heavied her. That Begg woman. They want to grill us both."

"At the inquest, you mean, or before?" Dennis Walsh didn't sound worried.

"At … so far as I know."

"All we did was sit in her bloody armchairs. What's she claiming?"

"That she never gave us any names and that we put words in her mouth and that she made it very clear she didn't know what body we were talking about. She's going to bring her two sons with her to back her up."

"As they weren't present—what good is that going to do her?"

"Don't know, Dennis. But, sure as hell, it will make her look like a good mum. Two loyal kids there to support her, you know what it's like." Looking motherly hadn't helped Margaret Elliot avoid conviction but it was usually true; look like a pretty girl in court and juries could be suspicious, look motherly and juries found it hard to believe there was a bad bone in the defendant's body …

"Greg, she's got a powerful weakness, maybe even a mental aberration—"

"And what might that be?"

"You saw her. She likes to see other people getting into trouble. She may not have ever hurt that little girl. But she never lifted a finger to save her. Maybe she was frightened of her husband, I don't say she wasn't, but there was also pleasure in knowing he was turning his brutality on to someone with even less power. But there is one way to spike her guns. See if you can find Gertie Bertie … or her family. It might not be exactly that. Bertram maybe, or a similar name. There's just a chance she's still alive if she really did manage to run away from there."

Greg didn't sound hopeful but he said he'd put out a call for information. It at least had the advantage of being an easy name to remember …

He sounded slightly gob-smacked when he rang back three days later.

"You were right. There *was* a Gertie Bertie got married in Rockhampton in 1954. Guy named John Lundy. They had two children. A boy and a girl. Gertie is dead. So is the boy. Ali has arranged for them to come for the inquest. And get this, mate, the girl's name is Phyllis. Phyllis and Dilys. They have said they will run DNA tests for us if these people seem to fit the bill and not just a coincidence or someone's having us on. Anyway, I'll see you next Monday."

The inquest began with technical information and a brief statement from Rob Crofton on how he'd come to find the skeleton. It then went rapidly downhill with Annie Begg stonewalling all the way. She said unequivocally that she hadn't given the officers any information at all. They had later tried to put words in her mouth. At first glance she made quite a good impression. She had dressed soberly and had her hair nicely permed. Her sons, rather large solid phlegmatic men, were wearing suits and ties and looked to be pillars of the community.

The magistrate, Mr Graham Kelso, punctured her image of someone who would like to help but can't by saying, "The officers told you the child's mother was Gertie Bertie … or you told them?"

"I didn't tell them anything."

"So they already had the name and told it to you?"

"That's about it."

"Did they tell you how they'd come up with a name for both the mother and the child?"

"No."

He allowed her to step down but asked her to remain while her younger son was asked if he remembered either mother or child at the farm. He said he didn't. He said apologetically that he didn't really remember the farm at all and his parents had not spoken of it later, after they had left it and taken on the pub. He had lived there for a while much later but had commuted in to a job at a hotel in Winville. He had simply seen the house on the farm as somewhere to live not a real 'home'. He too was asked to stand down and his brother rose in expectation.

But Magistrate Kelso said mildly that he would change the order slightly and try to get a clearer line on the missing mother and daughter. He next called John Lundy and asked him to

clarify if that had really been his wife's name and whether she had ever mentioned a connection to the farm.

"Yes, sir, it was Gertrude Bertie. She told me when I met her that she had worked on a farm and that she had a daughter called Dilys who died there. She said she had run away from there after her daughter's death and she had walked all the way to Maryborough where her mother worked at a hotel there."

John Lundy was not exactly a confidence-boosting witness. His face and manner showed the ravages of alcohol. His hair was tousled and his clothes had seen better days. But he spoke quite clearly. "She was eighteen when I married her. She was born and baptised at Cherbourg."

"Are you saying," the magistrate looked down at the few details of Gertie and Dilys that public records had yielded, "that this woman was twelve when she had a baby?"

"Yes, sir," John Lundy said, and looked round the court as though to challenge anyone to contradict, "that was about it. She was told the baby would be taken away if she didn't do as she was told."

"Did she ever say who the father of her child was?"

"I didn't ask. Dilys was dead. I didn't like to talk about her."

"We haven't found a birth registration for the child. Did she ever mention who had baptised the child?"

"She said she knew a minister. I don't know his name."

His little snippets of information were tantalisingly vague. In the end he was allowed to stand down and his daughter Phyllis Wood was called. She said she was a nurse in Rockhampton and answered quietly and carefully. She said she understood from the stories her mother had told her that her older half-sister had been starved to death.

"I cannot prove this. But it might explain her attitude to food. She never failed to begin a meal by saying that food is the most precious thing in a baby's life. Sometimes she would have tears in her eyes. It used to embarrass us a bit. I know this isn't proof of anything."

"Did she ever mention the father of her child?"

"Once or twice. She said they weren't allowed to go outside mostly and that little Dilys was always crying. I am sure she did say the name of the man she worked for but I can't remember. She said she was never paid anything. She said his wife liked to see her being punished."

"Being punished—how?"

"She didn't say."

"Did she ever tell you how she came to leave the farm."

"She said, after they took her little daughter's body away, she climbed out a window and managed to walk to the road. She got a lift with a milk truck into a town there. I don't think she ever said its name, but she said it had a butter factory. She asked him how to get to Maryborough. He told her but she didn't really understand his directions. It took her nearly two months to get to find her mum's place."

"She never went to the police?"

"I don't know. But she was very afraid of police. A lot of our people were. She was always afraid that the police would come and take us away from her."

"Did she know the name of the man who had given her a lift?"

Phyllis Lundy didn't answer immediately. At last she said in her quiet rather diffident way, "I am not certain but I think it was Brumby. I think she might've remembered that because of the connection with horses."

Mr Kelso eventually said he was going to hear one more witness, to save him returning all this distance unless absolutely necessary, and then he would adjourn the inquest for a fortnight to allow more enquiries to be carried out.

James Begg had sat through the proceedings with an unreadable expression. Sometimes he looked at the Lundys, sometimes he looked at his mother and brother, sometimes he looked at the police officers.

He gave his name and age clearly and said he had been four years old in 1952. He sat down and said without waiting for questions: "I can't give you a detailed account of what happened when

I was four. But it is true. There was a little girl crying often. She was kept in the shed near the chookyard. She and her mum slept there on bags. She was locked in there all day while her mum worked. I know that because I used to peer through the crack in the wall and watch her sometimes."

Mrs Begg half rose in the middle of this exposition. Her face darkened. But it was only when her son drew breath that she screamed out "That's a lie!"

Her son opened his mouth, then closed it again. Mr Kelso said calmly, "You had your opportunity to tell us what happened, Mrs Begg, so I would ask you to be quiet now." It was a clear hint that he hadn't believed her. "Go on, Mr Begg."

"I saw my dad carrying the little girl late one afternoon. I remember it was raining. I went inside. I don't know where they went. But I never saw the little girl after that. I don't know how long afterwards it was when my mother said that Gertie had disappeared. We moved from the farm quite soon after that. My mother always said she hated living there and didn't want to talk about it. I went back a couple of times after I had grown up. The shed is still there. But it never occurred to me that the little girl was dead when I saw my father carrying her." He looked around the court. "I know I was a child and didn't understand what was going on. But I do know my father was a hard man and I can well believe he mistreated both that mother and child. He was hard on my brother and me too but not to the same extent, I don't suppose. I cannot speak for my mother but I would like to say 'Sorry' to Mr Lundy and to Mrs Wood. It isn't good enough to explain it away as being a different era and that people believed they were doing the right thing by Aboriginal people. They weren't and they knew they weren't. I'm sorry I can't give you any details that might explain how and why that little girl died but I have never forgotten the sound of her crying in that dark shed. To me that is indictment enough of our family."

As Greg Sullivan came out in to the bright glare that was a summer afternoon in Winville he saw his junior was crying. "C'mon, Ali, don't let Doug see you. He'll never let you live it down." He sounded faintly embarrassed and awkward.

"I don't care." She took out her handkerchief and sniffled into it. "Dennis understands. I'd rather have that."

"*Do* you understand?" Greg turned to his colleague.

"All that? Yeah, I think so. But there isn't a lot of comfort in understanding. Mr Begg is dead. Mrs Begg will never admit to … anything. The community didn't know … or didn't want to know. The boys were too young to intervene. God knows what the cousin knew or didn't know. And we were on the wrong side in those days."

"You see?" Ali Deane reached up and gave Sergeant Walsh a watery kiss.

"And if Doug hears about you *kissing* Dennis you really will be up shit creek without a paddle." Greg Sullivan put on a rather sheepish grin. Public displays of emotion always left him feeling a little awkward. Then he said with more vigour, "And I don't know about you two … but I'm bloody well starving."

*

Note: AWB: Afrikaner Weerstandabeweging, a far right organisation in South Africa.

Case No. 1: Stomach

Relations between parents and children in the small Queensland town of Buckton were much like relations elsewhere; the only difference, some parents thought, was that they had the grim and brooding presence of local police sergeant, Dennis Walsh, to invoke when things went horribly wrong.

Joanne McNally was receptionist to the two local doctors, Leslie and Kamala Davis. She was also the mother of a soon-to-be-teenage son. She and Jason had a happy and relaxed relationship. It had changed slightly since he had started at Buckton High this year; just a slight unwillingness to be seen in her company when they went out in public. She dated, though not very seriously, both the local vet Vince Bromby and the local constable Guy Briggs. They were both a fair bit younger and although she enjoyed the attention she knew it would be unwise to take any of it too seriously.

The curious thing about it was Jason's response to the two men. He wasn't terribly relaxed about the idea of his mother known to be dating a copper; not when he was trying to make his mark as a new student in the tougher environs of the high school. Cool dudes did not admit to having coppers come round for tea. End of story. But he liked Guy and he had no intention of doing anything to spoil his mother's little romance.

"So what would you like for your birthday, Jase?" she said to him one evening. "Would you like to invite some of your mates around—or go somewhere?"

He thought about it for a while. "You know what I'd like? I'd just like to go to Winville with you and Guy. Buy a new skateboard. Maybe a movie. Have something to eat, McDonalds'd be fine. Just like get away from here for a day."

"Are you sure you wouldn't like some of your friends to come round here? A bit of a party maybe."

"Not really."

"There's nothing wrong, love, is there? At school, I mean."

He shook his head and she couldn't draw him to talk about anything to do with school. "Okay, well, if you're sure that's what you want—drop in and talk to Guy on your way home from school and we'll make a day of it."

But when she asked him two days later what Guy had said it was to learn he hadn't been in. "You're not scared of Sergeant Walsh, are you?"

He shrugged. "He's always there … " Some people had the opposite complaint; where the heck was Sergeant Walsh when they finally needed him? She knew perfectly well people wanted it both ways; him elsewhere when they staggered out of the pub, him there when they found their garden hose nicked …

"Just go in and ask if you can speak to Constable Briggs. Sergeant Walsh doesn't bite."

Even so, it was several days more before Jason went nervously into the station. Mothers seemed to have this blind spot when it came to image. How could a guy cope in that zoo if he was spotted sneaking into a police station? It was as good as publicly sleeping with the enemy. He was reasonably sure that his mum didn't sleep with Guy but that wasn't much consolation. The public perception remained.

Sergeant Walsh *was* there but he said only, "You want to see Constable Briggs?"

Jason nodded. Sergeant Walsh went out the back, said something about "I'll take over", and Guy came in.

"Oh, hi, Jase. How's things?"

"They're okay."

Guy wasn't certain whether it was merely that business of bridging the gap between primary school and high school, he remembered making heavy weather of it himself, but he felt that Jason had sort of withdrawn into himself over the last month or two.

"I just came round to see if you'd like to come to Winville with me sometime."

"Sure. Any special reason? Or you just want to get away from here for a few hours?"

"Both. I'm going to get a new skateboard, maybe some new trainers. It's my birthday on Sunday. I thought, maybe, we could do a movie."

Guy always found himself floundering when it came to interpreting Jason's cryptic comments and dead-pan delivery. But this was straightforward enough. "Is this a guy sort of thing? Just you and me and your mum out of the way at the hairdresser's?"

"Just you and me shopping. We can catch her up later."

It never failed to surprise Guy with his inexperience that they always seemed to get things sorted out pretty easily; this time though he felt Jason was still holding something back.

"In that case we'll need to go on a shopping day. What say we go straight after Easter. Wednesday maybe. I'll see if I can get the day off." Guy made it sound simple and easy and cheerful. And it was true: Dennis would make no complaint about giving him the day off unless something blew up right on that day.

"That sounds okay."

"Okay, see you soon, Jase."

But Jason continued to stand there another minute, looking uneasy.

"Is there something else? A problem at school maybe?" Guy hoped his sergeant wouldn't come barging back in at this crucial and ticklish moment.

"Yeah. There might be." Jason put a hand in his trouser pocket and drew out a matchbox and handed it to Guy. "I dunno what it is—but I saw some other kids drop it one afternoon and I picked it up. They looked around for it but they didn't ask me … "

Guy opened the box cautiously. Inside were four shiny red pills. Guy's expression lost its cheerful let's-be-pals expression.

"Just write down the names of the kids. Then you'd better duck on home. I don't want you mixed up with … this."

Jason hadn't been certain before. Now Guy's serious look confirmed his vague suspicions. Not being 'mixed up' suited him down to the ground. He had already got knocked around a bit by some of the older boys. But dobbing them in would make his life unliveable …

Even writing four names was difficult enough. He found himself longing to be home with his bedroom door tightly closed.

Guy took the slip and said loudly, "Tell your mum, Jase, that I'll be in touch soon." He wasn't sure who he was doing it for. But people in Buckton always seemed to get to hear about everything and sooner rather than later.

Dennis came in, holding a heavy-duty dog collar. "Okay, we'd better hit the road. Don't want the bloody mongrel to have time to digest the lot."

As they got into the police car and turned on to the road out of Buckton, Constable Briggs said simply, "Jason brought in a matchbox with four tablets in it that he saw some other kids drop on their way home. I said I wouldn't involve him. I'm not sure what they are … but I think they might be speed. Amphetamines. Red devils. That sort of thing. How would I go about getting them tested?"

Walsh, after his first surprised glance over, said only, "Could be. Photograph them. Write when, where, and how they came into our possession. Get them to Winville for testing. No point in speculating till we know what we're dealing with. That kid's getting bullied, isn't he?"

Guy wasn't sure whether this was a straightforward question or somehow designed to trip him up. "I don't think he's very happy there … but I guess it takes time to settle in."

"How old were the kids that dropped the box?"

"I've got the names. They're all a fair bit older, I think. Fifteen, sixteen maybe."

"Ah … so the beautiful Eve may be dispensing more than pills."

Guy hadn't made that connection. He did his level best to avoid thinking about Eve Rogers. Horrible as it had been to be sent, anonymously, a graphic video featuring him having sex with Eve Rogers at the Caritas Farm Stay place over near Dinawadding he had the slim comfort of knowing that Dennis had locked it away in the safe with a note—rather than passing it on to the CIB men in nearby Winville. The thought of DI Doug Towner watching it for light relief, maybe making ribald comments or sniggering over it … that would be more than he could bear …

And if it did somehow blow up in their faces he knew Dennis would simply say, “I made the decision to keep it here rather than pass it on. You got a problem with that, Doug—” and Doug Towner would probably back off or accuse Dennis of being a pervert. The trouble with this scenario was that he would probably only feel worse if he hid behind his superior.

“Do you think—the pills might be linked to the Rogers?”

“I have no idea. And no point in taking the next step till we know what we’re dealing with. But I suspect she is simply a classy call girl, there to service a lot of disgruntled old men who still think the world owes them a living. But she just might be the weak link in their chain.”

“In what way?”

“If it’s any comfort … she may have set you up so as to compromise you … but it is also possible that she found you a nice change from a lot of sour old farts.”

“So why did she doctor that video to make it look like I’m some sort of … of pervert?”

“We don’t know that she did. The last time I saw Eve Rogers I’d go bail she was on a high … maybe from taking speed. There’s a good chance she just does what she’s told there … and someone else is pulling the strings.”

*

They had been called out by a farmer, Alan Brumby, in a panic because he’d seen a dog in with the mob of sheep he had on agistment. Alan dairy-farmed but he sometimes took some extra stock for his brother further out west. If he had grass to spare. He’d found evidence of a dog getting in and chasing sheep the last couple of nights. But this was blatant daylight entry.

“It’s that bloody pig dog of Wally Barron’s!” he’d said indignantly. “I was sure it was him the last few times but I couldn’t prove it. You’ve got to come out and tackle him right now if you don’t want me doing something with a loaded rifle someone might regret later—” It wasn’t clear whether the ‘someone’ might be himself or his neighbour.

“Calm down and stay home,” had been Sergeant Walsh’s instructions. He took the heavy-duty-collar he had rousted out of the store shed, put in the commercial emetic kept now for such occasions since one farmer accused of letting his dogs deliberately kill a neighbour’s hens had objected to the old dosing with salt and water, added a couple of clean jam jars, and went out to the car. Constable Briggs, not being very confident with animals, had the horrible thought that if he had to watch a dog vomiting he would probably bring up his own lunch. But he couldn’t very well insist on staying here; nor was he really sure he wanted to. Not if it was going to involve him in tricky questions related to drug-dealing on the campus of Buckton High School or, worse, his relations with the sexpot proprietor of the Farm Stay business …

When they got to Mr Barron’s farm it was to find his dog dripping wet. But even wet the pig dog didn’t look any more friendly or attractive. A swim in the farm dam or a good hosing down would however have removed any possible blood stains from round his jaws.

“Catch him, will you, and we’ll shove some of this down his throat.”

“I don’t like you bods messing round with him. He’s a valuable dog.”

“Won’t take long. He comes up clean we’ll have to look for another way to catch the animal that’s been stock killing.” Dennis took the big dog and whipped the heavy duty collar on and said, “You won’t like this, pooch, but it’s your nuts on the line. So drink it down.”

It didn’t really amaze Guy Briggs, he’d had time to observe and wonder, but Wally Barron took it as almost a personal sense of betrayal—that his dog seemed so effortlessly to accept the calm authority of Dennis Walsh.

Then it was a matter of watching and waiting for the stuff to do the trick. A few minutes later the dog heaved up a foul mess on to the piece of plastic Dennis had put in front of him. It was all right for Dennis to stand there casually, Guy Briggs thought as he turned away abruptly and willed his heaving stomach to settle down again. Wally Barron turned and watched him with a faintly amused gaze.

“You’re out of luck, Mr Barron.” Dennis bent slightly to hook a long strand of soggy yellow-brown wool out of the mess. “Pity the brother doesn’t shear till September.” Dennis didn’t know when Alan Brumby’s brother normally sheared his flock but the animals were obviously carrying a

good length of wool at the moment. And it was unlikely that they would be returned home to a dry paddock just coming into winter. And Alan had no facilities to shear that size of flock …

Wally Barron simply stared at the shred hanging from the small stick Dennis had scooped it up with. He had been all primed to assert his innocence, his dog's innocence, the mischief-making habits of the Brumby clan, the claim that the police were hassling him just because he had a strong dog … and now he couldn't think what to say.

Instead he turned to pat his dog's head. The animal still looked faintly distressed. But not vengeful. The dog turned and gave his owner's hand a sudden swipe with his tongue. At last Mr Barron said in resignation, "What are you going to do?"

"You, Mr Barron, are going to tie the dog up. You can give him a very small drink. Then you can get in the car and come with us to talk with Alan Brumby. You might care to bring your wallet with you … or your chequebook."

It never ceased to puzzle Constable Briggs; the variation in the way people responded. Some demanded their pound of flesh and then some over. Others said they would leave it to the police to decide. Some said they would let the matter drop. Alan Brumby came out as the police car drew up and the three men got out.

Wally Barron shambled over to his neighbour. "It was my fault. It was Skipper. I'm sorry." It obviously pained him to say it. But he did say it.

Alan Brumby after a startled silence and a quick glance at Sergeant Walsh said, "So what now?"

Walsh shrugged. "You'd better put a price on the dead animals. Then it's what to do with the dog."

Alan Brumby was silent for a long time. The others assumed he was doing complicated sums in his head. But at last he said, "No. I'll let it go. But you've got to make a decent run for that dog and keep him inside. Tie him up well tonight and I'll come over tomorrow and help you make a big pen for him. But it's up to you to make sure you keep him in."

Wally Barron gave an abrupt little duck of his head then turned and shambled back to the police car in silence.

"Do you trust him to keep the dog in?" Walsh said as he watched the dog's owner get into the car.

"Not really. But the dog is his mate. His family. I don't want the bloody animal in here. But I'd always feel a bit of a bastard if I insisted he shoot the thing. You give the teenagers a second chance. I guess I'm giving a dog a second chance. But I'm going to swop the animals around and put my bull down in that bottom paddock. I don't trust an animal once he's decided chasing and killing sheep is some big lark."

"Get on to us if there's any more of a problem with him."

"Don't worry, I will."

*

Country people sometimes comforted themselves with the idea that although they didn't have much in the way of services and it was a worrying season and prices weren't any too marvelous 'at least we don't have drugs here like they have in Brisbane'; that sort of thing. Their kids might do stupid things with cars, with guns, with alcohol, even with bicycles and bits of rope … but they didn't stick needles in their arms …

Dennis Walsh, understanding this view and the comfort in it, wasn't sure how to tackle the problem of apparent drug-dealing or drug-taking by some of the students at Buckton High. A very public response, getting the matter brought up in an assembly, put in the school newsletter, letters sent out to parents, a story in the *Buckton Bugle*, would have everyone clucking round in muted panic. And once they'd decided to panic there would be no way back to the old somnolent complacent attitudes of yesteryear …

Did this matter? He wasn't sure. And the matter seemed to need a lot more quiet thought in the meantime …

"They say I can take a break around the end of June," he said one evening to Fiona Greehan who had brought round a pizza and some salad, "—and do I want to ask for Paul Ramsay again."

"Do you?"

He sat back and the chair creaked under him. "The sixty-four dollar question? No, so far as I'm concerned they can send Paul or Joe Blow or anyone they fancy. Unless Guy manages to wreck his career in the next seven weeks he can probably keep things ticking over, no matter who comes. And that's not the question anyway … or not the important one."

But for someone usually so blunt and straightforward he seemed to be a bit tied up with this. She looked at him in curiosity followed by a tentative dawning of understanding.

"I know you don't want to marry me … but I *am* going to ask you. Would you like to come away with me for a few of those days and we can quietly … tie the knot?"

"How do you know I don't want to marry you, Dennis? Body language? Mind reading? Do I talk in my sleep?" But her flippancy hid a more difficult need: how to respond. Now that the question was asked … it had to be answered. If not today then … tomorrow …

He went on eating while he waited.

"Would you mind if I take a day or two to think it through?"

"Take as long as you like."

She nodded but she sounded hesitant when she said, "No matter what—we'll keep all this that we have already? It's very special to me … even if I'm not Mrs Walsh."

"If you mean—will I get in a pet and say it's all or nothing—of course not. I'm not going to cut my bloody nose off to spite my face—or whatever the saying is. But I would like you to be my wife. You know that."

"Yes, I do know." She dropped back into silence. If they lived on a desert island she would say yes immediately but other people and their ideas and views and pressures seemed to intrude here. The bank's manager, Hilton Browne, had told her only this morning that he was thinking of extending his time in charge here. The Bank of the Darling Downs did not have a compulsory retirement age. The thought of years with Hilton while he slowly but comprehensively wrecked the branch then laid the responsibility for the disaster at her door depressed her deeply. But she couldn't think of any way to get rid of Hilton other than to hope he would change his mind and decide that retirement would really be a very pleasant option.

"Dennis, what are you planning to do in your break?"

"I thought I might take a few days in Redcliffe to unwind. Then go on up north. That woman we got on to about taking Bernie Goodrick in her guest house there sounded very nice. And her willingness to take someone as awful as Bernie impressed me. A few days just pottering around would be pretty good … and nicer if there's any chance of you coming down."

"And up north? What will you do there?"

"Just the usual."

"Dennis, this may be a stupid question—but what *is* your usual?"

"See the family. Give them a hand. See a few other people. Go bush for a few days. That sort o' thing."

She nodded slowly. "Do you think we have enough love to cross the gaps … between what you like doing and what I like doing?"

It was all very well for Dennis to say he was always willing to try something new, to fit in with some of her wishes and plans, but she couldn't help pondering over it as she walked home later. She knew he was willing to read things which didn't appeal to him, to go to new things, to be fairly open-minded, but there was always that feeling that he was doing it for her rather than out of a shared enjoyment … and some day he might cease seeing the need to bother …

Raelene had just come in as she arrived home. And Raelene would say, if she mentioned marriage and Dennis, that she needed to go and take a cold shower and hope that the sudden flash of madness would die down again. But Rae had her own life and she couldn't let Rae influence the decisions she made about … marriage, about life, about children, about career and change.

"Rae, what would you say if I said I was thinking of marrying Dennis?"

There. It was said.

"Apart from putting your head in a bucket of water till your brain cooled down? I would say it's your life and you must know what you want from it. I would also say that I know you love him

and although I don't think he's good enough for you—I'm willing to accept that he loves you. And I would say it would be lovely to know you're going to stay on—not throw the job in Hilton's face and rush off home to Brisbane. And I would ask you if you want children … because I know it gets to be an issue and I don't want you to miss out on something you really want. And I would say … I think you should wear a soft cream satin with old lace and carry some of those roses with the little pale-pink buds … whatever their name is, Cecile something … along with some darker pink ones to set them off nicely. And I would say … God knows where you're going to go for a honeymoon that would suit you both but there must be somewhere … "

Fiona, after being painfully keyed up, found herself laughing. "I know. I'm not sure if I am the chalk or the cheese. And I know that if I say no … things will still continue along. It's not—marry me or say goodbye for ever."

Rae nodded thoughtfully, "And—do you want children? Really want. Not just think it would be nice. Or your mum's saying she'd like a grandchild."

"Yes. I do. I can't picture myself as a mother. But I've always hoped I would meet someone I could share that with … "

"And—are you sure that someone is Dennis?"

Fiona went over and turned on their electric jug and got down two mugs. It wasn't a delaying tactic. It was the need to be doing something while she mulled over the most important question life had ever thrown up. Relationships could be untied. But once there was a baby …

"Yes. I am sure."

"Then go for it, kiddo. So long as you know your own mind—don't let anyone else mess you around."

"And if I said would you, and Kieran, like to come to the wedding would you be pleased … or would it turn your stomach, metaphorically … "

"Of course we would want to come! What a silly question." Although Rae would probably dispute any suggestion that she had quite a lot in common with Dennis it seemed to Fiona that they both had that quality of not holding grudges, of simply accepting things and taking them in their stride; in a way she envied them a little. Or was Rae being nice and kind now, having been caught on the hop, and she would hone her arguments against this marriage over the next few weeks?

"And," Rae said firmly, "I don't see why you don't have a baby now. Instead of agonising every day over the awfulness of Hilton Browne and how he is wrecking the bank and your career and everybody else's career … why not just say sucks to him, you've got more important things in your life."

"It's not something you do in a hurry … or for such a reason."

"*He's* not the reason. All that frustrated mother love is the reason. But there's no harm in being spurred into action—instead of sitting round worrying about when would be the right time."

"You make it sound so easy."

"Easy as falling off a log … and not half as painful." Rae accepted her mug but said, "I don't know why we're having coffee. We should be getting out the bubbly—"

*

Jenny Roberts came back to Buckton regularly and went round her old home, picking up rubbish, trimming back shrubs, occasionally doing a bit of painting, sometimes sweeping paths or shining windows. From garnering some sympathy after her mother died she had moved to the status of a mild joke and her house was now referred to as 'the house that'll never shift'. She wanted to sell it but she had insisted on putting a much-too-high price on it. And so the old house drowsed peacefully and emptily through the summer days, only suffering the occasional bit of vandalism or dumped rubbish.

She was out by the front gate one evening as Fiona Greehan came out of the bank. As she had been very rude to Fiona a while back Fiona found it hard to feel much sympathy for the older woman. She and Kieran had put a proposition to Ms Roberts some time ago, suggesting that she seek an independent valuation and they would discuss it seriously. Ms Roberts had turned it down with the derisive comment that she knew what her house was worth and she wasn't going to take a penny less.

But as the months lengthened and no buyer, not even a faint nibble, came by there was something a little sad about the whole situation. Fiona hesitated then crossed the road to say: "Hello, how is everything?"

For a minute the other woman looked tempted to say something sharp. Then she shrugged and said wryly, "Not a queue of eager buyers … but otherwise everything is fine."

Fiona smiled. "If you could magically move it to the coast you *would* have people queuing. I suppose it has more to do with Buckton not being the place where everyone wants to live."

"Perhaps." Jenny Roberts turned round and gazed back at the old house with its wide verandahs and the late sun catching its windows. "But I do need the money to put into my business."

"What kind of business do you have?"

"Printing and binding. I would like to upgrade. The new computer technology saves time and effort. And they are more picky these days about safety and insurance … " She continued to gaze at her old home with unreadable eyes. "Ms Greehan, there is something I would like to say. I *was* out of line that time I implied you were throwing rubbish into my yard. I knew afterwards that it was an absurd thing to say. But I was so upset when I came round and found all that mess everywhere."

"I know. I'd feel the same. But it isn't fair to ask Dennis to mind the place for you. It isn't his responsibility. But … would you mind if I asked a more personal question?"

Jenny Roberts shrugged. "Shoot."

"I can't help wondering if you don't really *want* to sell the house—because you still feel a kind of reluctance to let it go."

Jenny Roberts seemed to turn the idea over and over in her mind. "You're probably right. I *was* happy here as a child. I had two good parents. I had friends. It was very safe. We could go anywhere. My friends were always welcome in my home. My mother was a wonderful cook … I suppose it is hard to let all that go. The memories sort of belong in the house."

"I don't know anything about your circumstances … but would it be worth simply getting a loan to upgrade your business and keep the house, till you either find a buyer or someone to rent—or you feel ready to let go? Or even live here yourself. I don't know that there would be enough business here for you. But it might be worth looking at."

Jenny Roberts shrugged. "Being sentimental doesn't work in business."

"But being happy does matter. And people do like to deal with a business where people are happy … I can't speak for your line of work but I feel sure it's an across-the-board response. Still … I mustn't keep you."

As Fiona walked away Jenny Roberts continued to stand at the gate. Perhaps there was wisdom in that idea of holding on to the family home. But Fiona Greehan was twenty years younger … and Fiona Greehan appeared to have her own source of inner happiness which had no need to hold on to the past nor to keep a business in good heart for its source …

*

The call to the police came in at 11.21 pm and roused Dennis Walsh to action. It was Norm Grant ringing to say his granddaughter had disappeared from her bedroom. It took him several minutes to fumble himself into some clothes and go over to the station for his kit and the car.

Norm and Ailsa Grant lived on what, many years ago, had been the Perry farm. It was a pleasant place. They had gone out of dairying ten years ago and now grew canary seed for the pet market and Mrs Grant had the reputation of being the best dressmaker in the district. Raelene Perry used her skills to do some made-to-order sewing as well as alterations. Their granddaughter Megan had come to live with them at the beginning of the year because of problems in the family; just what the problems were hadn't been made public but there had been some gossip that Megan's father was an addict of some kind but as he lived in Warwick the question remained up in the air. Megan was a cheerful podgy child who was the apple of her grandparents' eyes and she had settled in without difficulty at Buckton Primary.

The house was lit up, every light burning, as the police car turned into the farm yard and parked by the back gate. Two worried people came bursting out of the back entrance with a thump of the screen door.

"Thank God you've come!" Norm was usually a laconic slow-moving man well into his sixties.

"Just tell me what happened and when."

"We all go to bed at about half-past-eight. Megan has her room in the sleep-out there but she does her homework in the kitchen. It was all normal. Then there was a big ruckus about twenty minutes ago. The chooks carrying on like mad. I thought it must be a fox got in the chook house … and I said to Ailsa 'I'll get the rifle' and she came out with me too and we could see the hens all upset and off their perches but there was no sign of a fox or a dog or anything. I did a big circle around but couldn't see anything. I guess we were out here about ten minutes hunting round. Then there didn't seem to be anything else we could do so we came back indoors."

"Have you got a dog?"

"Not at the moment. Megan gets a bit wheezy round dogs and cats so we didn't replace our old Border Collie."

"Then what happened?"

"We came inside," Mrs Grant said with a slight tremor, "and I thought I'd just check on Megan, see if she'd woken up, maybe got a bit scared. It's taken her a while to get used to living in the country. And when I looked she wasn't there. I thought she'd just got up … but I couldn't hear her or see her anywhere … and she didn't come back to bed. Norm went round outside with the torch and I hunted through the house. We couldn't think what could've happened. But in the end we rang you." They looked at each other and their worry and concern was palpable.

"Did you hear anything else? A vehicle maybe. Or footsteps. A door closing. Do you lock the house at night?"

"We've never locked up. We don't have locks on all the doors. But I did think I heard a car … I might be clutching at straws but I thought it sounded like a VW. But somewhere out there … not close."

"Right. Show me her room and what she was likely wearing."

"Just her nightie," Mrs Grant said with a catch in her voice. "Not even her slippers or her dressing-gown."

The night wasn't cold but the image of Megan out there in nothing but a flimsy cotton nightdress obviously distressed her.

The sleepout was just the verandah with a waist-high masonite wall and louvres set into the wooden framework above. It had a slightly amateurish look about it; Mr Grant had probably done it himself. Anyone could simply walk in from the side garden. But what would Megan have done if she'd woken to find a stranger bending over her?

"Has there been anything going on lately, with neighbours, at school, Megan wanting to stay overnight with friends, anything out of the usual?"

They both shook their heads. "She seemed happy here. We don't mind her friends coming here or her going to their homes. But only at the weekends … "

"And when you heard the VW drive away—did you get any sense of the direction it took?"

"I wouldn't like to say for sure but I think it went down to the corner and turned towards Garra. I wish I'd gone after it but I didn't connect … anything."

"Okay. Did you go out this side door yourselves?"

"No. We came back through the house and out the back."

"In that case … " But trying to pick up footmarks by the light of a torch was nearly impossible. Just near the side gate into the grassy paddock between the house and the road there was a faint indentation where someone had stepped into a garden bed. It suggested that the kidnapper was relatively slight and Megan was fairly heavy; possibly 'he' had found her hard to carry and had weaved to and fro a little.

"I'm going to take a run out the Garra road … just in case there's any sign. I'll also ring Winville and get them to get a message out to all stations and on to the radio. That's my mobile phone number so ring me if you find anything or hear anything or think of anything. Don't go into the fowl yard if you can help it. We might be able to see what he threw in to get the hens to make a racket. Is Megan's name Grant?"

"No. McPhee." Ailsa said to her husband as the police car drove away a minute later, "He could've done more for us—surely—"

But Norman only shook his head. "It's hard to see what. If she's gone she's gone, no good bumbling round here with a torch."

This was hardly comfort and Mrs Grant gave herself up to the tears she had been struggling to hold back ever since she'd found the empty bed.

Walsh's run out the road as far as Prickly Creek was futile. If the VW was relevant, if it had come this way, if it had turned off … whatever the next stage had been there was no sign of it, nor could he think of anyone out this way who drove a beetle. By the bridge he stopped, turned on his light and checked his book in which he jotted useful information about local vehicles. VWs were not terribly popular with country folk. But there were three listed for the area. He could try their owners tomorrow. But for now getting word out about the missing girl seemed the only thing to be done.

It might be a serious crime but there was always a possibility Megan had been a party to something or that one of her parents had snatched her back …

The whole thing was unsatisfactory but in the end he returned home and got a few hours sleep. He rang the Grants first thing in the morning only to find they had not seen or heard anything more. He called Constable Briggs to come in early and returned to the farmhouse to try and get more of a line on the vehicle or the perpetrator.

A vehicle clearly had stood for some time off the road; it had sunk a little into the loose gravel where it had pulled off. Then it had probably done a sharp u-turn and returned to the main road. It was running a small risk to stop there in view of anything heading towards Garramindi or vice versa … but only a very small risk. He ran a tape measure between the places where the indents showed faintly. But there were no clear tread marks to record. He left the police car a little further along and cut across the paddock towards the house. The person appeared to have placed the sleeping or tied girl down on the ground when he came to the barbed wire of the boundary fence and effectively pulled her under the bottom strand. The grass was flattened and a couple of blonde hairs were caught in one barb. Walsh then walked across the paddock to the side gate. Here and there a foot showed up very faintly. Probably a medium-sized man in trainers but it could be a fairly large woman or even a still-growing teenage boy.

The Grants were still casting round helplessly for an idea on who might have wanted to do this to Megan, to them. They both said that although Megan's dad was a bit irresponsible and they weren't exactly sorry the marriage had broken up they really couldn't see Adam behaving like this.

After Dennis had photographed everything he radioed Guy to get him to go round to the primary school and see if Megan had been in any trouble, any talk of running away; ten-years-old seemed a bit young to be talking about boyfriends but it was just possible she had a crush on someone who might've taken advantage …

Dennis then went out along the Garra road and called in on the farms nearest the highway and asked about anyone hearing a vehicle. No one could pinpoint a car at around eleven or a bit after. No one remembered hearing a Volkswagen.

It was always hard to deal with this kind of helplessness. It seemed very unlikely that anyone would demand a ransom. The Grants simply did not have the kind of money to make much impression. They could sell up. But that could take months. And neither the daughter nor the son-in-law were well off. It came down to either some sort of dare or prank—or sex. In which case he was probably looking for a youngish male, driving a VW, probably living in or with some knowledge of the district. It also suggested some knowledge of country ways: would a city person think of stirring up a fowl yard to distract Megan's guardians and cover the noise of getting her out of the house? More problematical was the way the man had kept the child quiet. She might simply be a very heavy sleeper. But a stranger could not count on that. Had she been drugged, tranquillised in some way, or had he slipped in and gagged her before she could cry out?

The primary school drew a blank. Megan was a well-behaved fairly confident child who was quite popular with the girls but didn't show much interest in boys. She liked dolls and reading and had told her class teacher she'd had a pet tortoise for a while. It was hard to re-position her as a

child who would catch the interest of a teenage boy or even the sort of lone man who might prey on a young girl. She wore her blonde hair in two spiky ponytails. She usually looked a bit untidy. Her class teacher described her as 'a nice normal girl who never gave me any worries' …

With no sign of Megan by that evening Winville set up a hotline but apart from a couple of crank calls received no useful information.

If Megan's disappearance got parents in a panic the call out in the dawn hours next morning to the Murphy farm had people locking doors and telling each other what they would like to do to the monster preying on local schoolgirls. The Murphys lived about a kilometre from the site of the new dam being built across Burleigh Creek. Their granddaughter Jade was eleven. Their dogs had barked and woken them up but although they had gone straightaway to her bedroom it was to find the room empty and no sign of any struggle.

"He's a very confident perp, very slick … or they are heavy sleepers and the dogs had been barking a while before they woke up." Dennis found signs of a car parked again on the roadside. This one suggested something longer in the body, not a VW. It might be someone else getting in on the act. It might be someone with access to several cars. But Dennis was inclined to think it was the same person, if only because the other parts of the abduction were very similar; the carrying, the rolling the body under the boundary fence, the getaway. The difference now was that attention swung towards the men working on the dam site.

Where people had in general been keen on getting the dam and friendly towards the men employed on it—there was now a sharp swing away. Maybe this was the down side to the project. One of the men was a monster and the two girls were probably somewhere there in the bushland along the creek …

Dennis Walsh wasn't so sure. But he felt it was too early to set any possibility aside. After a long conversation on security, night movements, cars, any gossip on site, with the foreman Anthony Carter, followed by a search along both sides of the creek, he went back to the bits of material evidence he had collected. Carter was adamant that the site was chained off and padlocked every night. This was to keep earth-moving and other equipment safe but it also had the effect of keeping the men's vehicles inside unless they made special arrangements …

It wasn't a lot. The evidence left by two vehicles. The things thrown into the Grants' hen house. The stones thrown on to the dog kennels at the Murphy farm—which suggested they might not be very good watchdogs if it took several hefty rocks to start them barking. But again this would seem to suggest some local knowledge.

Jade, though tall for her age, was a very quiet girl who loved her pony more than she loved any of her fellow students and had never demonstrated any interest in boys either. And as she was a much-freckled redhead it did not appear to be sparked by anyone's belief that she would win Miss Junior Showgirl at the next Buckton show …

And then the two girls were found a morning later, struggling in a confused way through the tangle of scotch thistle and bottlebrush on a property further up Prickly Creek towards Garramindi. Both had been raped. Neither had any memory of the abduction. Both were frightened and hurt and had vague recollections of a man wearing a balaclava and dark clothes.

It was at this point that Winville agreed to call in the special Sexual Assault Task Force created to back up small country stations where there appeared to be a serial rapist at work. They were organised to go into rural and remote communities at a moment's notice. Some people drew a sigh of relief. This might be the end of the problem. Others wondered if this was the calm before the storm. Dennis Walsh said sourly to all callers, "We'll get the bastard. He'll be cocky now, thinking he can thumb his nose at everyone—" But Guy Briggs thought it was more likely to be the task force which would catch the man; partly because of their expertise in this area and partly because the man had made no attempt to avoid leaving clues; including, Winville said cheerfully, plenty of his body fluids, including sperm.

"You'd think Doug was talking about the leftovers from a bloody picnic," Dennis said later to his junior, "not two poor kids with their lives wrecked." But then tact had never been DI Doug Towner's defining characteristic. And no one who'd ever made this complaint about Dennis Walsh was on hand to say anything about pots calling kettles black …

Case No. 2: Grab

The task force only contained two people but as DS Greg Sullivan said to his wife one evening, "They're s'posed to be hot stuff. They got the man who was grabbing women out of that old people's home—and the boys who threatened to drown that girl unless she gave in." He seemed to think they would find the horrors at Buckton a mere doddle. But his wife Narelle had long ago ceased looking on any police investigation with that kind of confidence. Greg was conscientious and hard-working but he had little imagination and the very real impediment of a boss who leaped to conclusions at the drop of a hat—and then clung rigidly to them until they were proved correct or the whole case imploded in his face.

At least, Narelle thought but didn't say, the two people from Brisbane would come at it with an open mind. Jocelyn Crisp was both a detective and a psychologist. James Garcia had worked for the task force from when it grew out of the Sex Crimes Unit and before that in the Vice Squad and had a good reputation.

But how well they would work with the local officers was another matter. According to Greg DI Towner had briefed them on their arrival with the simple statement: "You'll be working with that bastard Dinny Walsh in Buckton who'll go tearing off on some wild goose chase of his own instead of working in with you. Sorry about that. But with luck you can leave him out of the loop."

"What sort of wild chase?" Garcia had asked mildly.

"Doesn't matter what you want checked, what back-up you ask for, all you'll get is him saying he'll do it then doing fuck all. So be warned. Either you ignore him or you come down hard on him and make sure he does it."

"Lazy, you mean?"

"You name it. Rude. Insolent. Goes off half-cocked. And when you want him—sure as eggs he's out with some bird instead of minding the station. And his junior isn't much chop either."

Both Crisp and Garcia looked mildly despondent at this summing up. It was hard to go into a new place and work with the local community if the incumbents were not supportive and knowledgeable.

Greg managed to get hold of Garcia as he was going out to the car to go to the motel for the night. Both Crisp and Garcia planned to move into Buckton first thing next morning. "Don't take any notice of Doug's take on Buckton. It's all sour grapes. Dennis is a pretty good bloke and he knows his patch."

"That's a relief. It was beginning to sound just about hopeless there, listening to Towner."

Garcia passed this on later. At first he and Joss had been strict friends. They both had partners back in Brisbane. But thrown together in little country towns they found it hard not to begin an affair. That they, rather than Dennis Walsh, might be somewhat distracted and lacking a hard edge to their powers of observation and investigation did not seem to occur to anybody.

People in Buckton were excited and hopeful about their arrival. Such experienced and senior people would clear everything up in no time. One of these excited and hopeful people was Constable Briggs. He had told Joanne and Jase about his idea for writing a book.

"People want a major crime … something that really grips them. So it usually has to be a murder—"

"But do you really *want* to write about murder when you're dealing with awful things every day?" Joanne occasionally read a mystery but she much preferred romance or maybe a travel book.

"What about aliens landing," Jase said seriously. "It would be interesting to decide just what they look like and what their spaceship is like inside and why they came here—"

Although Guy thought he would probably stick to his original idea, or maybe bring in rape and abduction, it was lots of fun talking about it with Joanne and Jason; as though the proposed book had become a kind of joint venture. They threw all sorts of ideas around and in the process, by saying what they liked and didn't like, he felt he was getting to know them.

The question of the pills in the matchbox was a much more fraught issue. By sending them to Winville and getting the message back that, yes, these were amphetamines Dennis Walsh had found himself backed into a corner. What was he doing about clearing up drug peddling, drug use, maybe drug manufacture in Buckton? His hope of doing some quiet digging had been undermined. He could say, "I'm too busy with the case of the two abducted girls", but that wouldn't be seen as a good enough response, not with Crisp and Garcia on the job.

He went round to have a talk to the high school principal, Derek Coleman, and asked him what he knew about drugs infiltrating the schoolgrounds. Derek Coleman was popular around town. He was seen as an energetic and forward-looking principal. Dennis Walsh was not one of his admirers but he put the needs of a case before his personal feelings. Usually.

"Is that a rhetorical question, Sergeant Walsh?"

"It's a straight-forward question. Do you know anything at all about your students using, selling, swopping, even making drugs?"

Coleman considered the question for some time. He had the suspicion it was some form of trick question; whatever he said would give Dennis Walsh an excuse to be unpleasant.

"No. So far as I know we are drug free."

"A group of your senior boys dropped a box containing four amphetamine tablets. I sent them to Winville for analysis."

"How did they come into your possession, Sergeant Walsh?"

"A good citizen of Buckton brought them in to me."

"Why didn't they contact me and ask me to handle the situation in-house?" He schooled his face to be devoid of the niggling alarm he felt.

"As the boys dropped them outside the schoolgrounds they probably found me the appropriate person to bring them to."

"Do you know the names of these boys?"

"I do." Dennis handed over a sheet of paper. As the principal scanned it a frown grew. At last he sat back and steepled his fingers. "Are you sure?"

"Why? Is there a problem with those names?"

"They are some of my best students. The thought of them having their lives wrecked—being expelled—whatever you are hoping to do—" He shook his head slowly, trying to take in the possible implications.

"Best students? In what respect? Behaviour? Academic? Sports?"

"Everything. Every year I look over my senior students in the hope that I can find real talent and promise to nurture and encourage. All four of those students have bright futures ahead of them."

"Then let's backtrack a bit. Have you noticed any changes in them lately? Doesn't matter how slight. Any sort of change."

Derek Coleman felt a vague unease grow on him, almost a heat that was equal parts of embarrassment and apprehension. He disliked Sergeant Walsh sitting watching, waiting, that sense of being pinned down. With almost everyone else in town he felt an effortless sense of authority …

Dennis Walsh finally said grimly, "Would you like me to write down 'Mr Coleman was clearly hiding something from the police' or would you care to spit it out."

Coleman continued to study the horns of his private dilemma before sighing and saying, "I think there has been a slight change in their behaviour but I didn't see it as drug-related, nothing to do with having money, appearing hyped up, acting more secretively. If anything it has been the opposite. My impression is that all four of them have launched their … their … have gone from talking about sex to … having some experience of it. I am not quite sure if I am interpreting the situation correctly … and so long as there is no question of underage … "

"How old are they?"

"They're all fifteen, I think, going on sixteen."

"Underage cuts both ways. You realise they are going to have to be interviewed—"

"You mean," Derek Coleman felt as though his worst thoughts had suddenly taken on a life of their own, "those two girls?"

"And the drugs."

"Can we … can we keep it low key? They *are* boys with a bright future."

"Arrange an after-school interview and let me know."

As Derek Coleman locked up and went home he thought resignedly that it could've been worse. At least he could relax over Easter and leave all thoughts of Walsh aside for a week.

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Joss Crisp and Jim Garcia went over Sergeant's Walsh's material, the medical records, all the photographs, before re-interviewing the families and the girls. They largely agreed with his assessment but picked up on one curious fact. Both girls were actually living with their grandparents rather than their parents.

"You're thinking there might be some father anger playing out?" Dennis said non-committally.

"We'll want to interview both fathers. Though the fact that both girls were raped—hard to see angry dads denied custody taking it out that way."

"Happens." Dennis could see which way their thoughts were tending. "But both fathers appear to have been in favour of their daughters going to the grandparents unless someone is telling lies. You might like to check out the men at the dam site … and I've just been told that four students at the high school appear to be getting sex somewhere, but I think we can count them out. None of them are old enough to drive."

"Do you always eliminate suspects on such slight grounds?" Garcia asked mildly.

"I have a strong suspicion where they're getting their sex and it's not with ten-year-olds. But if you'd like to interview them you're welcome. The perp though has access to more than one car and possibly some form of tranquilliser dart or syringe. It suggests an older man." Doctor Leslie Davis had found what appeared to be marks of a needle on the girls' necks.

"Well, let's hope we can soothe people's fears over Easter … and there's a good chance we'll get him with his DNA … even if we have to do what they've done elsewhere and test a whole community. We can bring in outside counselors but it has been suggested to us that the girls would feel more comfortable with a local person. Dr Davis has suggested his wife. Would you agree with that assessment?"

It struck Jocelyn Crisp that Dennis Walsh was probably not the right person to ask about 'binding up the wounds' but he said calmly, "Not up to me but if the families are happy with that idea I'd have no problem with it."

Both officers went out to check the area where the girls had turned up. The farm itself was currently untenanted while its owner was in hospital and a neighbour had been keeping an eye on it. There was no sign of a car actually driving in to the creek which suggested the girls had again been carried. But it struck them both that people somewhere must've seen a parked car. It was only after they had parked along that road in the late evening that they realised just how deserted these country roads could be. Cars could do almost anything and there was no guarantee anyone would notice.

In the end they cuddled up and kissed while they kept an occasional eye on the side road. It was late when they returned to the motel in Buckton. And they didn't call by the station. So it was Dennis Walsh who was called out to the small farm owned by Maryann Dillon to search for her daughter in the early hours of the morning.

He felt rather cheesed off to be asked to leave messages on the task force mobile phones; surely they should be as willing to come out in the dark as he was. On the other hand there probably wasn't a lot they could do until morning. Maryann's story was similar to the others; she had been asleep and had got up to go to the toilet. To her surprise her daughter's door was open and the bed empty.

But as Joss Crisp pointed out next morning as she prepared to go and interview Mrs Dillon there was a difference. The abduction wasn't noticed until much later at night—to which Dennis Walsh said "That's because she probably came home plastered and it didn't start to wear off till well after midnight"—and Maryann was not a grandparent. Was this significant? Or was the man simply choosing 'easy' targets?

"She is also older," Dennis said as Guy Briggs got into the car with the two outsiders, looking vaguely pleased and important. He had been afraid he would be left to mind the station during Good Friday while the others got to do the 'important' stuff. "Already at high school."

"Maybe the perp started young and is moving up." The car drew out and Dennis went back to routine work for the next hour. Fiona had gone to Brisbane to spend a little time with her mother and other friends and relatives. So there didn't seem very much point in going on home. And if he did go on home then Jenny Roberts was quite likely to pop up like an irritating jack-in-the-box to make yet another complaint.

But half-way through the morning Mavis Barnard from the town's only service station came over and said, "Can you spare any time later, Dennis, just lunch … or if they've got you teed up all day, how about dinner this evening."

He said it had better be dinner. The task force would probably see it as dereliction of duty if they came by later and found him gone.

"I know it is all terribly serious," Mavis said soberly, "but you still need to eat."

She had hardly gone out when Kaylee Williams and her daughter Susannah came by. They were working on his yard, turning it into an attractive little bush area with shrubs to provide nectar for the birds and green vegetables to … Fiona had said mildly, "I'm not sure that you really need more spinach, you've already got better muscles than Popeye … but good for the system."

"Yours or mine?"

"Both. If you promise to eat all your greens I'll promise to eat mine."

It was true; he had never quite been able to get the same sense of comfort in his digestion since Cherry Morton had tried to poison him. He still got through a full day's work, he still mostly enjoyed life, he still felt comfortable with Fiona. Just something that he couldn't quite pin down …

But Kaylee had a different thought in mind. She normally went round to her aunt's place on special occasions but Charmian Crabbe was away. Now she said, "If we brought some sandwiches around—would you like to have a picnic in your new garden, Dennis? Nothing fancy. But just sort of christen it and try out your little table and everything."

"That's a nice idea. Okay, I'm just waiting for the task force to come back … but I'll knock off in an hour anyway for some lunch." He handed her a note. "If you could buy some drinks and things, whatever Susie fancies, a cake maybe. The café is open."

He went back to work but he couldn't quite rid himself of the feeling that regardless of how much experience Crisp and Garcia brought to the case of Buckton's serial rapist they hadn't provided him with any clear sense of how they wanted to proceed or whether they wanted him to provide support and information or whether they preferred to work without what they might regard as local 'interference'. It was hard to know whether they inspired confidence or whether they worried him by putting most of their eggs in this DNA basket …

In the end he switched the phone through, opened his front door and sat with Kaylee and Susie in his front garden. The weather smiled, a willie wagtail and a magpie came by to give the illusion of a garden full of bush birds, and he enjoyed both Kaylee and Susannah as company.

Kieran Dobbs, coming by with his dog as they were packing up the remains of their lunch, said to Rae Perry some ten minutes later, "I saw Dennis having lunch with Kaylee and her daughter."

"Uh huh!" Rae turned from making Chelsea buns to point a finger. "So it looks as if he's the sort that wants one thing till he gets it—then loses interest—"

"No, it doesn't. It looks like him enjoying his made-over yard on a nice day with two nice people—while Fiona is no doubt enjoying Brisbane with various friends and relatives—"

"Don't you believe it—" And while they were having this conversation Dennis Walsh was having a more private one.

"I'll bet it's Towner! I'll bet anything he nobbled them, told them to leave me out of the loop—" He bundled the lunch crockery into his sink with more energy than care. It might explain why the two detectives had come here with no apparent strategy or clear plan, no setting out of what aspects they would cover and what they wanted him and Guy to do as back-up. Doug Towner, he felt certain, had compromised the investigation before they even arrived in Buckton.

Guy came into the station later, looking rather sunburned and tired but still elated. He had been able to hear at first hand details of some of their other investigations.

"So what did you learn from them about *this* investigation?"

"We went back out to that area where the first two girls were found. We went to all the neighbouring farms. We found out the girl's dad deserted her and went to Sydney. But maybe he was really angry. It doesn't sound like it … but she wasn't a very good witness … "

"Who wasn't?"

"Maryann."

"Did you check the pub to see if she was in last night and what time she left?"

"No."

"Then go straight round now. It'll be closed. Bill's a good Christian when he's feeling tired. But you can knock him up. If he doesn't remember go round and talk to George and Bob."

He was pleased that Bob had decided to stay on. Bill Borrie was looking definitely tired and a bit seedy. But George Johnson's brother Bob had acquired a reputation among the local women as 'Bob the Groper' so he was possibly a mixed blessing.

After Guy had gone out again he sat back and thought over the best way to try and deal with the four students and Derek Coleman …

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Mavis and Noel sat him down to crumbed fish and mashed potato in the evening. "Can we ask questions," Mavis said as she brought out a couple of bottles of ginger beer, "or is it all hush hush, with these high flyers in town."

"I think it's a disaster in the making. But I'll keep my fingers crossed."

"What do you mean? We heard that they had solved a lot of really difficult cases."

"Maybe. But how they're expected to do a decent job here when Towner has nobbled them I don't know."

"We can but hope," Mavis said piously. "And the man might leave a very obvious clue somewhere. But I do have a bit of good news for you, Dennis. It looks like Cherry Morton won't be coming back to Buckton. She's lined up a job in Winville."

"Where at?"

"You know the roadhouse out this side of Winville … I just forget the name of the man who runs it … Briscoe, I think … "

"Well, if she wants to lay on her back there for every stray truckie—wouldn't be my cup of tea—"

"Don't suppose it would," Noel said drily. Mavis suddenly presented with this absurd image went off into fits of laughter. For a moment Dennis merely stared at her then he realised what he'd said. Mavis finally wiped her eyes and said, "I don't think we really should be talking about such things on Good Friday … but sometimes a good laugh is as good as a dose of castor oil … which reminds me, Dennis, did you ever find out if you were still suffering any after-effects from Cherry's 'cocktail'?"

"They say not. But I just can't seem to get right back on top of everything … just lacking some energy, the old get-up-and-go—and don't tell me it's age—"

"Wouldn't dare," Noel said with a grin. But it was Mavis who said thoughtfully, "It might be something quite different. An ulcer. Blood pressure. Something you've picked up around the farms. Touch of Q-fever. Go and have a check up."

"I've been thinking of that. Trouble is—I don't want to go to Leslie Davis."

"I don't blame you. But go to Dr Thompson in Winville. He'll take you seriously if you say you're not up to par. Just between you and me and the gatepost I almost wish the Davises would move on. He thinks he's too good for a place like Buckton and she's too scared to say boo … " Noel sat back with the air of someone who's said the last word on something.

*

Easter Saturday always saw people out and about in droves. Cricket, pony club, picnics, shopping, people off to the races and other things in Winville. Dennis and Guy were called to a

prang at the hospital turn-off past the butter factory. Fairly minor except that a mother had been carrying a baby in her lap and it had come into sharp contact with the front passenger window.

"What's the problem?" Dennis said angrily. "You want to addle the kid's brains the way yours are obviously beyond repair."

Dr Davis overheard this and was tempted to intervene. Instead he took the words away with him and laughed over them later with the new nursing director at the hospital. Even if the long-time staff did not like him he had found an apparently kindred soul in Susan Denby …

"I'll want to see proper child restraint in this vehicle within a week—and believe me—I'll check."

"We can't afford to—" the upset mother began.

"Then you can't afford kids. No restraint. No vehicle."

Even Guy Briggs felt this was a bit hard on a poor farm family. But there was no shifting Dennis Walsh on his ultimatum. "And," he went on angrily, "if I see either of you in the pub before the car is fixed to carry your children safely I'll have you blacklisted." This was probably an empty threat but it had the desired effect. The family were round to Noel Barnard the same afternoon to discuss how best to keep their children safe.

But the real tragedy of the day came much later. It was nearly midnight when Owen Binnie rang the station to say his niece Justine was missing from the house. Dennis tried the task force people without luck then went out to the farm. It appeared to be the same *modus operandi,* in this case stones thrown on the roof of the bunkhouse where Owen's trainees slept. The boys had woken up in a panic and come running over to the house to get Owen and his wife Cathy who'd then gone to check on their niece who was staying with them over Easter—and found her missing …

And yet not quite the same …

Dennis Walsh, unable to get anything beyond 'please leave a message', went round to the motel. The office was in darkness except for one outside light. The team's car was parked in front of one door. He went over to it and thundered away. A light came on. Garcia said "Who is it?" Dennis Walsh said, "The poor bloody fool stuck with you morons!"

The door opened on the two senior detectives pulling themselves into slacks and shirts. "What do you mean by this, Sergeant Walsh?" James Garcia was angry.

"You two want to turn your phones off that's your business—but don't blame me for having to come round in person and break up your—whatever. Get dressed and come with me. Another girl's gone missing."

"There isn't a lot we can do in the dark, Sergeant Walsh—"

"Yeah, there is. I want that farm scoured from end to end."

It was hard to know which of them was angrier as they spent a fruitless night scouring Owen Binnie's five hundred prime hectares. Garcia and Crisp soon came round to the belief that Doug Towner had been absolutely spot on.

Whereas Dennis Walsh tried to put his unease into clear thoughts as he trudged up and down. The worried family set out to milk as usual before dawn. Whereas he continued to harry the task force relentlessly; "She's here somewhere. If we can find her fast enough we just might get a clue to what drug the perp is using—"

"You're off the radar, sergeant," Garcia was in the process of formulating a formal letter of complaint to have Dennis Walsh completely removed from the case, not even left brooding on the edges. "Every other girl was removed from the area."

"You don't know that. And this case is different."

Easter morning found them up in the timber near Gus Mortimer's farm. The DPP was still debating whether to charge Gus with being an accessory to the murders carried out by his two brothers in a quarrel over a racehorse. Dennis Walsh was currently Mortimer's least favourite person; not that Mortimer had many favoured people in his life …

"She's here!" It was Jocelyn Crisp who found the girl lying in the long grass near the boundary fence. Justine Binnie was bound and gagged, her eyes frightened and confused.

Garcia refused to back down and admit that Dennis Walsh had read that one correctly but Jocelyn Crisp said, as they helped Justine into the police vehicle, “Why did you decide she might still be here?”

“Go back and go over the whole thing with the family later. You’ll see.” The three officers and Justine, with the Binnie family following on behind, set out for Buckton Hospital in the freshness of the morning; the current two trainees left to finish up in the dairy.

Dennis dropped them off at the hospital and went round to the station. He had hardly unlocked when Jim Phelps, the local ambulance driver, rang to ask Dennis to come round to Nelson L’Estrange’s house. “I’m not sure if it’s a suspicious death or not.”

For a moment Walsh felt the unworthy thought that it would be nice to get Nelson out of his hair. But as he drew up and saw the men waiting, with Nelson slumped into a chair between them, he realised it was Mrs L’Estrange who had died.

“What happened?”

Nelson looked up with haggard eyes. “It was like a fit. She was sitting down. I went to grab her as she fell but I was too late. I ran to call for help. I came back and she was … she was … ” He put his head in his hands.

“Mrs L’Estrange was on medication,” Jim Phelps said as though to spare the primary school principal the need to explain further, “she had a manic-depressive disorder. There were some side effects … ”

Nelson seemed to straighten up again. “Sometimes she said, Hannah said, it was hard to contemplate a whole life with them, they made her unwell sometimes … but I know she wouldn’t … she wouldn’t … do anything. We were planning to go to the ten o’clock service … ”

In his few meetings with Hannah L’Estrange Sergeant Walsh had gained the impression she regarded her husband and his many foibles with a wry tolerance. But she lived very quietly, her main outside interests being the Anglican church and her passion for gardening and reading, and she was rarely out and about round town.

But now, watching Nelson and his near collapse, he did not doubt that the principal had loved and needed his wife. He might’ve called the police round to the school on hundreds of tedious little complaints but that didn’t alter this fact. The trouble was, he was not the sort of man who would want a friendly hand laid on a shoulder. There was probably no one in town he could really turn to for any comfort.

“I’m sorry. There will need to be an autopsy. But it will be done as quickly and quietly as possible … I doubt there was anything you could’ve done for her.”

Nelson turned and looked at Sergeant Walsh then he blundered away from the small group and they heard a door close on him.

“I don’t think he should be left alone. Find out what doctor she was seeing. I’ll have to set things in motion to get her sent to Winville. Or do you want to do that, Jim?”

“I’ll do it. I think he’d find it easier, seeing it as a medical rather than a police matter.”

“And what is your take on her death?”

“I s’pose it’s possible she took the wrong dose. But I’m more inclined to think it was natural. Don’t worry, Dennis, we’ll get back to you if there’s anything that doesn’t stack up. I really wanted you round here … to prevent any comeback later. You know what he’s like.” Jim Phelps dropped his voice slightly.

Dennis nodded. Everyone round Buckton knew what Nelson was like. “But keep an eye on him. He’s not going to find any of this easy to deal with.”

Back at the station he tossed his cap aside and put the jug on to boil. Easter Day and he was dealing instead with abduction and sudden death. He sat down heavily and began to enter up the day book …

Jocelyn Crisp came in half-an-hour later and said, “She’ll be okay, young Justine, she hadn’t been raped. They’ve done a blood test but I don’t know if they’ll pick up anything. It could be one of these new fast-acting drugs … like Rohypnol … drop it in some girl’s drink … she’s out to it in ten minutes, rape her, she wakes up, wonders where she is, tries to get a lead on what happened to her, the drug’s already broken down in her system, no clues left … ”

"Could be. Or an animal tranquilliser. Easier to get round here."

"So why did you think this case was different?"

"No one heard a vehicle. And the house is a long way in from either road. He always carries the girls away. But he probably isn't a particularly big man. To carry Justine all the way to the road would be a fair effort. I think you'll find the attacks will stop now."

"It might be a copycat thing … and then he didn't think it was worth following through."

"No. She had a puncture mark in the same place as the others."

"So where is the other girl? Tracy?"

"I'll leave you two to find her."

She was about to respond to this when a different question occurred to her. "Hold on a minute. How did he get up there without a vehicle?"

"He had a vehicle. He had two choices. Go up Parsons Road which is a dead end unless you want to take down the slip rails further along. Or go along the front road. If he went up Parsons Road he risked getting bottled up but it's much steeper. He only had to release the handbrake and run gently down the hill after he'd dumped Justine. Very quiet. And if anyone did come up that way he could say he'd been to see Gus Mortimer … no sign of any girl with him … "

"Okay. I'll buy that."

"Where's Garcia?"

"Still spitting chips. We're going to do a wider search of the area. Including that empty house where the double homicide happened. I understand local people now avoid it like the plague."

Too much to expect an apology from them, he thought grimly, as he put the phone through to his house and went home to 'enjoy' what he could of Easter. Fiona had left a large box with him with a card on top to say 'Don't open till Easter' and underneath it 'It was a temptation to stay and enjoy the contents with you but duty etc calls … along with the need to prepare mum for the Big Day'. The contents proved to be a hamper with lots of plain and exotic foods, some with extra little notes added in with more personal messages.

"Speaking of mothers … " He set all the contents out on his kitchen table then lifted the phone to ring Townsville.

He had hardly put it down again when it rang. Dora Binnie said in an anguished way, "I've been trying to get you, Sergeant—"

He thought of placating her with 'I was chatting with my mother' but she would probably not believe him. "What's happened?"

"We've found, John and me, we've found a body." She told him where to come and rang off.

A body.

So there was more than sex and anger and someone trying to make them all look fools at work here.

But the body was alive when he reached the side road and found old Mr and Mrs Binnie standing anxiously over a young woman now wrapped in a towel and Mrs Binnie's discarded cardigan. The girl looked up with weary defeated eyes and then seemed to loll backwards. He managed to catch her before she fell. Mrs Binnie still looked deeply upset and shocked.

"How could anyone be so wicked to do that to her?" She seemed to find the world a suddenly incomprehensible place.

"Dora, would you open the back door for me. We'll get her straight into hospital. And John, if you would take her legs and help me lift her in. Just relax now, Tracy, and we'll have you safe soon."

As they carefully manoeuvered Tracy Dillon into the back seat of the police car Dennis asked them how they'd come to find her. "I saw something in the ditch there," Dora said, "and I said to John, what's that, it looks like a person. And we stopped and went over … and there she was lying there, stark naked, the poor love, and all woozy and sick. I drove up to the house there and rang you and we helped her up the bank and found something to put round her … "

"Good. You did the right thing. So I'll get her straight to hospital. But if you'd come into the station … or I can come out to see you later, just to get a statement from you both."

"Could you come to us? We've got family coming round to tea later. Come and have some cake with us if you can spare the time."

After he drove away with Tracy he wondered if 'family' referred to their brother's stepson and his daughter with whom they had been feuding for months. Probably not. But he had arranged a session and tried to get them all to come to some agreement. It hadn't been very successful but at least he had managed to scare the stepson into behaving a little more responsibly.

Dr Davis was called to the hospital to take swabs; Crisp and Garcia turned up ten minutes later. Tracy was older than the other girls, a little more mature, but whether her young woman's body had sparked the greater ferocity of her attack, and the humiliating way she had been left in a ditch alongside the road …

*

The old days had seen Easter Monday given over to a big lively sports day, what an old timer had once called 'a lot of leppin' and runnin' about' but people to organise it, insurance, changing attitudes in the younger generation, the ageing of the farm population; these and other factors had led to its demise. In its place St Monica's had put a fair and sports day. There were sack races, egg-and-spoon, wheelbarrow races, three-legged races; there was a men's tug-o'-war and one for the mothers; there was a small merry-go-round, a chocolate wheel, a lucky dip, several stalls …

This year Sergeant Walsh was more on the look out for a lone man watching the happy groups of nubile young girls than for claims of cheating or stealing. But the day passed off peacefully with sunburned children getting into cars and babies grizzling in the late afternoon. If there was a dubious man around he had very successfully melted into the crowd.

On Tuesday morning he was called out by Mrs McLaren; her husband Ken, she said, had been doing some welding and had copped a piece of hot metal but he was refusing to go to hospital. It wasn't really the moment to say 'I hope that means he was trying to fix his bloody hopeless fences'. "Right. Hang up. Call the ambulance. And I'll come out and make sure he gets in the ruddy thing." Easier said than done but finally the farmer was placed in the ambulance with a light bandage over the eye and whisked away.

"Do you want to go into town with him," Sergeant Walsh turned to Mona McLaren.

"Not really, no. I know perfectly well he'll give the nurses a hard time and tell me it'll be my fault if he loses an eye. I think I would rather get on with my own work and wait for them to ring me."

"Okay. Does this mean he wasn't using goggles or anything?"

"It means that Ken was being his usual law unto himself. He said it bounced up and caught him. I didn't ask any questions. But thank you for coming. I'll just have to hope for the best."

In the evening he had a ring from Elaine Pounder. "I know this will make me sound like a right old stickybeak, Dennis, but I *am* worried about Nelson L'Estrange. He's been going round closing all his windows and doors and pulling his curtains … "

"I'll come round. I didn't like the way he was talking on Sunday … and being alone … "

"Exactly. I'm glad it's not just me worrying." Her house backed on to the principal's yard. She probably had a good idea of his habits.

And the house had a closed–up deserted air about it when he got there. He thundered on the door. Silence. He knocked again then went round the side of the house in the hope of finding a window he could see in. There was a sudden crash inside. He didn't wait to try and find an unlatched window, smashing in the nearest pane and struggling inside. The house was hot and stuffy. Worse, Nelson L'Estrange was sitting in the middle of his sitting-room carpet. He had apparently been trying to fit a rope to the light fixture when the chair tipped.

One minute he had been trying to decide how best to tie the sturdy rope. The next he was being hauled to his feet by a very angry and very large man. Dennis Walsh almost threw him into the nearest armchair then took the rope and kitchen chair and hurled them out the nearest door. Suddenly thoughts of eternity were very far away from the drama of the moment.

Nelson looked terrible. He obviously hadn't shaved since Sunday. And probably not eaten either. His eyes were red-rimmed. His face looked slack and grey. "You shouldn't have … " He

closed his eyes briefly. There was something about the largeness of Dennis Walsh, the aliveness of him, he felt he wanted to sink down into silence and solitude and blot the man out entirely.

Dennis sat down and rested his head back for a few minutes.

At last, L'Estrange said wearily, "I wish you'd left me to go with Hannah."

"I know. I don't s'pose it's much comfort to say I know how you're feeling—"

"You can't. No one can."

"Well, I'll tell you something—and if you ever repeat it outside this room I'll have your guts for garters. I do understand … because I had a wife and baby daughter a long time ago. I loved them both. And they were killed in a very horrible way. And the youths responsible got off on a technicality. I've had twenty-three years without them and I've never stopped missing them. There isn't anything to fill the gap. Just work. But if work is all you've got you get stuck into it and do the best you can. And if you get lucky you get a second chance at … everything."

Nelson raised his head wearily but said nothing.

"Now, you'd better get this house reorganised and stop thinking about topping yourself, mate—"

"Don't call me 'mate'. I am not anybody's *mate*." Nelson sounded peevish. Dennis Walsh couldn't help a wry grin. He would never have believed he would be pleased to hear Nelson being his normal tedious self.

"Okay, I won't. I'd better keep going. I'll pay you for that window."

"No. You won't. Maybe, someday, I find the thought hard to believe in, I might find some reason to be grateful … "

In the evening Sr O'Brien from Buckton Hospital rang to say that she had heard from Winville, where Tracy Dillon had been sent, that the girl was much better and would come home tomorrow. She said Ken McLaren would be okay in a day or so. And she added she had heard that Hannah L'Estrange had died from an aneurysm and did Dennis know if that was correct?

"I don't know. Nelson is in a mess. I just hope it's something that it wouldn't matter what he did or didn't do—it wasn't something he could fix. I think he's feeling both miserable and guilty."

"Poor man," Sister O'Brien said kindly. "And what about the girls … any news? People are very antsy, girls not wanting to go bed on their own, mothers getting up in the night, people buying locks and bolts … I hope they can catch the man soon. It's really making for a lot of worry and stress out there, Dennis."

"I know. But I think there won't be any more attacks."

"I hope you're right. And is it true that they think it's one of the girls' fathers? I think I must've led a very sheltered life but I really find that very hard to believe."

"They're not confiding a lot in me. But, yeah, I think that's the way it's going. They're going to get all sorts of sophisticated lab tests done. At least that will eliminate … some people."

"I'm not sure if that's comfort or not."

*

Guy went to Winville with Joanne and Jason on the Wednesday. He enjoyed the day. Jason, though not given to effusiveness, also seemed to enjoy himself. It was Joanne who left them at the movie theatre and went away to shop for things she couldn't get in Buckton who found herself musing on the whole thing. Did she really want Guy or was he just a reasonable fill-in? Would they manage to become a family? It should be simple to know how she felt and what she wanted; but there was that vague nagging sense that Guy was as happy in Jason's company as he was in hers, that he hadn't really grown up himself and he, like Jason, almost regarded her as a mother figure. She was deeply grateful to him for taking a lot of interest in her son but she knew she wasn't ready to fade away into the sort of woman whose husband always refers to her as 'mother' …

Was it because she had determinedly made it clear to Guy that she wanted a friend and companion rather than a partner, that she wanted someone who would get along with Jason even more than someone who would get along with her …

Would things all fall into place if she chose to take the relationship further? But Guy had never pushed for anything more. And she wasn't certain how Jason would see it if Guy started staying overnight. It seemed easier to leave things as they were. After all Guy would probably get

transferred sooner or later, the same as John Applegarth and Ashley Turner had moved on, and she might not want to uproot herself to go to Longreach or Mackay …

It was late when Guy drove them back to Buckton. The light was on in the police station as they came past. "I wonder if they've had any more news on the girls." He wasn't sure if he really wanted to know. It was hard being the junior when the titans clashed. And nobody really seemed to want to tell him anything, possibly because Dennis wasn't being kept informed, and Crisp and Garcia assumed he would pass confidential things on to his boss.

But in the end curiosity won out and he dropped Jason and Joanne off and went back to the station. James Garcia was sitting in Dennis's chair and going through Buckton's records for the last year. Joss Crisp was browsing in the filing cabinet. He didn't find anything wrong with their presence or their desire to know more about Buckton.

"Can I help?"

"Probably not. We're looking to see if Buckton's ever had anything similar in the way of sex crimes."

"Wouldn't it be easier to ask Sergeant Walsh?"

"We're supposed to make our own independent assessment. And sex offenders sometimes show up earlier in their 'career' with different types of offences." Dr Crisp felt uneasy and compromised by the whole way James was running the investigation; but he was the senior and more experienced member of the team. It didn't do to let your ego get in the way of a clear appraisal of where things had gone wrong. Though things, she felt, had gone wrong from the beginning; DI Towner should never have tried to influence them in any way or urge them to leave local knowledge out of the loop. It was at that moment they should have responded clearly and firmly with, "Whatever your problems with local officers we cannot leave anyone out of consideration and certainly not the local sergeant."

What then? Would Doug Towner have accepted that he shouldn't be trying to influence them?

"Tell me," she went on, "why there is so much bad feeling between Towner and Walsh? Does it impact on this investigation?"

Guy felt this was an unfair question to ask him. Would they now go back to Winville and repeat anything he'd been unwise enough to say? Crisp seemed to realise she had put him in a bind. "It's okay, just off the record. It's very hard for us to come into a strange place and get caught in all this other stuff. Hard to know if any of it is relevant to our work too."

"Mr Towner was very angry because Sergeant Walsh and Sergeant Midgley solved that double homicide."

She raised her eyebrows. "He took the credit. I saw him on TV."

Guy nodded cautiously. "But he still knows that they were right and he was wrong. He said it had something to do with a love triangle and clients of the agency. My boss said it had to do with a fight over a racehorse. And it was," he said in simple conclusion.

She smiled. "You're very loyal to Dennis Walsh, aren't you?" The idea surprised him. And he wasn't sure if it was true. You did what you were told. You kowtowed to those higher up. If you were lucky you got a boss who was knowledgeable and fair and showed you the ropes and helped you along …

"I can't answer that. But I like working here."

"Okay, I won't ask you any other tricky questions. Have you got work waiting here? Will we be in your way?"

"No. I just saw the light on and thought I might be needed."

"Dennis went home a while ago. We've got our own key."

Guy nodded. The phone was switched through. "In that case I'll go on home too." It had been a good day but he wouldn't be sorry to get home and crash in front of the TV.

*

It was Garcia who said, after Guy had gone, "There's something about drugs here. I've been wondering if the girls ran into a drug user, barbiturates rather than just a sleeping pill. And what if those puncture marks are a blind and the girls actually were given something on the schoolgrounds."

"You think Buckton has a drug problem? That the girls were encouraged to take something in the evening that made them sleep heavily or lose control or believe the perp was part of a happy dream?"

"According to this," Garcia ran a finger along the sprawl of Dennis Walsh's writing, "he went to see the high school principal last week and has set down an interview with four boys for next Monday after school. And according to this some speed tablets were passed to police via a Jason McNally. I think we need to speak to the principal to make sure we're not leaving older students out of the loop. It would be very easy for them to pass drugs to female students, at school, on the bus, downtown maybe. I think we need to talk to this Derek Coleman ourselves."

Jocelyn Crisp wasn't entirely happy about this but she could see the value in getting a direct comment from the principal. Dennis Walsh had seemingly dismissed the boys but they probably shouldn't be dismissing anyone from their investigation at this stage.

There was only one D. Coleman in the phone book for Buckton and James switched the phone back, rang, and got straight on to him. He expressed himself willing to help in any way possible. Garcia explained that they were still looking at everyone who had any kind of relationship with the four girls, including fellow students.

"I do understand that," Derek Coleman said earnestly. "But I know these boys. They're not out there pretending to be Zorro of a night time."

"But they *are* involved with drugs, it seems," Garcia said carefully. "Is there some sort of spin-off? Hyped up kids may not be the same as the kids you see in class."

"I do understand your point. And if there is a specific thing I can help with … but my take is that these are students who are not going to throw everything away … and I am still not convinced that they ever had anything to do with drugs of any kind. But Sergeant Walsh comes in here and thinks he can get away with the most outrageous allegations—"

"Drugs do come into the equation. A fellow student saw them drop a box full of amphetamines and took it to the police."

"And you have a name to back up this allegation?"

James Garcia said firmly, "Yes, I do. One Jason McNally."

Derek Coleman was silent for a studied moment. Then he said quietly, "I think I see what has been happening. It is what the Americans call a frame-up. And I think if you're hoping to make a connection between drugs and those girls then you're whistling in the wind. I don't know about the primary school girls but that young Tracy Dillon has eyed off every boy in school here. I think the expression is a cock tease. I would suggest that you double check all the information you get from your sources—"

"This Jason McNally—"

"His mother and Constable Briggs are an item. Young Jason is currying favour with his likely new dad. I think you can discount his allegations, Mr Garcia. I hope this has laid your fears to rest. If there is drug dealing in Buckton then my school is not its focus."

"Do we believe him or not," Garcia said as he put the phone down and began putting papers back.

"It's a small school. It's hard to see how he could be completely blind to it if he really did have a problem."

"But even if we discount drugs in the problem—we've still got teenage boys, raging hormones, all that sort of thing."

Joss Crisp nodded thoughtfully. "It still might be worth a face-to-face interview. And finding what cars they have access to. That sort of thing. And we still need to see the men at the Burleigh dam site. None of those caravans were ever checked."

"No. Very careless of our Mr Walsh."

Garcia got up, massaged his stiff neck, then picked up his briefcase and went to the door to turn off the lights and lock up.

*

Dennis Walsh, as usual, was first into the station in the morning. He had seen Ken McLaren who said unequivocally that he had been wearing a protective helmet when he was hurt—which

suggested he hadn't put the visor down or the thing was defective or he was going gaga—and he had seen Nelson L'Estrange who had looked faintly awkward and embarrassed but at least was shaved and spruce. He had said the result of the autopsy was that his wife had had a stroke. Her medication might have made her more susceptible, he didn't know, but they had told him he was not to blame in any way; no matter how quickly he had got her to the hospital it probably would not have changed the outcome.

Then he had gone out to Dinawadding to deal with a fire at the railway siding. He ignored the graffiti and vandalism there but arson was more serious. The station might be closed and no trains running but there was still the vague local hope that this was reversible. He had come back and checked messages and gone home.

But now as he looked around he saw that things were different. And the phone was no longer through to the station house. Obviously the task force had been working here. He had no objection. If they were any closer to a resolution to the problem … but …

Guy and the two outsiders arrived together. "Why didn't you switch the phone through again when you'd finished?" was Walsh's opening remark.

"I am certain we did," Garcia said mildly.

"Then why is it here now, and no answerphone turned on?"

"You forgot, possibly."

"No, mate, I didn't forget. I took one message at my house at 6.30 pm and then all went quiet. I come in this morning and find it like this. Do you think you're the only people dealing with problems round here."

Garcia seemed about to argue but Crisp said mildly, "Can we get on? We've got a full day ahead of us. But we would like to get your take on this Derek Coleman before we go to see him." She hoped this would mollify him. After all Blind Freddy could see they had been remiss with the phone last night.

"What are you going to see him about?"

"His students. His older male students mainly."

"To ask him what?"

"Any horseplay, dating, school functions, anything that has got out of hand. And we might just follow up on this drug allegation—"

"What drug allegation?"

No one noticed Guy Briggs grow tense and watchful.

"This business about speed on campus. This Jason McNally that—" Dr Crisp backtracked slightly. "I forget the boys' names. But we just want to eliminate them if we can, not get the investigation bogged down on side issues."

"Did you mention the name of Jason McNally to Derek Coleman?" Dennis Walsh had turned to look at Jocelyn.

"Is there a problem with that?"

"A problem!" Walsh slapped his forehead. "You bloody dickheads! You gave out confidential information like that!"

"Come on, calm down." James Garcia said with some heat. "This is Buckton—"

"And that gives you morons the right to come in here and put a boy at serious risk, does it? Any harm comes to that kid and I'll see you both end up in court and you'd better believe it." He turned to Guy Briggs who had watched the exchange with growing dismay. "Guy, go straight round and get that kid and get him out of town. He's not safe here now that these cretins have given his name to Coleman. Get him to Winville and make sure he stays there." He went over to his desk and scribbled a message on a slip of paper with furious strokes. He handed it to Guy who took it and scurried out.

"You're turning a molehill into a mountain, Sergeant Walsh." Joss Crisp tried to dowse the situation.

"Am I? And you'd be the best judge of that, would you? You know all about what's going on behind this business, do you? Little Miss Psychic? Don't give me that bullshit! There are seriously

dangerous people behind this drug business and if Derek thinks he can keep his white-headed boys untouched—then he's got another think coming."

"I think we'll get on our way. We've got a lot of interviews to fit in." She still tried to sound conciliatory.

"Yeah—get the hell out of here before I boot you out. You're s'posed to be helping—not wrecking lives." But after they'd gone out he sat back with the dismal thought that it was no wonder his health never seemed to be a hundred per cent. And he had only calmed down marginally when the manager at the supermarket rang to say they'd had a break-in last night. "I rang and rang and got no answer. What's the matter with you these days?"

"Just what I need."

But he got up, put the answerphone on, and went out.

It probably would not have done much to console him, or Guy, if he'd heard Jocelyn Crisp say to James Garcia, "I think we just stuffed up quite badly." 'We' was possibly a little strong. But she knew she had done nothing to try to persuade Jimmy to wait and discuss the situation with Dennis before they put their toes in that pool.

Case No. 3: Goodbye

Dennis Walsh had hoped to be able to soft-peddle on the whole of the drugs-and-boys business. Talk to them quietly and find out if they'd ever been near Caritas and the beautiful Eve Rogers, if they'd even been over to Dinawadding. Now he felt as though his hand had been forced.

But he was also aware that he had played right into the task force's hands; they would now believe Doug Towner was spot on with his allegations. He should've tried harder to stay calm …

And now …

He intended to do a quiet survey round Dinawadding, try to find if any suspicious pills had been surfacing, if Bruloder as new owner of Japana Beef was still trying to buy up local farms and businesses, if anyone had had reason to question anything about the new owners. And was Eve Rogers making herself available not only to people who came to Caritas but to a wider audience. There would be no shortage of men lining up. But the puzzle was of course—had she given the boys some speed, had they bought it, had they helped themselves … and were they now on film? Had he made an error of judgement by putting that video with Guy Briggs on it away in his safe rather than making the whole situation public—

And what excuse could he use to get another search warrant to go into Bruloder and Caritas? Could he suggest that the problem had not been fully dealt with, that there was still someone dealing drugs …

Just as the previous owner of the feed lots had managed to grow hectares of marijuana away from the public eye so too they could be using a shed to cook up batches out of the public eye … and was there a link between Bruloder and the previous owners Hoysted Holdings and their well-established supply system …

He doorknocked at every home and business in the little hamlet of Dinawadding. It was much smaller than Buckton but had a primary school, a general store, a pub, a service station, a CWA hall, a Catholic church, a post office as agent for the Commonwealth Bank, the closed railway siding, and about a dozen houses. In its heyday it had been a pretty little place with garden beds each side of the station and pepper trees along its couple of streets; but now an air of defeat had gradually closed around it. The blackened station, a couple of boarded up houses, an air of decline all made it a sad place to visit.

And people were angry. Hoysted Holdings had not provided jobs or money. They had hoped that Bruloder would inject something but they were finding that, if anything, there were fewer jobs and even less contact with the workforce at Japana and the Farm Stay place. One woman put it succinctly when she said, "I'd like to let the cattle out then raze the place." He was half inclined to agree.

Had she heard any rumours about drugs or sex being on offer?

For a startled moment she simply gaped at him.

Then she said, "I wonder … "

"What do you wonder?"

"My grandson goes to high school in Buckton. He and his dad were round with us on Easter Sunday and he was … well, he was a bit strange. I don't know how to explain it. He didn't seem to be hearing what people were saying to him. I said, I'll bet it's those earplugs kids use all the time now, they're making him go deaf. But his dad said it had come on quite suddenly, Micky being sort of off with the fairies. He thinks it's the stress of school and everything. I don't. But who am I to tell the younger generation anything."

In the end he only found one man willing to say straight out that he had heard sex was on offer at Caritas but that you had to book in for at least one night and it was pretty stiff, the tariff, even if you did get a bonus.

"So you didn't book in?"

"Not so far. But I might."

"I wouldn't advise it. I've got it on good authority that they've got hidden cameras. Not unless you're the exhibitionist type."

The man seemed to carefully process this idea and come down firmly on the side of preferring to keep his sex life private.

At the end of the morning Dennis had urged almost every adult in Dinawadding to get on to him if they had the slightest worry about anything; he had talked to the school principal at his home, he had followed up on the arson case. But he wasn't sure if he was any further forward. And people were as keen to get reassurance their girls were safe as they were to answer his questions …

On his way back to Buckton he called into Caritas. Whatever he asked would tip them off. But to ignore a situation wasn't his way …

Both Mr and Mrs Rogers were there, along with two older men, all enjoying an *al fresco* lunch beside the pool.

"Sergeant Walsh," Adam Rogers came over to meet him, "how can we help you?"

"I'm doing the rounds of the district to warn people about the drugs which are circulating. I'm sure no one here except your wife bothers with a bit of speed but if you see or hear anything get straight on to me."

"Don't you think you're over-reacting? What people do in private … and I am yet to be convinced that making things illegal is the way to go. It only makes them more attractive to the younger generation."

"It does." He looked at the two visitors carefully. "But not up to me to say what's legal and what's illegal. So while amphetamines are illegal I'd suggest you go easy on making them, taking them, or palming them off on local kids."

"You've been misinformed, Sergeant Walsh, this place is what you might call a 'drug free zone'."

"But Bruloder isn't … and you're connected to the business. So pass on my warning."

"Again you've been misinformed, Sergeant. We have no contact with anyone at Bruloder. Two completely separate businesses."

Dennis Walsh was in no good humour. But it was a statement he wasn't in a position to cut down with a couple of swift blows.

"Now, if you will excuse me," Adam Rogers went on, "I do have guests." As Dennis Walsh continued to stand there calmly, showing no sign of asking more questions *or* walking back to his car, Mr Rogers simply turned his back on him and returned to his guests. Eve showed signs of responding to the situation by getting up and coming over but her husband put a hand on her shoulder and she remained where she was.

"Don't hurt her," one of the men said as Adam's fingers dug in. "I'm looking forward to a little bit of … " he used a word Dennis Walsh hadn't heard before. But it suggested these visitors, too, were South African.

Walsh climbed back into the police vehicle and drove out. But it was times like these when he longed to be able to leave a tiny microphone behind or to change shape and settle softly on a nearby beach umbrella …

Crisp and Garcia were out when he returned but Guy Briggs was conscientiously filling in stock permits. Dennis left him to it and went to get himself a bite of lunch. He had got a line on the supermarket break-in and hoped to be able to sheet it home …

It was probably an accident, not a genuine break-in. But people didn't walk away from accidents with a saintly face. They confessed and offered restitution, in his book. But it was still difficult to get people, teenage boys, anyone, to shift from the tough-it-out mindset to the confess-it-all mindset.

When he returned to the station he sent Guy off to get himself some lunch. He was still there when Dr Crisp came in.

"Good, I've been hoping to catch you. I wanted to say sorry about that business with the school principal. But surely that was an over-reaction on your part?"

He took out his day book and opened it to the relevant entry. "If I bother to write in it 'this information is to remain confidential' I do it for a reason, not because I get a kick out of writing it."

She came over and looked at the relevant entry. "I see. Jimmy didn't tell me that was written there—or I would've said, leave it alone."

"Does he always treat confidential information so carelessly? If this isn't a one-off then he's not fit to be doing the job."

"But, surely, you must have confidence in the principal—"

"Why?"

"Well, he has a serious job himself—and dealing with important issues."

"Coleman picks himself out some favourites. The rest of the student population he either tolerates or treats as invisible. One of his students had been missing from school *for a month* before he got on to me. And then his only real concern was that she was a bit of a cock tease and might've gone off with one of his precious boys. The man's an incompetent fool when it comes to making sure all the kids in the school's care get the same level of day-to-day attention."

"People speak well of him."

"No. He's lucky enough to have some capable staff who pick up the slack. But that's not good enough. And as for you two fools giving out the information I made a point of *not* giving him," he shook his head wearily. "If you'd come to me and said 'how can we tackle the question of drugs, of teenage boys' then maybe we could've sat down and worked out the best way to tackle it. But now it's young Jason who's bearing the brunt of it. The kid was already getting bullied. Now he's in serious danger."

"Why? This man is obviously focused on young girls—"

"And you're suggesting that's the *only* issue on our plate here?"

"It is a small place—and very quiet. Till this abduction business blew up."

"No, Dr Crisp, it has the usual problems and I am expected to tackle those problems, whatever they are. So instead of carrying on at cross-purposes it is about time we did what should've happened at the beginning, sit down and work out some ground rules. You do not act on any information you find here without running it past me. I don't interfere in your investigation. Constable Briggs and I will give you whatever back-up and information we can. Agreed?"

Jocelyn Crisp said quietly, "It sounds fine but it isn't my decision. DI Garcia is senior to me. I'll do my best to make sure we work together. Otherwise this piece of excrement is going to get away with it."

The phone rang and Dennis Walsh said he would be there in 'two ticks'.

"Then try to get him to work with us—not doing his best to fuck up the investigation I had hoped to do very quietly and carefully. Now they know I know what they're doing and they'll be making sure I can't get evidence." He stood and reached for his cap. "I'll see you later."

After he had gone she got out her map of the district and looked at the relation of the various houses to each other. But the sense of depression Buckton had sparked refused to go away. Walsh was right to be angry. She hadn't known till he had shown her just now that that information had

always been tagged ‘confidential’. Jimmy had known that and he hadn’t given her any hint of it when he decided to contact the principal. Was it merely his willingness to ride roughshod over people he regarded as rednecks, including Walsh, or was there another agenda here? She felt a deep unease and not even her feelings for her colleague could dissipate this sense of failure.

*

Thursday evening, after work, Fiona Greehan came over to the station in the hope that Dennis would have some time, short or long, to spend with her. There was no sign of him but two strangers were behind the counter and going through various papers. She said politely, “Hullo, is Dennis around, do you know?”

“He’s out at the moment. Can I help you?” The woman had short blonde hair and an arresting rather than a pretty face.

“No. I’ll just sit down and wait for him.” She suited the word and seated herself gracefully in the tiny waiting space. They must have permission to be in here but she felt faintly uneasy. Something to do with them? Or the unwillingness to have strangers trawl through things like her horrible experience with Artie Kees?

They continued to go through things and discuss them quietly. She didn’t try to listen in, assuming they were either the task force people Raelene had mentioned or here to audit things …

But as the minutes ticked by she had the odd feeling that her quiet presence was making them uncomfortable. The man, a very good-looking man in a lean dark way, looked up and gave her a slight smile. “Are you sure you want to wait for him rather than leave a message or come back later?”

“I am used to waiting.” She returned his smile.

He nodded. The station clock went on ticking overhead and she wondered if she should offer the station some magazines; not that Dennis was in the habit of keeping people waiting. And when he came it was in his usual energetic way, setting the station door tinkling and erupting into the small space which suddenly seemed much too limited for all four of them.

“And what the fuck do you two think you’re up to?”

“Still hunting,” Joss Crisp said mildy. “This problem with the canteen out at the dam site—it seems to have left a lot of bad feeling.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Quite a lot … possibly.” DI Garcia did not try to hide his irritation. “Those caravans would be the ideal place to hide a girl for a day or two. You should’ve searched them thoroughly as soon as the Murphy girl went missing.”

Fiona could see the stranger’s irritation but it was Dennis who seemed to flame up with anger. She wanted to interpolate herself between them and provide a soothing word, a soothing sense. But the door opened again and Constable Briggs came in. He started to say, “Joanne is very upset—” and then he saw the team behind the counter and stopped in embarrassment.

“Your lady friend I take it,” Garcia sounded sarcastic. “How does she play out in this drug plot? Is she stealing stuff from the doctor’s office and getting her son to flog it round school?”

It wasn’t Guy who reacted to this. He knew his relationship with Jo and Jason was wrecked beyond recall. They, quite understandably, believed he must have passed on information. It was Dennis Walsh who turned on James Garcia with an angry shout. “I told you to keep your stupid mitts out of local stuff—” He reached out as though to yank Garcia bodily out from behind the counter.

But the door tinkled again and two local women came in; Betty Low and Patsy Pounder. “I’m sorry to bother you—but it’s Poppet—that big—” Patsy stopped in mid-sentence. “I’m sorry. Is this a bad time?” Betty Low, quite clearly, had been crying.

“Of course not.” In the moment when Walsh turned to the two women Joss Crisp saw her partner slip a sheet of paper out of the day book and thrust it in his pocket. Her eyes widened slightly but she said nothing. Fiona turning back to them rather than embarrass the two ladies by seeming to listen in to their troubles saw this look and wondered what it meant. But the whole situation seemed too fraught to allow her to intrude a question.

Garcia said briskly, “Then we’ll leave you to your local stuff. Come along, Dr Crisp. Good evening, ladies.” He went out.

Dennis turned to Guy and told him to go with the women. “I assume you mean that dog next door got in?”

Betty Low nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

“Then check the fence, check his restraint. See if it was an accident. If it wasn’t tell them to come in here tomorrow afternoon and I’ll deal with it.”

Guy nodded rather nervously and scuttled out.

Dennis turned to Fiona. “Sorry. This place is a madhouse.”

There was any number of possible responses to this. Instead she homed in on a different thing. “It never ceases to amaze me. You don’t only know the people on your patch. You know their animals. Is Poppet a cat or a small dog?”

“A cat. I sometimes think I prefer animals to humans, excepting you.” He came over and took her in his arms briefly. “What say I lock up now. With luck Guy can handle it. And God knows what those cretins were after this time—but I s’pose I’ll find out somewhere down the line.”

He put the phone through and they went over to the house behind the station. “How was Brisbane?” They chatted as they went in. She was tempted to tell him that she was snowed under as her boss, Hilton Browne, had spent yesterday afternoon asleep on the couch he had imported into his office. But she felt that it might be better to talk of innocuous things. They went into the kitchen and she put the kettle on. “My mother wants us to come and get married on her lawn and have tea there afterwards. And I’ve found us a celebrant who seems very nice. So everything is fine at that end unless you’d rather we do things differently.”

“No. That sounds fine by me.”

“But things haven’t been fine here, have they?”

He put out mugs and a packet of biscuits. “That’s to put it mildly. Two more girls got taken while you were away. Mrs L’Estrange died suddenly. Those morons have compromised a drug investigation and put a boy’s life at risk … the usual round of small stuff. A laugh a minute. It *is* nice to see you again.”

He was never effusive with his compliments and endearments; and yet she always felt they came with the entire weight of his love behind them. People who said ‘love’ and ‘darling’ in every sentence began to seem trite and insincere by comparison.

“And if I ask you about the two people who were going through your paperwork—will that send your blood pressure skyrocketing again?”

“Probably. I’m going to Winville tomorrow for a check-up. I’d just like to try and get back to normal before we—”

“Is it more than blood pressure?”

“Don’t know. I still keep blaming Cherry Morton but Mavis said it might be something more ordinary, like an ulcer. So I’m going to see Dr Thompson tomorrow.”

“Good. But it isn’t only your physical health, is it. You’ve been worrying about the girls … about Nelson … ”

“Strange, isn’t it. I never thought I’d feel sorry for the tiresome old coot. But I knew what he was going through … ” He fell silent.

“And the girls?”

“Do you mean—was I thinking ‘that could be my daughter’, that kind of thing?” She nodded. But he said, “No, Dani would be grown up now. She might even have kids of her own. I’ve sort of followed her … growing up … thought about the plans we might’ve made … the career she might’ve chosen.”

“Yes.” It seemed strange to listen to him speak but she did not doubt that his little dead daughter was still in some rose-tinted way very real to him. Dani would not have come to the attention of police, chosen the ‘wrong’ boy, been rude or surly to her father, stayed out late. Dani would have grown up to be an idealised version of … she couldn’t decide. His mother perhaps. Or Norena. “But that man took away from those girls … their innocence … their … virginity … their right to choose. You can’t forgive that, can you?”

"You're probably right. It doesn't matter so much these days. But I still think it's their right to make that choice. Whether they see it as not mattering or a gift to … you know … it's still their choice. Dr Crisp thinks the girls are probably handling it reasonably well because they weren't fully aware of what was happening … and because each one of them knows she wasn't alone. But maybe that's a two-edged sword."

"Yes, it's hard to process a memory when the memory is all muddled up." She made the coffee and came over to sit down. "Dennis, this may be very bad timing … but you asked me once about having a baby … "

"And you said it was a nice idea."

"And once the idea was there between us … it's never gone away. Do you still feel the same as you did then?"

"Of course. Does this mean you've … well, that's a silly question really. I assumed we would think about a baby when you're ready."

"We don't need to wait to try if you'd like to … I don't know if it will be easy or difficult. Would you be very disappointed if nothing happens?"

"I think I can take it in my stride. So long as I've got you in my life."

It was a temptation to stay but she eventually excused herself, saying she was behind with things and could they plan on dinner Friday night. Then she let herself out for the short walk home. But as she walked down the side of his house she noticed the light in the station was on. It might only be Guy but after hesitating a moment she changed course and went around to check. The front door was closed but not locked. Inside the new man from the afternoon was hunting through the station safe. He straightened up swiftly. "Can I help you?"

"No. I saw the light and wondered if it might be a break-in." She saw he had a briefcase sitting on the counter.

"No. Just doing some more information-gathering for our investigation. Can I drop you home or anything?" He closed the safe and picked up his briefcase.

"Thank you. But I live just round the corner. I'll walk. I'm sorry to startle you." They both went out and he walked down to his car. Fiona turned the corner to walk along to Creek Road. But after his tail lights moved away up the street she turned back into the station house yard. It probably *was* him simply doing his work with the station reverted now to peace and quiet. But she felt the same faint unease he had sparked in the late afternoon.

She came back in and said quietly, "Dennis, I know this may be telling tales out of school—but that man, that detective, was just over there going through your safe. I'm not sure if he was taking something out or putting something in."

The information seemed to electrify him. "The bastard! Come on then!" And before she knew where she was she had been hustled out of the house again and into the police vehicle. "I'll drop you off. I don't want you mixed up in any of this. That guy is seriously bad news."

"In what way?"

"I didn't give him the combination for the safe. Nothing in there that's his business."

He almost bundled her out at her gate and drove on. It was all slightly disconcerting and she felt the need to compose herself before walking in calmly and saying to Rae, "I think Buckton has gone all topsy-turvy while I was away."

"It has a bit." Rae was busy in the kitchen. "But that new detective, Jimmy Garcia, is pretty dishy, isn't he? I'm not surprised she likes to go away with him."

Dishy or not, Sergeant Walsh was pleased to be able to catch Garcia just as he was parking at the motel and getting out.

"Sergeant! More troubles?"

Dennis walked over to him and before the other man realised his focus he found the briefcase twitched from his fingers and Walsh was getting back into his car and slamming the door. A minute later the police car drove away. Jocelyn Crisp rarely got to see her lover furiously angry but she did now …

*

Dennis Walsh worked fast: returning Guy's video to the safe and changing the combination, photocopying every paper from the briefcase then putting his set of papers in the store room under a box of forms. He was about to go out again to return the briefcase when Fiona's statement struck him; 'taking something out or putting something in'.

He re-opened the safe and hunted through it. At the back he found a flat plastic pack with red pills in its compartments.

"So, Mr Garcia, you are not here to find our rapist after all."

His expression was set and grim when he parked again at the motel and knocked on their door. Garcia came to open it. "I will be putting in a formal complaint about you, Sergeant Walsh—"

"And I will be putting in a formal complaint about you, buster."

Jocelyn Crisp left the material she had been writing up and came over. "This is all very well and you can do all the tit-for-tat stuff you want later on. But we do have a serious crime to be solved here—"

"The only crime I'm worried about right now—is this turd removing the paper with security information on it and stealing a video from our safe. I don't know what your real reason for coming here is—so either you tell me exactly what is going on or I close Buckton station to you. You can work out of this motel room for all I care. Your choice."

"No, Sergeant, it will be your career going down the tube. When you leave this room I will be ringing to ask that you be removed from Buckton as soon as they can put in a replacement. And believe me—I have clout where it matters."

Dennis Walsh gave this a contemptuous—"Go for it! Forgotten Dougie's number? Never mind. I know it off by heart. But I'll still make sure you're charged with theft … and before you ring Dougie you might like to come round to the station and pick up your bag of pills you left in my safe. Then I want to be left in peace to do some background reading to see whether you really are a detective or some sort of pathetic blow-in." He turned and went out.

"He thinks he can bluff his way out of the mess he's in—"

"No, Jimmy," she felt tired, "if he goes down he will take you with him. And what are these red pills he's talking about?"

"It's a scam. He's distributing them to the school kids, not directly, but through his constable and that boy. No wonder he didn't want the school principal to know who was the link to his school. Didn't it strike you that he was completely over-the-top when he told Briggs to take that kid to Winville? He suddenly realised we might want to talk to the kid ourselves. Get him out of the way with a lot of sound and fury and we'll think they're the innocent ones in danger … "

"Maybe. But I still don't understand. What has drugs got to do with a serial rapist? Are you saying there is a link—"

"Do you remember that big drug bust last year … out at the feed lots?"

"Yes. I thought they got that all sorted out."

"They did. But no one has explained just how Dennis Walsh knew what was going on. He had no real evidence, just some hunches. He got a search warrant on spurious grounds, claiming that they hadn't got rid of the unlicensed guns, and they went in and ignored guns and found drugs. I had a quiet chat with Doug Towner. He thinks Walsh knew all along but that they'd refused to cut him in with a real slice of the action so he turned round and dobbed them in. Sour grapes. Not proper policing."

"So how would that connect with these red pills he was talking about."

"He knew I had to have seen the bag so he thought it would be better to come in swinging."

She nodded. It could be like that. "And the video?"

"Not having seen it—that's a bit hard to say. It might only be his private porn collection. But I think he got film out there that he's been holding on to ever since. Some kind of insurance. Or blackmail. I heard that there was a push here to try and get him removed. The local people don't want him. But he's still here. So how does he hang on to the job? My answer is that he's got something on someone with influence. I don't know what chance we've got of getting that video back."

"Has he got something else in the safe that you could ask to see, do a firearms' audit, something like that."

"That's an idea. Or take Briggs down to the pub and get a few drinks into him. I'd say it wouldn't take much to get him to spill everything he knows there."

"But this still isn't finding our serial rapist." She was beginning to feel disillusioned and weary with the whole thing. "I'm arranging to have a profile done. And if we can get the DNA given priority … but they've jacked up on getting the girls' DNA done as well. They say we haven't provided enough evidence to suggest a father or close male relative."

"I still think we need to be looking closer at those places where you've got a single male workforce … the dam … the feed lots. And I think a drug connection plays into it."

She felt reluctant to give his views much credence. These crimes had all the hallmarks of a lone male. "They've tagged him as a secretor. AB blood group. So at least we can start eliminating some people. I checked the files there for their personal details. Walsh is O positive. But Guy Briggs is AB. Maybe we should be looking at them more closely from that angle."

Her companion, still smarting over the snatching of his briefcase, sat back and focused on this new angle. "That's interesting. That is very interesting. Would he cover for his constable, do you think?"

"We haven't made any real attempt to either get to know them or to get a realistic assessment of their relationship. But I think he might, just might, try and protect Guy Briggs."

*

Dr Alistair Thompson was a Scot who had lived in Winville for forty years. He was gradually retiring, shuffling his patients off on to his partner, Dr Pemberton, as he told Dennis Walsh on Friday morning. He also had something of the same sort of sardonic humour that marked out Father Colgan in Buckton.

After he'd got Dennis Walsh semi-naked on to his couch he said, "Now this *is* something. The Ogre of Buckton at my mercy." But he worked carefully through the list of poisons Dennis gave him. He tut-tutted over blood pressure and diet. He poked and prodded and asked pointed questions.

In the end he wrote a prescription and said he'd like to see him again in a fortnight. As Dennis put his shoes back on he said, "Can I ask you a question that's got nothing to do with my health?"

"Fire away. Nothing I like better than difficult questions."

"What sort of infections can cross from dogs to humans? I thought of things like anthrax and hydatids."

"I'd start small and work up. Various intestinal worms. Ringworm is quite common. Children playing with puppies. When I'd eliminated all the small stuff I'd get on to the heavy things like rabies. You haven't been bitten by a dog lately, have you?"

"No. But I've got a small suspicion that something is going on out at the feed lots. I haven't really got a handle on it yet."

Dr Thompson sat back in his swivel chair and said slowly, "Now, that is interesting. Naming no names … my partner had a couple of cases recently from there which he found a bit … well, a doctor isn't supposed to talk of things being odd. But he asked my advice. I told him to get blood tests done before we start worrying. I don't know if he did."

"If there is anything—can you get him to give me a call. If we've got a risk to public health I'd like to know this week, not next month."

"I'll have a quiet chat with him. Where're you off to now? Home?"

"Off to see a man about a piano as a matter of fact."

"Oh aye, ask a silly question—get a silly answer. I doubt if those big paws of yours would even fit on a piano key."

"Not for me—" As he went round to see Winville's one shop which sold musical instruments, offered lessons, did piano tuning, he hoped it would prove to be one of his better ideas.

He had seen the old piano sitting unused when he went into Graham Binnie's house a month ago. He had discussed it when he went to see John and Dora Binnie after their discovery of Tracy Dillon. They said it would be nice to have the piano out and being used. So he had made an

arrangement with John and the other claimant to the piano: could he borrow it for a while for Fiona? He would get it repaired and tuned in return for the use of it.

To his untutored eye it was a lovely old thing; a beautiful walnut casing with brass sconces and carved panels. To his untutored ear it was definitely wanting in the sound department though all the notes still played. It would cost to get Aaron Mossop out to Buckton but he hoped that Fiona would be pleased with the final result. He had managed to get it moved in before she returned from Brisbane. Whether he could get it tuned before she 'discovered' it was another matter.

But Mossop was interested and sympathetic. "I hate to see a good piano just being allowed to warp and rot. But it might take more than one session if the mice have been in." He then checked his diary and said, "Look, I don't promise but if I get finished up with another job in time I'll drop out this afternoon about five. At least then I'll be able to give you a better idea of the size of the job. You'll need to pay my travel and time. But if you're in luck it won't need anything replaced."

From the music shop he went round to see Narelle Sullivan who had suddenly been saddled with Jason McNally. She was a warm-hearted person and didn't object to the sudden increase in her household but she said straight out, "He's very upset. He thinks you and Guy betrayed him to the principal and those big boys."

"I don't blame him. And telling him it was that fool they've saddled me with doesn't remove the problem. But tell him that Guy is as upset as he is … and tell him I'll make sure it's safe for him to come home next week—even if I have to—God knows—go and sit full time in that schoolyard or something."

"That I wouldn't want to see," she said with a smile. "But what fool are you talking about? I thought they'd just given you two hot-shot detectives to solve that awful business with the girls."

"Do you know something, Narelle, I'd rather have Greg. I reckon between us we could've got the problem sorted by now. But those two are running round like headless chooks saying it all has a drug connection."

"And do you think it has?"

"I'm not sure. But I wondered if the perp used some sort of animal tranquilliser … much easier to get. They'd have stuff over at the feed lots. Or maybe he pinched something from a vet surgery … "

"Now that is a thought. Greg said something went missing from Ron Oliver's surgery recently. They were going to put it in the paper in the Crime Watch column … but I think they're holding off … I'm not sure why … maybe that has something to do with the girls … not wanting to alarm a suspect maybe."

"I don't think they've even got a suspect." He'd been through Garcia's papers last night. He had some material on the medical side. A list of interviews. Both ground and aerial maps. But no hint of anyone in the frame. "Tell Greg to give me a ring later if it's something he can give out details on."

"Yes, sir, immediately," she said with a smile. "I've always wondered how policewomen felt being ordered to find lost cats and make the tea."

"You probably would do a better job than some of the men I know—"

"Well, you can relax. Doug says he is definitely retiring next year."

*

Mossop was as good as his tentative word, arriving in Buckton a few minutes after five. He called into the station to find out where the piano was. "He's gone out to the library," Guy Briggs said. "But he left a note for you." He handed this over and came and pointed out where to go. It was a relief to have a brief friendly exchange.

His morning had been made horrible by DI Garcia grilling him on his whereabouts each time a girl had gone missing—and saying he was round in Betty Cronk's flat watching TV or sleeping wasn't a terribly good alibi—and by being asked to open the safe so that the two detectives could check Buckton's firearms and whether any chemical restraints were on the premises such as capsicum spray. He wasn't sure how to respond. If he said no and they tagged him as insurbordinate or obstructing an investigation he would be in trouble. If he said yes they might demand to know

what the video was … or else he would have Dennis breathing fire later. He wasn't sure which would prove the most career-destroying.

And Garcia could be very sympathetic and charming when he chose. Guy finally gave in and turned to find the slip with the combination on it. But after a couple of minutes of fiddling he could only say rather helplessly, "It doesn't seem to be working. Dennis must've changed it last night. I wonder if he's left a note for me." But after searching in the obvious places he had to confess that he couldn't get into the station safe.

"That is totally irresponsible of your boss. Has he done it before?"

"No. Maybe he told me and I forgot." But as he said it he thought he knew the answer. Dennis didn't want to risk them getting into the safe. "I'm sorry, but he should be back soon and he can open it for you."

"Well, we won't wait on his pleasure. We've got more interviews scheduled. We'll drop by later."

Guy was relieved to see them go. If Joanne heard he'd been questioned as a suspect she really would say—"That's it. No more. You've done enough damage to our lives."

The only consolation he could find in anything was that Mrs Pounder had been very kind and helpful and he had managed to resolve the death of Mrs Low's cat … well, not resolve precisely; the cat remained very dead, but her neighbour *had* apologised and promised to find her a new kitten and send his dog out to his brother's farm. And Mrs Pounder had invited him around to dinner one night. If Joanne was going to put up the shutters then it would be a comfort to have an occasional alternative.

Dennis, when he returned from Winville, gave him the new combination and said he was quite right to assume the safe was off-limits except under his supervision. "And this time *learn* the bloody combination—instead of leaving slips of paper lying around!" He then went through his messages, sorted out the division of labour and went out again. He came back at four-thirty, wrote a note for Aaron Mossop and went round to the library. If they didn't have anything useful on dog diseases he would call out to see Vince Bromby. Of course it mightn't be dog-to-human contact. It might be another problem with cattle-to-human infection at the feed lots …

*

Fiona came round to see Dennis at about seven in the evening, bearing a casserole and a bottle of wine. He had heard Guy out in silence, the story of being grilled on his alibis, then said, "Don't worry. I know you weren't out there abducting schoolgirls. But I would suggest that you get a blood test done. I'm still not happy with what's going on at Caritas. But I'm not sure what our main problem is—and what's just them thinking we're a whole lot of stick-in-the-mud old wankers. But I did learn something this morning. Apparently something went missing from a vet's surgery in Winville recently. With luck Greg can give me the low-down. Otherwise I might send you to Winville to have a quiet chat and you can go round and see Jason. He might've stopped breathing fire by then."

"He's very angry with me, isn't he?"

"I'd say so. Also with me. But I'll go and see Coleman and those four boys on Monday afternoon. I might try and get a signed statement from each of them that they'll treat Jason properly. Worth a try."

"I wonder if he will ever trust me again." Guy was still wandering around in some morbid area of his own. "I really thought it was great, us getting along, going places together sometimes."

"If he doesn't want to believe that you had nothing to do with it—I'll make sure Garcia apologises to him."

"I don't think … I don't know for sure but I don't think he would want to do that for me."

"I'm sure he wouldn't. But Mr Garcia may not want news of his affair with Ms Crisp common knowledge around Brisbane. So I think we can lean on him if we need to."

Guy walked on home, feeling a little more cheerful; that his boss was willing to use what sounded like blackmail to help him restore his relationship with Jason might be a bit bizarre but it was also a curious kind of relief. He couldn't say it aloud but he had begun to think of Jason as his

pal, his confidante in simple things, even his son. To lose that so casually made him miserable. And he didn't know how he was going to face Joanne …

Fiona said cheerfully, "Where would you like to eat? This only needs to be heated up."

The day had developed some cloud, a bit of a storm hovered with promise then muttered and rolled away again. There had been half-a-dozen spots, not even sufficient to lay the dust, but the evening remained quite muggy and warm.

"We could try out the dining-room if you like. I dusted it."

She turned back from putting the dish in the oven. "Really? Is this something to do with marriage or it was making you sneeze?"

"I had someone in today. You can go and look if you like."

"This is all very mysterious." She took his hand. "Come on then. Come and show me."

He hadn't known how she would react. She might've preferred to make her own choices. Instead she turned to him with shining eyes. "Dennis! How lovely!"

"I know it's only old and it needs more work done on it. And you might like something better … it's only on loan … "

"It doesn't matter." She went over to it, lifted the lid, pulled up the stool and sat down. "I'm a bit out of practice … " She played 'Home Sweet Home' and 'Greensleeves' and 'Loch Lomond' before closing the lid firmly again.

As they ate she said, "It isn't quite in tune yet but I think it will be a lovely piano with some work … and me some practice … I didn't know you knew any piano tuners?"

"I didn't. I went into the shop in Winville this morning and asked."

"And what did the doctor say?"

"He thinks I've got a grumbling appendix. He's put me on antibiotics to see if it will settle down of its own accord. But whether I can lay that at Cherry Morton's door … And he told me to get my blood pressure down. The trouble is—people keep sending it up again."

"I know. My poor darling. I'm sure Knights in Shining Armour die young. And I really don't want to lose you." Though she sometimes had the suspicion that he actually enjoyed a good scrap; that the things she would try to smooth over he would deliberately confront …

But 'people' were considerate enough to let them have an uninterrupted night together …

And Guy Briggs went round to see Joanne McNally with a bunch of dahlias from Buckton's florist-cum-souvenir shop, knowing he would probably be shown the door in no uncertain terms, and instead found himself being allowed in, sitting down to dinner with Joanne, watching a romantic video with Joanne, ending up in bed with Joanne …

Somewhere in the sleepy hours of Saturday morning he asked her to marry him.

She said she would think about it …

Case No. 4: Solomon Grundy

"Aren't you going to call a public meeting or make a public statement," Dennis Walsh asked the task force as they prepared to leave Buckton to return to Winville and further work with the CIB branch there. "People are anxious and worried. They have no idea where your investigation is at."

"I'm sorry," Jocelyn Crisp said mildly. "But we've got a long way to go yet. You can give it out that tests will show the identity of the man. But these things take time. We're still running with a time lag of several months—unless there's a breakthrough."

"And what did you do that I couldn't do?"

Jocelyn turned to her partner. "We'll be putting together a detailed profile. We've got a range of evidence to go to the lab. We've got detailed information now from all four girls. And all four found it easier to discuss the crime with me. We've got some useful common denominators—"

"All of which is pretty much diddly-squat for the time you've put into it."

"But you, as you keep telling us, have better things to do," Garcia said with a sudden spurt of anger.

"No mate. I left the investigation to you. If you hadn't been here I would've worked on it myself. That's all. But you had to go barging off into other areas just because Doug told you to find a way to get me—and drugs is the easiest. What would've happened if I hadn't noticed that bag of pills in the safe? A big set up job, I s'pose."

"So what did you do with them?"

"I took them to Winville to be tested to see if they came from the same batch as the last lot. And *if* they are—then I will face a very interesting question—where did you get access to the same batch as those four boys. And the answer has to be Caritas … and that raises some more questions on where and when you were taken into the confidence of Mr and Mrs Rogers. I think, Mr Garcia, you might like to go away and do some hard thinking."

This time it was Jocelyn Crisp who interposed calmly. She was afraid that her partner would fly at the local sergeant and there would be an undignified affray in the local police station. She said with some authority, "We will be in touch. And if you think a public meeting would allay fears—then we are willing to address such a meeting. But we would like to run all our material past the team in Winville before we make any public statements."

The trouble, Dennis Walsh thought as they drove away, was that nothing had changed for the better. The girls were still in limbo. He was no closer to understanding the Bruloder-Caritas connection. Even the weather had decided not to give them a decent soaking. *And* he had old Mrs Grundy and her spaniel beckoning him out on to the footpath.

"I thought," she said looking like a rather stern 'in my day we didn't' grandmother, "that it might be easier for you to come to us than for us to come to you." As well as the dog she had a large canvas hold-all containing a watering-can and a Bible and a cardigan. He came and stood on the footpath beside her. "And how can I help you, Mrs Grundy?"

"I go round to the cemetery *every* Sunday afternoon to sit down with Lennie. It's been four years but I still like to have a little chat with him. And I water the flowers and read a verse for comfort. I haven't got very much in my life. So I never miss."

"That's nice. So what's the problem?"

She didn't seem upset particularly. If any of the graves had been vandalised then her husband obviously hadn't been singled out to suffer. But neither did she rush to answer. At last she said neutrally, "My husband has disappeared."

"You mean his grave has disappeared?" He went back to assuming vandalism. But she might mean she had ceased being able to believe in Len Grundy's 'presence' or she was going senile or Godfrey Waddell was re-using the grave (though he probably wouldn't do that without first discussing it with Myrtle Grundy …)

"It's gone. There's nothing but some grass there. Everything gone. The stone. The flowers. The little concrete slab next to Lennie where I always sit to chat. They've all disappeared."

"And no one has contacted you to say they're changing anything there?"

"Why would they want to move things around? Everyone there is dead."

"I don't know. Are they running out of space? Maybe wanting to bring a truck in to trim a tree? Maybe they want to move the caretaker's shed? I haven't heard anything but the Council would know … "

"But how can Lennie disappear between one Sunday and the next? And I haven't seen anyone doing anything down there. I think I would've noticed if they were lopping trees or putting some gravel down. I walk past quite a lot." She appeared to be suffering mildly from cataracts, though he couldn't believe she could no longer see Lennie's tombstone, but he had always found her quite sharp in the times their paths crossed.

"Then I think I'd better come around and have a look. If someone's pinching gravestones we've got a problem. Do you want to walk or can I run you round in the car?"

"If you don't mind Solly getting in your car. He's very clean and well-behaved."

"Okay. That's fine. I'll just get the keys."

The dog jumped with careful dignity into the back of the police car. Mrs Grundy got in the front with her bag and a creak of her knees. The old Cyclone gate into the cemetery was never closed. The paddock criss-crossed with little named paths had hundreds of graves. It was quite

crowded but not so crowded that graves were re-used, only when another family member wished to go in the same plot. Some of the old stones were worn and a bit out of plumb. Some of the newer ones had not had time to fade into the landscape and the sun still glittered on their gilt.

But there was no sign of damage. No toppled stones, no paint sprayed around, no flower beds or flower pots damaged. The place drowsed in the dry autumn afternoon. Over on the far side Mrs Applegarth was tidying up around her mother's plot, trimming the grass a little with a pair of shears. Otherwise the place appeared deserted.

"Which 'road' is Lennie down?" Dennis ran the car in beside the shed where various equipment was stored and a map of all the plots was up on the wall. All the dissecting paths in the central area were named after World War One places; only the newer developments on the southern side of the paddock had acquired later battle site names.

"He's on Ypres," old Mrs Grundy said. She pronounced it Yip-preese.

She got out with her bag and her dog and waddled off along the path signposted Ypres Lane. Half-way along she stopped and pointed.

"You see, sergeant. All different. Not a whisper of Len. And all these other graves around him are different too. I didn't know they would want to do that. I thought once you were dead … well, that was pretty much it. You didn't go gallivanting round the paddock." She sat down on a nearby slab and looked vaguely annoyed. "Len will be wondering what has happened to me today. I'm sure he knows I like to keep to my routine."

There was certainly no sign of Len Grundy here. But it was the dog which interested Dennis. He had followed them up this way but then he had wandered off among the various graves and was now sitting down in a patient way on his haunches two blocks over.

"It might be an idea to go over and see what is interesting your dog through there." He pointed.

"The funny old thing! He's lost too by the look of it. He always sits down right beside me and waits."

"Shall we go and see."

He gave her his arm to help her over the uneven ground and they came up with the dog a minute or two later. Mrs Grundy gave the dog a little pat then looked around. Dennis waited for her to notice the grave the dog had singled out.

"Well, blow me down the hatch!" Myrtle Grundy turned to Sergeant Walsh. "However did Len's grave get over here?"

"I don't think the grave moved, Mrs Grundy. I think some naughty boys have been changing the signposts around."

She looked around and then went over to sit down on her usual slab and give herself up to a long laugh. "You must think I'm an old silly. But my eyes aren't the best and I do always go by the signs on the end of each block. And clever old Solly knew better than I did."

"Why do you call him Solly?"

"You know the old rhyme about Solomon Grundy? Len named him. He's about ten now."

"Would you like me to leave you here now—or take you back?"

"That's all right, Sergeant Walsh, I'll stay here now and have a bit of a chuckle with Len. But it was very kind of you to bring me around. I didn't like to admit it back there. But I really did think I must be losing my marbles … only I couldn't see how it could happen so quickly."

*

Derek Coleman and the four senior boys were in the principal's office when Sergeant Walsh went round to the school on Monday afternoon. He took the chair Coleman indicated. The boys looked as much curious as worried. Derek Coleman looked out-of-sorts and irritable.

"I won't keep you," Walsh said straight away. "But I want to know what happened when you lot went out to the Caritas Farm Stay place. You might as well go first, Mr Coleman."

"Nothing happened. My wife and I occasionally go out to swim in the pool there. It is much less crowded than the Council pool in Buckton and they have said we are welcome to come."

"Your wife always goes with you?"

"Usually."

"Who goes with you when she doesn't? These four boys?"

"I took them once, yes. I thought it would be nice to have a little outing, discuss their futures, their studies, their careers, that sort of thing."

"And when you got there you sat down beside the pool after you'd all had a swim and you and Adam Rogers had a martini maybe and Eve came over and invited the boys to go inside the house with her."

Derek Coleman sat at his desk with his hands clasped but at least one of the boys was looking at the local sergeant with an open mouth. "Is there a problem with any of this?" Coleman finally said. "I did have parental permission and I don't drive like a maniac."

"No, no problem at all. So while you and Adam had a pleasant relaxing time on the loungers beside the pool the beautiful Eve, maybe in her bikini, and the boys in their togs went inside and had coffee, or a cocktail, and a piece of nice rich chocolate cake. Was that the way it was?"

One of the boys nodded. Coleman again said, "I fail to see the problem with this. They are a pleasant and hospitable couple."

"No problem at all. And then what happened, boys? Was it all in together or did she invite you into her room one by one while the rest of you watched a video?"

No one said anything. He went on almost conversationally, "You aren't in trouble for having sex with Eve Rogers. She could be in trouble for having sex with you if any of you are underage. But that's a quite different matter. I don't imagine many youths your age would knock back the opportunity. A beautiful woman who knows a lot about sex. What was the video?"

One of the boys broke ranks to say, "It was a … a training video … in case we didn't know what to do."

"I see. In my day we looked in books. Now you get to watch a video. And you all enjoyed the experience, I take it?"

They all nodded cautiously. "And then she said some nice things about you all, said you were great in bed, all that. And then she gave you some red pills and said they would help you any time you were feeling a bit down, worried about exams, that sort of thing."

"Boys, you don't have to answer that question." Derek Coleman suddenly sparked up.

"They aren't in trouble, Mr Coleman. I haven't got any handcuffs with me, no charge sheet. You may be in serious trouble but that is a different matter. Now, just answer my question."

One of the teenagers nodded. "Yeah, she did say they'd pep us up."

"And how many did she give you?"

"About a dozen."

"And you've taken them all … except for the four one of you dropped outside the school?"

They nodded.

"Right. Well, first off, she gave you a banned substance. That's not your fault. You weren't to know what they were. But I'll give you a tip. Never take a pill without knowing exactly what it is. Doesn't matter whether it's a beautiful woman who gives it to you—or some old hag—or even your headmaster. Now, the second thing, and this is very important, Mr Coleman will arrange for you all to have a medical check-up and a blood test. He can think up a good excuse if he wants so that it won't raise eyebrows."

"You're not suggesting," the principal seemed to have sunk back into a brief reverie but now he frowned, "that Mrs Rogers has … I don't know … some sort of STD."

"Mrs Rogers for whatever weird reason has sex with a dog at times. It may or may not be her personal choice. But there are serious things which can pass from dogs to humans, including worms. So you all need a health check. I'm sorry to spoil your first experience, boys, but your health is more important. Get that done this week. If there are any out-of-pocket expenses Mr Coleman will pick up the tab. And just one more thing—if I find any of you taking or dealing drugs here—telling me you didn't know what they were won't wash. You only get the one chance to plead ignorance. If you think it would help to talk out some of this stuff Mr Coleman will arrange counseling for you."

He got up then and went out. He had wondered about saying anything about the hidden cameras. But they might not bother for every session. He still thought Guy might've been singled out as a way of compromising him.

Derek Coleman dismissed the boys after arranging a mass visit round to the local doctors; as he said later to his wife, "I thought it was all nice harmless fun for them, better than getting their first experience round behind the toilets or in a parked car. And that bloody Sergeant Walsh had to come round and spoil it all and make it sound dirty and sordid." As he hadn't told her the full story she agreed wholeheartedly with his assessment.

But two days later Nanci Coleman heard a different version of the story from Joanne McNally. Jason had come home to Buckton and gone back, rather diffidently, to high school. But no one bothered him or asked him hard-to-answer questions. After a morning of nervous apprehension he began to relax and by lunchtime he thought that if the result of getting dobbed in was to go to the Sullivans he really didn't mind being dobbed in all that much.

Joanne when she wasn't agonising privately over Guy and Jason had heard various stories in regard to Derek Coleman, the boys, and Eve Rogers; she had also seen the worry over the girls that the visit by the two detectives had done nothing to dispel. But more than that she'd come to realise that Derek hadn't been there for her son. To him Jason was expendable because he wasn't clever at anything, he wasn't winning sporting trophies, he didn't show some unexpected talent. And she couldn't forgive that lack of concern.

Normally very warm and kind to patients and visitors alike she was short with Nanci when she started to mouth off about Dennis Walsh spoiling the boys' 'outing'. "If you think that," Joanne said brusquely, "then he hasn't told you the truth about what really went on."

"Who hasn't?"

"Derek. Guy had to take Jase to Winville to keep him safe—"

"To keep him safe! That is absurd. He was never in any danger."

"You don't know that. But you might like to ask your husband why he booked some of his students in for a health check—"

"You shouldn't be telling me this."

"I wouldn't be. But I am sick of hearing you tell me how much Derek cares about the kids—and what bastards Dennis and Guy are."

Nanci dropped the conversation like a hot potato. She had no wish to be left to stand up for Derek; and not now when she thought she possibly *didn't* know the whole story. Joanne thought later that it wasn't a good enough reason to say yes to Guy; this kind of empathy. And yet, almost without noticing it, she realised Nanci had unwittingly nudged her further towards him.

*

Jocelyn Crisp rang Dennis Walsh a couple of times to share information with him. She also faxed him the profile she'd drawn up with help from various sources: a lone white male, between twenty-five and forty, not well-educated but with a knowledge of country life, probably in an unskilled job but with a liking for cars, and almost certainly with a connection to one of the girls: father, male relative, family friend.

She didn't say how she had come to these conclusions though undoubtedly she had access to a lot of data on similar crimes. "Even so," Dennis Walsh said wearily, "it would fit a heck of a lot of local people. Most local men in that age bracket are working in that sort of area. This isn't the heart of yuppie heaven."

"Do they expect us to keep working on the case—or is it completely their baby?"

"Well, we keep our eyes and ears open. But apart from that—we can't do much without knowing what they're doing."

"People are still worried. Joanne locks all the doors and pulls furniture across every night. He mightn't be able to get in—but I'm blowed if she could get out if there was a fire."

"I know. I'm pretty sure he's done his dash. But I can't *prove* it so I'd rather people take those extra precautions. And we've got a different problem. They just faxed this through. Those other pills almost certainly came from the same batch or were made by the same … person. I don't see how to warn people without adding another layer of panic."

It was true. The town had been quiet and calm while the task force was here. People really did have confidence in them. Now that they had gone without a word the panic was creeping back. What sort of monster was out there? And where was he hiding? And it wasn't much help to say that the rapist was almost certainly a dysfunctional nobody …

Then Sergeant Walsh changed his mind and suggested to George Hickman who put out the monthly *Buckton Bugle* that he do an interview so that the profile could be worked in and people could be reassured that their friends and neighbours were not wolves in sheeps' clothing. It gave him the opportunity to say that such men were invariably 'cowards', invariably dysfunctional family men, invariably 'pathetic creeps'; George toned it down a little. After all, if there was the slightest chance that the man was one of the girls' fathers, brothers, uncles, even grandfathers … then she would have to live with that knowledge for the rest of her life.

"And can you run a piece about drugs, George? I've been debating this. I don't want to up the ante. But I do want to warn parents and children. Say 'Sergeant Dennis Walsh, when interviewed about this warning, said he was reasonably certain the drugs were being distributed from the Caritas Farm Stay vacation centre near Dinawadding. Any one having contact with the place should be particularly careful'. And run a photograph and description of these pills."

"Dennis, I know you know your business—but I can't say that. I'd be sued from pillar to post. My poor little paper would be closed down. They'd get my house. They'd probably come round and set fire to the wash house or poison my dog. It just isn't on."

"I don't see why not, George. Underneath my quote you can put your disclaimer. The *Buckton Bugle* disassociates itself from the above comments but is aware that the police are firmly of the belief that Caritas is a distribution point for amphetamines."

George sat back and gazed out on his small garden and the altar end of the Uniting Church beyond the fence. A couple of little bush canaries played and twittered in the shrub by his front gate. It was a picture of peace and contentment. Somewhere in the distance someone was trying to play 'Dixie Land' on a mouth organ …

Unlike the people who couldn't wait to leave Buckton or those who returned with mixed feelings George Hickman had no real desire to live anywhere else. He liked what he did. He had a son and some grandchildren just out of town and loved them all. He saw his help with the volunteer Fire Brigade, Rotary, the library, and the Pony Club as being interesting and a source of amusement and gossip.

Now he said, "All right, I will. If they want to sue the *Buckton Bugle* good luck to 'em."

"But don't forget your disclaimer. It might help when you get into court."

"Thanks a bundle, Dennis," he said drily as he finished jotting notes for himself. "But you are serious about that place?"

"Never more serious. I'm sure Caritas and Bruloder are connected. So you might like to do some more digging in your spare time. But there was one thing that puzzled me. They call it Bruloder Inc but I thought that would refer to a public company and there's no listing for them."

"There could be in the USA … or South Africa … or even the Cayman Islands. I'm not sure if it's a crime to put Inc if you're not incorporated. Maybe it's pending, maybe they've jumped the gun—"

"Maybe they're a bunch of crooks."

"That too," George said mildly. "But on a lighter note, Dennis, I went along to the first book reading group at the library before Easter. It was very pleasant. Fiona was there, and Guy."

"Who else?"

"The library people. Naomi Duggan who's their English teacher at the high school, another teacher from St Monny's, Jon Dundas, and Hannah L'Estrange. That was so sad. But we all had a good time. So at least she enjoyed that last little bit of public life. We can't all read the same book. The library and the newsagency don't have enough copies to go round. So we're going to read in the same area. Then we all have to give a summing up of our book so that other people can decide if it sounds worth reading or not. None of this 'load of codswallop' or 'I couldn't put it down'. It has to be a reasoned argument. You should come along, Dennis. You get a real insight into people from what they like reading."

"And what did Fiona say she fancied?"

"Now that would be letting cats out of bags. You'll have to ask her yourself."

He could, of course, but somehow he would rather spend their time together doing other things than talking about books. He always managed to turn day-to-day things off fairly well, that was a survival technique, but it had amazed him that he could also turn off investigations that even from the most basic of benchmarks were looking like almighty messes. It wasn't just that sense of pleasure in the moment; down below was a deep and profound feeling of contentment and happiness. It didn't matter that they didn't always want to read the same books …

"I might."

"But what I really wanted to say, Dennis, though I know it isn't my business … that young fellow, that Guy, should not be wasting his life in a job where he's never going to fit. One of the women asked if he found reading mysteries fun or did he prefer to get his mysteries first hand … and he said how much he dreaded any sort of face-to-face confrontation. He would much rather solve crimes with a computer. Maybe you should boot him in the direction of a library. I hear Adrian is thinking of retiring."

"I know. He's always off with the fairies when I need him to be out and about. But instead of me pushing him in that direction it might be an idea if someone did a bit of yanking from the other direction. So far as I know he's a fully-qualified librarian. But his dad thought libraries are for sissies."

"I see. In that case I'll see what I can do." But George Hickman sat on quietly after Walsh had gone. That was probably the difference between Guy and Dennis. To Guy the problems stood up like awesome mountain peaks. To Dennis they were molehills to be bashed down and stamped on. And perhaps strangest of all was the sense that Dennis and Fiona so obviously cared for one another. He would never have thought of pushing them towards each other if matchmaking had been one of his hobbies …

But what about Guy? What chance to get him to try his hand at a bit of writing for the paper?

'And I am in danger of chickening out. All right for Dennis to say he'll carry the can … but I don't really want to wake up one night with someone from there deciding whether to 'necklace' me or throw me out a window or turn my head into strawberry jam … '

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It was all very well for Mrs Grundy to enjoy a good laugh. That didn't explain who had gone in and changed the signposts around. Or why. Though the most likely explanation was to confuse old ladies like Mrs Grundy …

The obvious first person to ask was Godfrey Waddell. He checked back through his diary to see what funerals he'd had recently and when he'd last needed a grave dug.

"Last Tuesday," he said cautiously. "Old Dick Brumby died in Winville but the family wanted him buried here. Chad Scully dug the grave for me."

"Say no more. It'll be Damien Scully who shifted the signposts around in the cemetery and got poor old Mrs Grundy totally mixed up. Odds on."

"What are you going to do?"

"Yell at him for the umpteenth time. I get sick of it. I wish the kid would pack up and hit the road. Doing the occasional odd job is no life for him. He needs the hard grind and something to get his teeth into. Then he mightn't be constantly driving me up the wall."

"There is a job coming up at the hospital in Winville. Wardsman. Would he think of trying for it?"

"I pity the patients. But I'll tell him."

Chad Scully came to the door when Dennis went around and thundered on the door of the family home.

"What is it now?" He looked rather rumpled and weary and was dressed in old jeans and a pair of carpet slippers.

"Where is Damien?"

"I don't know."

"Did you take him to the cemetery when you were digging Dick Brumby's spot?"

"I did. Fat lot of use he was. I thought he could finish it off for me but he'd disappeared."

"I'd say he was busy changing the signposts around. Thought it'd be a laugh to confuse everyone. You might like to see that he goes back there and puts them back the right way."

"No. I'll go. God knows when he'll consent to come home."

"Look. I'm not here to tell you how to bring up your kids. But if he keeps on the way he's going he's going to end up in jail. There's a limit to how much people can take from one little turd."

Usually Chad fired up in defence of his son but now he only said drearily, "He doesn't take any notice of me. What do you expect me to do?"

"Take him to Winville. Find him some accommodation. Tell him to get stuck into looking for a job. I just heard there's a job going at the hospital there. In the end the other boys his age will have jobs and something saved. He'll have bugger all and it'll be his own fault. He's got a brain. Tell him to use it. And I'll be over to check that everything's back properly by tomorrow in the graveyard."

The trouble with all this was that it left him feeling tired and discouraged; and he knew from experience that Chad would simply let the situation run on in its same old grooves …

But maybe everyone has their breaking point.

As Dennis Walsh was opening up the station first thing on Monday morning Chad Scully and his son drove past heading in the direction of Winville. It might've been mere wishful thinking on Walsh's part but there was a grim set to Mr Scully's mouth.

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The task force seemed to have faded into thin air; until about a week later Doug Towner went on TV to say that the investigation was progressing well and police believed an arrest was imminent. "Bollocks!" was Dennis Walsh's comment to this bit of grandstanding in front of the media. And hearing Doug give out Jocelyn Crisp's profile almost word-for-word was hardly encouraging.

There was absolutely nothing in the notes belonging to DI Garcia to give the slightest hint that they had any ideas. Dennis had been over and over his copies, not so much for any insight into the abductions, but in the hope that he could pick up something on why Garcia was so sure there was a drugs connection—and if there wasn't one, how he could manufacture one.

The only thing that gave him any pause was a note on 'ER' as what he interpreted as a 'seriously loose cannon'. Guy, after puzzling over the scribble, said that description was a possibility. But there was no explanation as to why Eve Rogers and her behaviour should concern the task force.

It was more the image of Doug Towner looking so confident, milking the minute for all it was worth, yet offering absolutely no concrete information which set up an odd little thought to wander round Walsh's thoughts. It might be a dead end but no harm in finding out. He rang Kieran Dobbs first thing next morning and managed to catch him before he got on the road.

"I won't keep you … but you've probably heard the rumours round the sale of Japana … before Bruloder bought it. Do you know what exactly about it was bothering people?"

"Jon called it 'all smoke and mirrors', I think because people weren't convinced that it was a genuine sale."

"In what way?"

"Dennis, this *is* only rumour—but people had an idea the Hoysteds weren't really selling, that in effect, it didn't matter what prices things fetched, they could borrow to buy and repay the amount paid back into their coffers, if you see what I mean. The idea was that Sam Hoysted owned a number of businesses and was well off … but his first wife was seriously wealthy and he quietly used her money to buy up things he could then link to these apparently small rural companies. I don't know the ins and outs."

"But he couldn't benefit … unless he's salted it away till he comes out of prison."

"No, but his sons from that first marriage could. His second wife, the one that died, was described as being a glorified nanny to them. People said he didn't want to split their inheritance by having more children. I don't know if that's true or just the way he explained away the fact he had no more children. He had an image of himself like the Duracks or Kidman, a sort of rural dynasty.

Not that I'd recommend it. I've talked with old-timers who claim no one would touch Kidman land with a bargepole, because he flogged it to death. They used to call it 'kidsick'. Though that might've been ignorance. But I think Hoysted *did* want to see himself and his boys as modern cattle barons."

"So you're saying that the sale to Bruloder might not have been a real sale. They might only be the front company until the boys are old enough to take over?"

"Something like that. I assume it would be legal. I'm not sure. But it would suggest that Sam was managing the boys' inheritance, that all his first wife's money went into some sort of trust to minimise tax. But whatever they were up to … well, it didn't do the people over there at Dinawadding much good."

And if there was any truth in this idea—then it raised another awkward idea. Doug Towner and Sam Hoysted had been best mates. Doug Towner had done his damndest to keep Sam out of prison. Doug Towner might be keeping a quiet eye on things for Sam and his teenage sons who were away at a boarding school in Brisbane. Doug Towner might not want the Buckton station looking too closely around the new-look-Japana …

Dennis rang Winville and asked for Greg Sullivan. "You might be able to help me on a couple of little queries."

"I thought you might be ringing me to complain about Doug strutting his stuff."

"Waste of breath. But I assume the task force is still beavering away."

"Who knows? Dr Crisp is certain the DNA will solve the crime. She's been working on eliminating people. Don't know about Garcia. I think he's gone off on another case and left her to do the hard grind. I haven't seen him since Thursday. But he did say something about cross-checking all sex crimes in the area. But then Doug told him to leave those five little kids out of it—gets complicated when you've got to avoid treading on Doug's toes all the time."

"But there must've been a sweetener for Garcia somewhere along the line. He seems an ambitious man. Would he want to have it look like a failed investigation … unless there's been a serious pay-off somewhere?"

"Don't ask me. But he and Doug got very pally. So Doug might've promised him some kudos down the line. Anyway, what did you want to know?"

"I saw Eve and Adam Rogers on their way to Winville to some function. I can give you the date. I just wondered if there was a public do on, Rotary or Young Farmers or something, or they were going to have a private dinner party with someone." He gave the date and then said, "I think those pills were given to Eve Rogers to plant to make it look like we have a drug problem here and I'm not getting on top of it … and Garcia planted the second lot in my safe. Which would've been a problem if he hadn't been seen messing round in the safe. But I might be wrong. If you could pick up anything at all on Hoysted Holdings, on the first wife if she died there, what money was left to the boys. I don't know. I just wondered if Bruloder and the Rogers are somehow the problem on top of the problem. Was Sam's first wife South African by any chance?"

"I don't remember her. But I'm sure people will remember." It was odd to hear Dennis speaking so carefully and soberly; almost as though he was weighing each idea as he put it out into public view. "Any more problems you want me to solve, Dennis?"

"You might like to have a quiet chat with Alistair Thompson and Dave Pemberton. There is a small possibility that we've got a public health risk at Japana. Can you send a health inspector around to check? I don't think I've got Buckleys of getting Leslie Davis out there."

Greg gave a long exaggerated sigh. "Anything else?"

"No. That'll do for today."

"So kind, Dennis. So considerate."

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Greg Sullivan was not in the habit of rocking any boats. He sometimes told himself when he felt he had been craven and let things run past without a query that he had three kids and a house not yet paid off; it was okay for Dennis to jump up and down and yell at everyone, he didn't have … commitments. But he had the disconcerting understanding that not even a swag of kids and a long-term mortgage would stop Dennis …

Even so there was another side to all this …

He said it over coffee a couple of mornings later. “So what exactly is going on in Buckton with all these little red pills that are s’posed to have been popping out of the woodwork? Does anyone have a line on it?”

“Haven’t a clue,” Ray Gould said cheerfully. “But didn’t the lab say they’re all the same?”

“Yeah. And it’s been going round the traps that they’ve got some connection to Japana. I thought we cleared that bloody place out. But looks like we’ll need to find a way to get another search warrant.” Greg was well aware that Doug, sitting behind him, had stopped shuffling papers and was listening. “Thought this Bruloder lot were a new broom … but I just found out something very very strange.”

Ali Deane, at first surprised then curious that Greg was obviously trying to raise a tricky point, said brightly, “What was that, sir?” She called him Greg outside but Doug Towner waged a losing battle to get her to be quietly meek and deferential inside this building.

“When they had that auction there at Japana and Bruloder really bought up big, price no object, that sort of thing, everyone thought Hoysteds were getting completely out of cattle. But I just found out that all the things Bruloder bid on were actually paid for by cheques drawn on something called the Neurand Trust. I didn’t think anything of it … then someone was chatting about those two kids of Sam Hoysted’s and they said their names were Neumann and Randall. Family names, I s’pose. Now, call me suspicious, but doesn’t that strike you all as odd? Doesn’t it sound like Bruloder acting as front man?” Several people nodded without committing themselves.

“But hardly criminal,” Doug Towner said coldly.

“I didn’t say it was,” Greg returned cheerfully. “Just strange. But if Hoysted was growing a little dope to up his returns … then maybe his kids are cooking up some little red pills for the same reason?”

“That’s rubbish!” Doug dismissed the whole argument. “The kids are in school in Brisbane.”

“Well, call me suspicious, but wouldn’t it be better for them to be keeping everything at arm’s length. Or maybe they’re dealing round … what school do they go to?”

Nobody seemed to know. But nobody doubted it would be the best money could buy.

“Codswallop!” Doug looked round the room then back to his deputy. “Isn’t it enough that they’ve lost their mother, their stepmother, and now their dad … ”

“I’m very sorry for them,” Greg said mildly. “But I still think it might be worth getting on to the school and just checking whether they’ve got that particular drug problem.”

“You really think any Brisbane school is squeaky clean? You’re off in la-la-land, Greg. And haven’t you got any more useful work to be going on with?” Doug had picked up a pen and was jabbing his desk.

“It *is* smoko, so don’t panic. But you know something … I think the task force got a whiff of something else when they were over in Buckton and they didn’t know how to handle it.”

“No one knows how to handle that old bugger there. Dinny Walsh thinks he’s fucking King Kong—”

“But there’s something about that investigation that’s got me worried,” Greg felt like someone trying to tiptoe over quicksand, trying to pretend that his big clodhoppers might not actually be sparking off any changes down below. “I thought those two would be really super-duper … and instead they were so unprofessional it was embarrassing—”

“Unprofessional—how?” Neil Midgley had come in and was listening.

“Well, first off, Garcia gives out an informant’s name that was clearly marked ‘confidential’, then he turns off the answerphone and leaves it off all night. Then he turns off his own mobile so he can’t be contacted. Then he tells Walsh an abduction reported before midnight can wait till next morning, then he opens the safe without permission and takes something out and puts in a packet of little red pills … now, if that’s professional I’ll eat my hat.”

“But he struck me as an ambitious go-getter sort of guy,” Ray Gould said mildly. “Would he compromise an investigation—when it’s his head on the line?”

“Don’t know. But if he stuffs up he can blame Crisp. And if he gets there somehow he can take all the credit. Or he can say he got total non-cooperation from Walsh and so how is he expected

to solve anything. But I was curious. I just wondered if he was really in there as cover for a different investigation. He didn't want a quick result on the case with the girls while he looked around … " Doug might appear not to be listening but everyone else was suddenly hanging on DS Sullivan's every word.

"So I rang a mate in Brisbane and asked him what sort of level Garcia lives at … and he got back to me last night and said 'seriously comfortable', more than he could afford on Dick Tracey's pay. It might just be that Garcia's wife has a good job, or there's family money. But Garcia has three kids … yet he can still afford to run a BMW and best schools. Now call me Mr Suspicious … but I think Garcia is on the make."

"I don't think you should be spreading unsubstantiated allegations like that." No one missed the ice in Towner's voice.

"I am not … spreading anything. I trust the discretion of everyone in this room. But I would like to know whether we should take any of these queries a bit further. Even just to put our own worries to rest."

Everyone suddenly looked mildly uneasy. It didn't take much to see that Doug Towner was seriously angry. But unlike the explosions of a Sergeant Walsh they all knew Towner would most likely find a more subtle way to make his displeasure known. Ray Gould and Neil Midgley nodded vaguely and said something about 'work waiting' and headed back to their own office.

When Towner found himself alone with Greg a few minutes later he said, "And just what are you planning to do? You won't get another search warrant, not on such spurious evidence."

"I'm not planning to do anything. Just keep my eyes and ears open. So far as I know we aren't looking at a crime, only that brainless little sexpot who has a fancy to turn on now and again … and gives out pills to some of her favoured customers."

"You're suggesting Dinny Walsh goes out there for sex? Hard to believe."

"Goes out where?" It had never before struck Sullivan that his amiable bulldog face might be a real benefit when it came to acting slow-to-twig …

"The Farm Stay place of course, forget its name."

"I was thinking of a different sexpot. But I s'pose you're thinking of Eve Rogers … " To his relief, his phone rang then. He wasn't sure he could keep up that conversation for much longer. But his boss had just dropped a curious little insight into the situation …

DS Sullivan wasn't in the habit of acting deviously, doing things in secret, asking anyone to keep things under their hat. He found it an uncongenial way of working. But for the first time he felt that Walsh's allegations might have substance to them. He had always known that Doug Towner was incompetent. But the feeling had been growing on him over the last year that it was more than incompetence: Towner was seriously corrupt. And he didn't know what to do about it.

He didn't think he could persuade Winville's local health inspector to go in to Japana. But he did have a good alternative up his sleeve. Jim Holland was the local RSPCA inspector and a long time friend. He could go in and check on the health and welfare of the animals at the feed lots.

And he, Greg, could call in on Dr Thompson on his way home …

Not that either doctor was particularly forthcoming. But Dr Pemberton said, almost as a throwaway line, "Would you mind to check on any cats they have there? What sort of condition they're in. They're sure to have some to keep the rats and mice down around the feed stores and silos … unless they bait … "

Greg Sullivan sent his wife to take the boys to footie on Saturday and he and Jim Holland made the long drive to Dinawadding. He had asked Sergeant Walsh if he had any tricky cases over at the hamlet to use as cover and been put on to the arson at the railway siding. He didn't believe he had much hope of solving it but it gave him a good excuse to poke around while Jim took the car and went on to the feed lots.

As he was assessing the amount of damage two elderly ladies out on the town's small main street that faced the station diverted and came over to him. "Are you here to fix it?" one of them wanted to know.

"I'm from the police in Winville," Greg said placidly. "Any ideas who did it?"

"Oh, it's those boys of Kev Walker's," the other old lady said decisively. "I'm sure of it. I saw them over here last night and they were carrying on and saying something about 'having another go at it'. I don't know if that's evidence. But it was enough for me. I came over and told them if I saw them around again I'd tell their dad."

"Not that he'd do anything," the other old lady said in a more mournful voice. "He's been looking definitely seedy lately. I'm sure it's all the dust and dirt up there with the cattle. I hate to see them all crowded in like that. I don't see what's wrong with keeping cows in paddocks. It's not as though we're short of room in this country. And the flies there—you wouldn't believe. I'm sure we've got more flies around ever since they started up there. The beetles can't cope with all the mess." He assumed she meant the dung beetles were overwhelmed by the situation.

"Well, tell me where the Walker boys live and I'll go and talk to them."

"That's them … just up the street there … on bikes."

"Okay. Thanks."

Greg didn't think of himself as a decisive person. So it was almost as surprising to him as it was to the boys who thought they could get away with anything here in a town with no on-the-spot police presence to have a confession within ten minutes. Yet it troubled him, as it always did, to see boys in their early teens already racking up charges. Before they had even thought about careers and life choices they already had big black marks hanging over them …

He charged all three of them in the presence of their mother, a rather tired worried-looking woman, who seemed unsurprised by the allegations. But then she had probably wondered why their clothes smelled of smoke …

Then Jim Holland drove in to pick him up. They bought pies and drinks at the store and sat a couple of minutes with their lunch. Then they set out on the drive to Buckton …

Narelle Sullivan had come up with the name of the Brisbane school the two Hoysted boys attended. But Greg was still pondering the question: should he ring and make a general enquiry? He couldn't be specific. He had absolutely no evidence to link the boys with drugs. On the other hand he was probably looking at a clientele with money to spend. These wouldn't be boys sent off to school with a few dollars to get them through the term; many of them quite possibly already had their own set of wheels, their own night life, their own girlfriends, their own computers and top-of-the-range hi-fi systems.

"Let's just stop off for a cake or something, Jim, just a chance to see how people here are dealing with that business with the girls." They drew up outside the bakery in Buckton. The For Sale sign was starting to weather. People were not queuing to buy in; any more than they were queuing to buy houses in the town. Jim White himself came out to serve them and have a bit of a chat.

"I see you're going for a big dance soon." Greg had noticed posters for an 'Old Time Dance' the local CWA branch was obviously promoting energetically.

"Yeah. I guess people felt they needed something to cheer 'em all up a bit. We thought those big name detectives would soon have a result. But we haven't heard any more from them. People are really worried … you know, just sort of waiting for it to start up again. We all know that monster is still out there somewhere. I haven't got children. But I'd be worried too if I had girls that age."

Both Greg and Jim had teenage daughters and they both agreed sympathetically. "Is that affecting the sale of the bakery? It must be hard to shift something if people aren't really sure this is a safe place to live."

"Don't tell me about it," White said gloomily. "It's not that I'd mind staying on. But after that business of our local copper getting a poisoned pie here last year … I've never felt quite right about the whole thing."

"Does Dennis still come in here at all?"

"Yeah. He does. Never buys a pie. But he still gets cakes and bread from me. I don't think he holds a grudge. But I always feel uncomfortable facing him. But I s'pose I shouldn't be telling you bods any of this or you won't shop here."

"I don't want to put you on the spot. Dennis is an old mate of mine," Greg said cheerfully. "But if your food's good enough for him—it's good enough for us." He took out his ID. "We've just been out to Japana, nothing to do with Buckton, but you wouldn't happen to get your meat from there?"

"No. I get it from Dave Barry. Just along the street here. And I think he's got local arrangements for getting his stock."

"Fair enough." Greg added an iced cake to his order. "Might as well keep the wife happy while I'm here … "

After the men had gone out again Jim White walked to the door and looked up and down the street. People had come to see the business but there'd been no definite nibbles. And he sometimes thought if he didn't have to face Dennis Walsh, if he didn't look out on Buckton and know that people were sniggering behind his back, no fool like a benighted old fool, that kind of thing, he felt he would prefer to stay on.

Because it was true: Dennis Walsh still shopped here, only making the occasional sardonic comment about the pies. And other people had gone through their own moments of purgatory. Fiona Greehan must've felt embarrassed when Dr Wilcox packed up and ran away without a word to anyone. There was something about Vince Bromby's wife refusing to return to him. Kaylee Williams had been put on a spot by her ex-husband. The Binnie children had pinched something from Jack Alexander's showroom. People all around him had their ups and downs. But they mostly got on with life and shrugged the embarrassment off.

He looked out on the peaceful small-town-scene; old Mrs Grundy with her dog, Mrs Applegarth talking with Elaine Pounder, Dave Barry in his apron talking to a stranger and apparently giving him some directions going by his various gestures. As he watched the little world of Buckton go by the feeling crystallised. He didn't want to sell up and go away. They probably hadn't thought twice before saying 'if your food's good enough for him—it's good enough for us' but he felt grateful to them. He would talk to the real estate people on Monday …

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"Anything new from the task force?" Dennis Walsh said as soon as the two men walked into Buckton police station; or what Guy sometimes called the 'tardis' as it was not much bigger than a police box.

"You know that the first two girls heard his voice, Dennis? They didn't recognise it but said it was just ordinary. Not … posh. No accent. Just your average ocker serial rapist."

"That's interesting. I wonder why the other girls didn't hear … or maybe he didn't speak to them."

Greg shrugged. "I'll leave you to work that one out but either he gave them more of the stuff in his syringe … or he knew they might recognise his voice. Or they're not remembering … not admitting … "

"So what happened out at Dinawadding?" Dennis sat back in his chair. Guy had been putting records on to the computer but now he too stopped to listen.

"Well, I've got your arsonists. The three Walker boys."

"Good man! That'll save me another drive out there."

"Over to you, Jim," Greg said to the RSPCA man.

"Yeah … well … we've got a problem there. Apart from the fact that it's a shonky place through and through and I wish I could come up with a good enough reason to close the whole thing down. But it's not the problem you were thinking to find."

Dennis Walsh raised his eyebrows but said nothing.

"If they're cooking up pills then that was all moved under cover somewhere. But Dr Thompson told me to look for cats and I found a half dozen there, all pretty scrawny, but not obviously sick. I also found a Dobermann dog over there with them. Which was a surprise. I thought they only had cattle dogs round the yards."

Neither Sullivan nor Holland noticed the look on Guy Briggs' face.

"So just what're you suggesting, Jim?" Dennis Walsh sounded merely conversational.

"I'm not sure. I'm not a qualified vet, though I've seen a lot of sick animals. At first I wondered if they might have a problem with leptospirosis if they've got a lot of rats … but no sign of that kind of raging jaundice. Could be various things. But I don't feel happy with the dog. I suggested they get him to a vet. He seemed a bit dozy. I just wondered if it could be an outbreak of toxoplasmosis there."

"What is toxoplasmosis?" Guy hoped his voice sounded normal.

"We usually see it in cats but it can be spread cat-to-human or cat-to-dog and maybe then dog-to-human. I'm not sure. It's a nasty infection. Sometimes it doesn't have any obvious symptoms. Or they could've built up some immunity but still be carriers. Other times it kills. It could be that both the dog and the cats there are picking up something from the rats. It's not a notifiable disease … and without a proper examination and tests I'm only guessing."

Dennis Walsh walked out to the car with Holland and Sullivan. But Greg Sullivan hung back a minute as the animal inspector went round to the driver's seat. "I'm not finding any of this easy to deal with," he said quietly. "I guess I hoped … if I could just keep my head down … Doug would retire and the problem would go away. But I'm certain he has taken a backhander … and probably Garcia too. But I can't prove it. I don't even know if I want to prove it."

Walsh nodded slowly. "Yeah, one goes down. Chances are we all start falling like dominoes. But get on to that public health aspect of it. If we can't get 'em one way … maybe we can get 'em another way."

It seemed to cheer Sullivan slightly because he changed tack, "Hope you're getting out your glad rags for this old time dance, Dennis, but just don't step on anyone's feet. They'll need the ruddy ambulance—"

"Very funny. Ha ha."

It wasn't amusing, though, to return to the station and find Guy sitting there looking anxious. But he said with a good attempt at normality, "What was all that about?"

"Get yourself a health check. Particularly for swollen glands. Use condoms. Don't go near Caritas or Japana. And don't worry. If the worst happens it is all treatable."

"You knew there was something wrong there, didn't you?"

"There are a heck of a lot of things wrong there. I hardly know where to start. But I didn't like the look of that dog in that video. Very pale around the eyes and mouth. I don't blame him for his lack of enthusiasm but he looked unwell and probably running a temperature. It might not be the same dog but there's a good chance it is. God knows who owns him or what sort of life the poor bugger is leading over there, penned up with a lot of cats."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I think we can leave it to them to follow up. Holland knows his stuff. Better to get a vet out first before we go in, jackboots first. But don't hold your breath. In the meantime I think what we *will* do is go back over all the material on those four girls. There *has* to be a local connection. I'd like to find it … "

Case No. 5: Dance

The CWA had seriously considered abandoning, or at least postponing, their Old Time Dance, not least because people were a bit iffy about being out late of a night. But most people felt it would be good to have something which brought everyone (or nearly everyone) together in a happy way, which provided a few moments of forgetfulness, which reminded everyone that Buckton was usually a safe place to go out of a night …

Fiona had debated whether to go or not. And then it seemed to make sense to deck herself out in a fifties style and go along with Rae and Kieran and Jon to enjoy herself. It was even fun to look through some old magazines and think about creating a suitable outfit. Did she want to look like her mother out shopping or the girls going into the Cloudland ballroom in their frocks and high heels and inexpertly-applied make-up? That little whiff of nostalgia.

She didn't know where Dennis was but Guy Briggs turned up to dance with Joanne. They might be a happy couple, there was gossip to suggest they were definitely an 'item', but it did not remove the worried look on Guy's face … or was he just dubious about handling the steps of the more formal dances?

The organisers had tried to include something for everyone. Older people danced staidly in a waltz, to be followed by the hokey-pokey, the twist, and moving on through the years till the younger ones, and a few brave matrons, found themselves line dancing. The CWA had hired Ronnie Birrer and his Old Time Good Time Dance Band from Winville and he was a lively and rollicking MC for the night.

Fiona did not mind if she danced or simply watched. It *was* nice to see people enjoying themselves. And the police, though probably not the taskforce, would find the man. Dennis was quietly confident. Though she wasn't sure what he based his confidence on. He said 'old style policing' but that could mean anything from ... it depended on the person doing the reminiscing but with Dennis she thought it probably meant basic things like fingerprints and tyre tracks, not psychological profiles.

Half way through the evening she found herself claimed by a stranger, a very good-looking stranger. There had been rumours of a film crew coming to, or through, Buckton at some stage. She had wondered if the faces she didn't recognise and which didn't seem to have the impress of country life on them might belong to this exciting group.

"Calum Hill," he said. "Come and dance."

And dance they did. But in a brief space for people to get their collective breath back he told her he was a producer scouting locations, a pool of extras, facilities and accommodation …

"And what is the film going to be about? Or is that a secret still?"

"No. No secret. I was chatting with a friend one day who told me she'd found quite a lot of material on the biological control of prickly pear … but that no one had ever written a book about the social impact. She was planning to do some research in old country newspapers. I was fascinated. I said, who can we get to write a script about the impact on one farm family? And it went from there. We're going to do a short documentary using old film clips and reports and interviews. And we're going to do a movie with all the trimmings. Romance. World War One. Conflict over land. You name it."

"That sounds wonderful. And I'm sure there are still people living here who could tell you some stories."

"Yes. We've got interviews teed up with several local people. A George Hickman and a Mervyn Pounder and a couple of others."

They stepped back on to the dance floor. The old hall was a bit shabby but the CWA women had done a good job of cheering the place up with balloons and streamers and some old pictures and advertisements blown up into large posters. They had not stinted on getting good music. The big trestle in the kitchen was choc-a-bloc and groaning with food. Several older women dispensed tea and cordial almost non-stop. And the committee room had been turned into childcare as there weren't many available babysitters tonight …

He smelled nice. He looked nice. He probably *was* nice, this Calum Hill. And she felt a kind of disloyalty that it should be such a pleasure to dance with him. Dennis would never be a partner like this. It was hard to picture Dennis looking debonair on a dance floor. Hard to picture Dennis on a dance floor full-stop. And Calum seemed to bring with him a whiff of all that she was about to cut herself, irrevocably, off from. All that she had vaguely assumed would be part of her life again when she left Buckton. Dennis was out there somewhere yelling at people, chasing people, arresting people, somewhere in the limited dusty confines of the town, and she suddenly felt, uneasily, she wasn't yet ready to turn her back on Calum's world and embrace the world in which Dennis Walsh belonged. She couldn't say any of this as she smiled and listened to him explain something of what he planned to do here. Because he would probably say, as Rae did, that she didn't belong here, she would never be happy here, she would always hanker for something else beyond the life a small town policeman could offer …

But it was too late now. There was no turning back. She had made her choice. Her choices.

As they moved out into the throng again Fiona saw Mrs Applegarth move purposefully through the crowd to tap Guy Briggs on the shoulder and say something. He nodded, then he and Joanne extricated themselves from the dance floor and a minute later they had left the hall. It was a simple little mime but, as she watched, Fiona was suddenly conscious of a cold shiver. It was almost as though an image of the grim reaper had come past and tapped to say 'death has come'. Fanciful? Yes, of course. Dennis must've rung through to say he needed help with something. But was it something to do with the four girls—or an accident—or a brawl—or something quite unrelated?

Calum Hill turned his handsome profile to see what had suddenly taken her attention away from him. "What is it? Has something happened?"

"Constable Briggs was just called out. I wonder … I wonder if it could be something to do with the four girls." She sounded more breathless than the information seemed to warrant. "I hope it is good news … not bad news. People have been through so much anxiety. And everyone still is worried … no one feels completely safe any more. The way the man just seemed to manage to melt away so easily … "

But the uneasy feeling that it was bad news refused to go away; even when she told herself firmly that Dennis was very good at dealing with bad news that faint sense of apprehension refused to dissipate …

From enjoying the evening she found herself wishing it would end and she could leave the stuffy crowded hall. But she danced on, still smiling, still being her graceful kind-hearted self. Calum Hill was not smitten but he did revise his feelings about Buckton. He wanted women and girls for his production who would be solid, freckled, 'typical' farm people. But it was also nice to know that there were attractive well-dressed sophisticated women here too. And he hoped their paths might cross again quite soon …

Fiona had planned to go home with Rae but now she changed her mind and went instead to the old station house, as the crowd began to thin out, as cars peeled out on to the night time roads, and let herself in. The house was in darkness, cool, with its faintly musty smell. She turned the kitchen and laundry lights on and put the kettle on to boil. Dennis might turn up at any minute—or he might not come home for hours. But she still felt that hyped tense faintly apprehensive feeling. It seemed impossible to think of bed and a good night's sleep yet …

She put out mugs then wondered about heating some soup. The night was crisp. She had eaten sandwiches and small tarts at the hall. But she felt a need to cradle something hot … to warm her hands …

Dennis, when he came in some ten minutes later, tossed his cap aside and sat down heavily. "Pheww! How was it? The dance?"

"It was very lively. I think most people enjoyed themselves. And I met a charming man who's here to plan a film about the prickly pear."

He nodded and took the hot mug she handed him. "Fascinating stuff. Prickly pear."

"I think you're supposed to home in on the 'charming man' part—"

"Am I. Why?"

"Dennis … I saw Guy leave the hall. Was it just the usual … or something else?"

"It was Father Meagher. Tried to top himself." She realised his apparent sense of disinterest was not merely tiredness; he was holding in his temper. "The stupid bloody nong! Why the heck didn't he come and tell me what was on his mind!"

"The secret of the confessional perhaps?"

"That's what Father Colgan said. I said 'Bullshit!' If he couldn't pass on a name, any details, at least he could say something like 'go back and look at the third case again'. I'm not a total moron—"

"Is he … is he dead?"

"I don't know. We got him to Buckton where they pumped his stomach and sent him on to Winville. He might get lucky. At least he wasn't there alone. It would've been too late by breakfast."

"And you think he knows something about the girls, about what's been happening here?"

"I'm sure he does." He drank down his tea and got up again. "I'm just going to have a quick shower. I won't be long. I spilt some kerosene on me earlier on, a bit of a pong … "

She tidied the kitchen. But she felt restless and scratchy now. And Dennis was in a foul mood. Was this what life would be like with him if she moved in permanently? Always walking on eggshells. She didn't blame him. It was an upsetting situation. But that vague earlier longing for something else, something which included discussion of films and ideas, of how to capture memories and what could be the essence of a forgotten period, refused to go away.

At last she left the kitchen and walked down the hall. The dining room was cold but she opened the piano and sat down. Just a few minutes …

The mood would pass. She had felt young and pretty and happy when she set out for the dance earlier on, her white and floral fifties frock with the swirl to its skirt, her little white gloves, the stockings with their seams and the white peep-toed shoes; she had felt at peace with the world. Perhaps it was still possible to recapture something of that sense of pleasure …

And instead she found herself playing sad things. She barely knew Father Meagher but what she knew of him was his enthusiasm, his energy, his dedication. So where had things all gone wrong for him? And was it possible to find the way back when you've gone to the precipice …

She let the thought go, trying to immerse herself in her music. A few minutes later Dennis came in quietly and stood behind her. When she ended he said quietly, "What was that? It's about how I feel."

"Mussorgsky. 'Une Larme'. It means 'A Tear'. There's nothing I can do, I know, but I do feel sad … "

"Play something else then."

She wasn't sure if he meant play something more cheerful. She hesitated over a half-way piece then played 'Für Elise'. Then she put her music away and closed the lid. She felt his hands rest on her shoulders.

"Was there something you were going to tell me?"

For a brief disconcerting moment she thought he meant she had forgotten to pass on a message. But he slid his hands down to rest lightly on her midriff. "Oh that! I honestly don't know. I'm only a couple of days late. I'll tell you when I know—" It had seemed so strange in the beginning that Dennis, surely the most down-to-earth and ocker of her lovers, should also in a way be the most thoughtful about her as a person. She had been brought up to believe that you kept tiredness, mess, bloat, PMT, and everything else to yourself and tried to present the poised and perfect woman to the world every day. It was probably the sort of woman Calum Hill would like; one whose needs did not intrude. Whereas she had gradually realised Dennis genuinely wanted her just as she was, not as she might airbrush herself into that model of the perfect professional woman.

"But I don't want a triumphal announcement … or you carefully hiding your disappointment. That kind of thing. Couldn't we wait and wonder together?"

She felt him bring his hands up to stroke her hair softly. For a little while there, through the lively evening, she felt she had trapped herself into something she wasn't yet sure she truly wanted. And now, as she leaned back against him, that feeling so troubling in its brief life-span faded away as easily as it had come and left her with a renewed sense of content …

*

Over breakfast Fiona said to Dennis, "When you said that, last night, about the third case … was that just as an example … or is there something different about that case?"

"It's always bothered me. Why was she the only girl to be left lying naked? All the others were left most of their clothes, not all, but enough to keep them covered. Why was she humiliated as well as hurt? I can't help wondering if there's some private anger playing out there."

"So the other girls … it may not be that he likes adolescent girls … but they're sort of … of window-dressing. It looks like a monster out there but it's really something private going on between … was it Tracy?"

He nodded. "Or Tracy's mum. I talked to her when Tracy went missing. But I wasn't there when the task force people re-interviewed them. Guy went with them. The guy didn't rape the last little girl. He might've been interrupted. He might be fairly dysfunctional. But maybe he'd just lost

interest. There's something about the third case I can't pick up on. Anyway, I'd better duck over to the station. I forgot to put the phone through. Might be a message from Winville. What are you going to do today?"

"I said I'd go round and help them tidy up the hall. I hope it's not in too much of a mess." Rae had offered their joint services; as there were few CWA members under fifty the offer had been accepted with gratitude. "Dennis, I'm sure it'll come to you … whatever is niggling away. I have a lot more faith in you than I've ever had in the task force. They may have more experience with this type of crime … well, I'm sure they do … but I'm equally sure they don't understand people as well as you do."

"The trouble is—girls that age are just about another planet to me."

"Maybe. But you have much more local knowledge. And things like what Ali Deane might call 'reading the country' … even just basic down-to-earth police work. Maybe they're not giving enough weight to tyre tracks … or something … " She did not have to pretend to her faith in him.

He gave her a long hug before he went out. "Still waiting?"

"Still waiting."

Even so, she still didn't quite believe in the possibility of a baby. Other women she knew, teetering on thirty-six, often went through long anxious moments when they tried to get pregnant for the first time. So why should it be so seemingly easy for her? Perhaps it was a perverse response to her own ambivalence.

Perhaps it had something to do with Dennis. Wild horses would not drag the admission from him. But she understood that deep unspoken longing for a happy family life of his own …

Dennis opened up the station and went in. No message from Winville. He could ring but in the end he sat back for a few minutes and tried to put his thoughts in order. The perpetrator had to be someone with reasonable local knowledge, had to be someone with some knowledge of country life, had to know which people lived on which farms, had to be male, had to have some access to tranquillisers, sleeping pills, something like that, (not that that would be difficult these days; in all the other claims he had not got round to finding out more about what had gone missing from that Winville vet; he made a note to check later), had to either own at least three vehicles or be able to borrow them or help himself from some 'pool' … had to have some relationship to Maryann or Tracy Dillon? … But that wasn't what was niggling.

He got out the scrapbook he had urged Guy to make up, under the guise of 'know your beat'. Guy had not worked at it with much enthusiasm or dedication but he had put into it several sketch maps, some aerial photographs, some information on the various owners of various properties, the places where there had been accidents, break-ins, stock theft, other problems, some information on the way people were related to each other, even some notes on distances and times it would take to get to various places. But it was sketchy and rather slapdash. He had begun pasting in the photocopied then cut out details of births, deaths, and marriages he had got from back copies of the local broadsheet. But he hadn't done anything about indexing anything.

Dennis ran a broad finger down the columns. The trouble with Guy was his continuing failure to tackle the hard grind. He still believed in magic bullets …

But at last he came to the item he had been looking for. The death notice for Maryann Dillon's uncle. "I think, Little Miss Muffet," he said to the empty office, "you've got some explaining to do."

*

Maryann had lived with her aunt and uncle for some years. Her aunt had died. She had stayed on. But her uncle had told her to go and have some 'fun' while she was young. Or he was afraid people would blame him for her drinking. Or he wasn't terribly fond of his niece. He lived on peacefully for years after Maryann went to Brisbane then he died and left the small farm to his niece. It had been a piggery. But she sold everything off except the house and sheds and then came back to live there with her daughter. She had a serious drinking problem, according to Bill Borrie at the hotel, but she was mostly just noisy and overwhelming when she got tight. The trouble with this, Dennis Walsh thought, was that people who were hail-fellow-well-met in the pub were often sour and angry by the time they got home to their families …

Mrs Dillon came out to see who was driving in of a Sunday. He wondered if she had been at the dance last night. She wasn't someone who suggested the joys of dancing—whereas he had no difficulty imagining Fiona drifting gracefully across a dance floor—nor was she in the mood to receive visits from the police.

"Whaddya want?" Her voice was slightly slurred.

"To talk to you about the abduction and rape of your daughter. I've got some more questions to put to you."

"How're about forgetting all that shit and just getting on with finding the creep."

"I'm all for it. Do you want to talk out in the yard or inside?"

She chose inside; probably because she didn't seem very steady and a chair seemed a nice idea. Her house was untidy and smelled of tobacco smoke. But it was quite nicely furnished with a white carpet and new-looking armchairs. He wondered if this was courtesy of her uncle's will.

"Now, let's just go briefly back over your details."

"Wasn't me got the treatment. You should be talking to Tracy."

"I will. Later. Now, your full name."

"Maryann Flora Dillon."

"Date of birth?"

"That's none of your business. I'm thirty-three. I won't say more than that."

"Date of your marriage?"

"I'm not answering that."

"Got a problem with it? Or you want me to think what I've been thinking all along. That you aren't married and you never have been and there's no Mister Dillon waiting to be found in Sydney."

Maryann was a large slow-moving woman. Her bust showed a massive cleavage and filled a very large t-shirt. She was wearing track suit pants which stretched tightly over her big thighs as she sat down. But now she jerked up swiftly. "Here! I'm not having you spreading lies about me all round this place!"

"It's a simple question, Ms Dillon. The date of your marriage and the name of your husband."

"His name is Ricky Dillon and I don't remember when we got married. It's years ago."

"Before or after Tracy was born."

"That's none of your business. I'm not having you tell people it was a shotgun wedding—"

"For crying out loud! How many people round here don't know you were a Dillon—"

"And I married a Dillon. So there!"

"No. You didn't. You can't claim marriage when it suits you—then turn around and get the single mother's benefit from Social Welfare and give them a big sob story. So there's no point me asking you the date of your marriage because there wasn't one. But I do need to know the name of Tracy's father. And I will sit here until you give it to me."

The task force had accepted her story of Richard running off to Sydney and leaving her to bring up Tracy on her own. They were sympathetic and she had been upset and crying with Tracy gone and a vague sense of guilt washing around with the stale alcohol and throbbing head. But now she knew that Dennis Walsh really did mean exactly what he said. And there was no one to complain to—not least because she didn't want her welfare payments scrutinised too closely.

But she was granted a brief diversion. Her daughter came to the door of the living room and stood there in silence. Dressed, calm, hair done, a touch of lipstick, Tracy was a stunning young woman to Dennis Walsh's way of thinking. She had a bit of trouble with her skin, a few pimples. But she had beautiful black-lashed slate-blue eyes. She was tall for her thirteen years and beginning to have some attractive curves. But it was that curious tense watchful waiting stance that intrigued Sergeant Walsh. Just something about her which suggested an Indian maiden, an adolescent Pocahontas, someone whose power and passion lay below the calm surface.

"Do you want me to ask your daughter?"

"Ask me what?" Tracy continued to stand there watching, her eyes going from her mother to the sergeant and back.

"The name of your father."

"No. This isn't … go away, pet, and don't bother us for a while. I'll get rid of him."

"I don't want you to get rid of him."

"His name, Ms Dillon." Dennis Walsh preferred to be able to focus tightly on Maryann; she was the one juggling the difficult act: which lot of beans to spill.

Tracy turned and disappeared as silently as she'd come, her face still unreadable and yet she left the feeling that she would like to say something though not necessarily about her horrible experience.

"I'll tell you," Maryann said at last, "if you promise not to bother her. She's a wreck. Always crying. Always sitting out there by the shed and looking a real miseryguts … "

"Okay. Go on."

"He was Ricky Scully. I haven't seen him in years. And I don't want to."

"A Scully, eh. And how does he fit in with Chad and his family."

"He lived in Winville, him and his brothers. His dad was Vern." She seemed to think about this for a while, then said, "His dad is still there, his mum, two of his brothers. But they don't know where Ricky is. It's not just me saying things, he always wanted to go to Sydney, maybe he did."

"So what does his dad do?"

"Still runs the car yard."

"And his mum?"

"Cleans."

"Cleans where?"

"A coupla places. Don't ask me."

"And the brothers?"

"Dunno. I only had to do with Ricky. He didn't seem to mind that I was fat … in the beginning." She put her head back and closed her eyes briefly. But after a minute she sat up again. "I need a drink. I'm going down to the pub now."

"What you need, you tiresome woman, is to stop drinking and start looking after your daughter. But how come Chad didn't know about Ricky—and you?"

"Because I don't have anything to do with them, that's why. That Damien always calls me 'Fatso' and his dad is a creep. I've seen him put his hands up girls in the pub. You want him after Tracy, hey? Is that what you want? Maybe it was him all along."

He had never pegged Chad Scully for that sort of behaviour. But he did know his way around the farms very well. And he did have access to a VW.

He got up heavily. The thought of yet another visit to the Scullys was a sure way to spoil a Sunday. And as well as Chad there was the whole family in Winville to be checked out, including the mother who cleaned … surgeries? A chemist's shop? A house with things lying around casually?

*

Sergeant Walsh had only just walked into the station again when the phone rang. It was Chris Kuhl. "I'm sorry to bother you on a Sunday, Sergeant Walsh, but I've just found a couple of drums in my gully. They're leaking into my land, looks like sump oil. I'm pretty sure it's the Maxwells. But I would appreciate some help."

"Okay. I'll be there in about twenty minutes." He sat down and jotted in the details of his visit to Maryann Dillon.

Christian Kuhl was about the closest the district came to a true eccentric. He had a block of land over the other side of town where he ran a few cattle. He had a small farm here with a shabby weatherboard cottage surrounded by a forest of weeds, shrubs, grass, vines. He kept about half-a-dozen pigs running loose, as well as a housecow, and treated them as part of his household. Dennis Walsh had only had occasion to visit him once in a professional capacity, someone had taken a potshot at one of his pigs with an air rifle, but he had gone back a couple of times since just for the quiet pleasure of wandering through that strange garden with Mr Kuhl and hearing his rambling commentary on the microfauna he shared his farm with. Because Chris Kuhl grew those garden plants and grasses and weeds most acceptable to the various species of local butterflies and moths and beetles. People found him eccentric because he rounded up his stock on an old Indian

motorcycle. They found him eccentric because he sat out on his sagging porch with a long scratching 'pole' to employ on whichever pig decided it could do with a bit of conversation and a nice rhythmic massage.

But it was his knowledge of the little world around him which Dennis Walsh enjoyed most. And the thought of the Maxwell clan carelessly contaminating that little world made him angry.

Chris, along with three of his Saddleback sows, was waiting as Dennis drove cautiously up the rutted lane. "Ah! Good. If you'd leave the car here. They won't hurt it. And we'll walk on up. It's not far." It was only a small acreage, three small paddocks, one given over to an old sprawling orchard, but a gully wound through it and out again. The Maxwells owned the gully in its higher reaches, though there were several other farms along this side road, including the one he'd just come from.

The two men followed the dry gully up the mild grassy slope till they came almost to the boundary fence. The difference was obvious. The Maxwells' land was almost bare. Chris Kuhl's land was a sea of vegetation, dry but thick, and his gully bed still showed a distinct tinge of green.

The two old kerosene drums, rusty and dented, looked as though they had either been deliberately rolled under the fence or had been dumped higher up and had gradually worked their way down. It always surprised Dennis that the pigs never got under these not-very-secure fences and went on to neighbouring farms but he had never had a complaint; they seemed to know that they were in pig nirvana …

"When were you last up here?"

"Not for a while. Might be two weeks, three, even more. I don't take much notice of the calendar. I only came up this morning because I thought I saw a dog up here and I wondered whose he was."

One of the drums had punctured and there was a thick black ooze.

"We'd better get some plastic round them before we try and move them. Don't want to make a mess."

"I think I kept the plastic that came round the hot water system a couple of years ago. And maybe a couple of bags as well. Would you like me to bring them up."

"Yep. And a wheelbarrow or handcart if you've got one."

After Chris Kuhl had wandered away again, his dust-grey hair floating behind him in the chilly breeze, Dennis took a couple of photos of the drums. If they had got here under their own steam then there wasn't much he could do about it. But he knew the Maxwells well enough to be suspicious. Yet sump oil didn't explain a faint but unpleasant miasma that seemed to hang over the area. There was some dumped junk further up the paddock. Possibly the Maxwells still preferred to keep their rubbish on their own land rather than take it to the Council tip.

A dead animal?

He widened his search. Just on the Maxwell side of the boundary was an area of disturbed ground. He could see where a dog had scratched at it.

"I wonder … " He picked up the flattest stone he could find in the gully bed and began to scrape away the top soil. Someone had dug here recently. What was already a slight depression which would, given some heavy rain, become a definite small tributary running into the main gully, had been deepened very recently. Someone, the Maxwells or someone else, had probably put the drums on top of the area to prevent animals digging up … whatever … and as the area subsided a little more the drums were no longer sitting on a flat surface and had begun to work their way down into the gully and under the wire …

If it was the Maxwells … he hated to think what they might now be burying. They hadn't bothered to bury the old man who had died there a while ago … but they might bury a neighbour's dog, a barbecued animal they had helped themselves to, a few leftovers from an illicit feast, something which had died on them …

But as he worked away with the stone, scooping away the dry earth, and the smell grew stronger he began to wonder how large the 'corpse' might be. It would not take long for a few strips of meat to decay from stolen bones …

The uneven edge of his stone caught on something. He put it down and used his hands to carefully scratch away a little more. What appeared to be denim began to show up. A dead dog wouldn't be wearing jeans. He stood up feeling a momentary stiffness and began to cast more widely round the area. Which way had 'they' come? There had been some strong westerlies lately but only the briefest shower a bit over a fortnight ago. Something might still show up.

The faint mark of a single metal wheel didn't surprise him, nor what might be the place where someone had rested the wheelbarrow. It was a practical way to move a heavy body. What did surprise him was the apparent direction it had come from.

Not the Maxwells then—unless they were playing a devious game to put anyone off the scent. But one of the farms further up this side road. And having only driven up and down it an hour ago it wasn't hard to come to a working hypothesis. He didn't call it that. But he did accept that the identity of this body might explain a lot of apparently unrelated things …

Mr Kuhl came up to his side of the boundary fence and said, "What is it, Sergeant Walsh?"

"Let's get the plastic under those drums to protect your land. Then I'm afraid I'm going to have to call in the big guns. I'm not sure what's buried on their side of the fence. But it will need to be treated as a crime scene."

Chris Kuhl stared at him. "The Maxwells, you mean?"

"Don't know. That'll be up to the experts. But we'll have to leave the drums here. They just might have some useful fingerprints on them." He and the old man laid out the plastic and the sacks and carefully nudged the drums on to them. "I'm afraid they'll have to come through your farm, Mr Kuhl. We'll try not to make a mess. I'll have to get on to Winville. But I'll get Constable Briggs to come out and direct them when they come so they don't mess up your yard. And would you mind putting your sows in a pen for a while?" Mr Kuhl nodded and went away again to call his pigs home with the promise of some grain and buttermilk meal …

Then Walsh got in the car and retraced his steps to the Dillon farm. There was no sign of Maryann but Tracy came out and stood on the front steps and gazed at him with a still unreadable expression.

"Hullo." He got out of the car and walked over. "Would you like to show me where it happened."

"Where what happened?"

"The fight with your dad."

She showed no sign of surprise. But neither did she respond. He simply stood and waited. The farm was quiet. But then there weren't many animals left here to justify the designation 'farm'. Maryann had let everything go. It was more a place to live until a better idea occurred to her. The only animals he had ever seen here were half-a-dozen scrawny bullocks belonging to the Brumbys further up the road, and they were here mainly as fire prevention against the long dry grass and Maryann's habit of chain-smoking, and an equally scrawny cat which came out from under the house and trotted over to him, its thin tail held straight.

"Is your mum still here?"

Tracy was a minor. He didn't want to create a situation which would damage her or the case later …

"She's gone to the pub. D'you want her?"

"Not particularly. But I can't ask you tough questions without—"

"You just did."

"Yeah. Sorry about that. It's best if I back off and set up a formal interview with your mum present."

"I don't want my mum around. I would just like to tell you what happened."

"Okay. But it'll be off the record. And I won't charge you yet even if you do dob yourself in."

"You know I killed him, don't you?"

"Did you mean to?"

"No. He came here. Mum was down at the pub, same as she is today. He said it's so dangerous living here that I had to come away with him. I'd be safe. Just him. I said I wasn't going to leave my friends, not for him, not for anyone. He came over. He sort of made a grab at me." Her

gesture suggested it was her youthful breasts he wanted to grab. “I stepped back. He sort of tripped or stumbled or something. I was holding mum’s big ashtray. I’d brought it outside to empty it. You know what she’s like. The whole house stinks.” She looked away from him. He was content to leave the long silence to look after itself. At last she turned back and said simply, “I hit him on the head with it. I just wanted him to leave me alone! That’s all I wanted!” Her voice went up and her hands shook slightly under the outburst.

“I don’t blame you.” To have Rick Scully, just about any Scully, as a father wasn’t something he would wish on any child. The amazing thing about it all was that Tracy gave every appearance of being a bright attractive positive teenager … “And then? What did you do?”

“I thought I’d just knocked him cold. I wasn’t sure what to do. There was a bit of blood, only a tiny bit. I took the ashtray inside and washed it and put it back. Then I came outside again and looked at him and his eyes were sort of staring up at me when I tried to turn him over. I got so scared. I just knew he was dead. I never saw a dead person before.” She had begun to sound stressed and breathless but there was something about her, a kind of determination to tell the whole story and be done with it. Except it wouldn’t be … not for a long time to come …

“What did you do then?” He sounded almost conversational.

“I panicked. I couldn’t think straight. I went inside to try to ring mum at the pub … then I thought maybe that was a stupid idea. I was going to say it was an accident. Then I thought maybe I should hide him while I decided what to do next. It took me a while to get him on to the wheelbarrow and put him down in the old shed down there.” Most of the Scullys were fairly tall but on the thin side. She pointed. “And then mum came home and she was really tight and she was abusing me like anything. I just thought, I can’t stand this, I can’t take any more. She went to sleep in the chair there and I went out and it was pretty dark and I got the pick and I took the wheelbarrow down and I went through there where the fence is pretty bad and round the top end of that gully and down there where the Maxwells dump their rubbish and I was going to bury him there. And then I saw that little dip and I thought that might be easier and I’d just make it look like the drums had rolled over the top. But it was really hard. It took me ages and I couldn’t do it properly. And then I came home and I was really tired. But I packed up a few things. I was really going to just go, never come back, and then I didn’t know where to go. I thought of going to my gran and granddad in Winville but I don’t like them all that much and they’re still angry with me because I refused to go with my dad … and then I just sort of sat down and everything seemed so hopeless and I cried for a long time.”

“Then what?”

“I went to school next day. I was really tired. Mr Coleman saw me yawning and said something about going to bed earlier. He sounded really sarcastic. I know he doesn’t like me. He only likes the really smart kids. And then I felt so tired and miserable I just started to cry. I couldn’t help it. And he said telling me to get to bed earlier was hardly a reason to turn on the waterworks. And then Kate came up to me and she saw I was upset and … she just gave me a big hug. That’s all.” Tracy started to cry in earnest now.

“I can’t very well give you a hug. But let’s have a look at this ashtray. Then I’m going to have to take you and it back to the station.”

She looked up with her eyes swimming. “That’s okay. I want to be charged. I don’t mind to go to prison.”

He had no difficulty in believing her. Underneath her misery there was that curious sense of relief. Sooner or later, body or no body, she would’ve cracked. One unexpected morning she would simply have walked into the station and said, “I killed my dad.”

“Maybe not. But I have another question. Where is his car?”

“I didn’t see one. Maybe he got a lift.” Maybe he did. Maybe he was worried that the cars he got access to might now be on someone’s radar. Or his dad had stopped him ‘borrowing’ … Maybe he had lost his licence. Or he planned to take both his daughter and Maryann’s car as well. But if he got a lift then someone hadn’t come forward … or was that because the taskforce had gone off searching for one Richard Dillon. No one would think twice about seeing a Scully …

In the house he said, “Would you mind if I used your phone. I’d like to have someone come into the station to be with you. If you don’t want your mum—is there anyone you’d like?”

“No. It doesn’t matter.”

In the end he rang Mavis Barnard. She was kind and sensible and motherly. The sort of person … but it was no good regretting that someone like Mavis could not have been part of this unhappy teenager’s life …

The ashtray was a monstrosity; a black marble top on a stainless-steel column. He wrapped the top of it in a swathe of toilet paper while Tracy went to get her coat and the front door key.

At the station he went ahead, as soon as Mavis came bustling in, and charged Tracy with involuntary manslaughter. After he’d finished getting her details and taking her fingerprints, she said, “Do I go in the cell now?”

It seemed a bit drastic but at last he said, “Yeah. This place is going to be full of other activities soon. I’ll find you something to read—”

“It doesn’t matter.”

He unlocked the cell and she walked in calmly and sat down on the bunk. Mavis came over and said, “Would you like company in there, love?” Tracy nodded but he hesitated. She was hardly likely to create a hostage situation or attack Mavis. But she *had* attacked and killed her father. She might not be the sad resigned teenager she appeared. A car drew up outside. He heard a door slam then footsteps. “Okay, but just for a few minutes.” Mavis went in and sat down. She was probably unprepared for the girl to turn to her in a kind of sudden desperation but she put out her arms and took young Tracy Dillon in a hug and stroked her hair and said quiet things.

The door swung open and Greg Sullivan barged in, leaving the bell tinkling in his wake.

“Now that’s service,” Dennis said cheerfully. “Brought the team to dig with you, Greg?”

“Sorry. I was already halfway here when I heard you on the radio. With luck Doug and the rest aren’t far behind. I wouldn’t absolutely *guarantee* it … being Sunday … I was heading this way to talk to you about your priest.”

In all the other business he had put Father Meagher right out of his mind. “Any better?”

“A bit. He’s conscious. I managed to get a bit out of him.”

“So who came and confessed to him?”

“That’s what I wondered. But it seems like it was nothing to do with that.” Greg came through behind the counter and took Guy’s chair. He also dropped his voice slightly. “Seems it had been preying on his mind ever since that business with the Pettigrews. Seems that he knew his car had been stolen earlier and he didn’t say anything then. It was only later, when he found out it was his car that had been used, that he got to thinking it was all his fault. If he’d spoken out sooner and the police there had got on to it sooner … those people might still be alive. I said to him—chances were they wouldn’t have got on to it straight away anyhow. Busy weekend. They were hardly likely to go out and scour the countryside for it. It still would’ve been found in the same place and at the same time. I don’t know if he found any comfort in that.”

“So why didn’t he speak up sooner? Too busy with whatever they do on retreats?”

“I think it’s that conflict between getting things done and being deep and spiritual. He was urged to go on the retreat as a way of deepening his personal … whatever … his faith, I s’pose. So he didn’t like to interrupt whatever spiritual exercises and silent prayer and so on he’d come for … just to jump up and down and say, hey, my car’s disappeared from the car park.” Greg was nominally Catholic but he rarely went with his wife to St Mary’s in Winville. Only on special occasions.

“So it was nothing to do with any of this stuff with the girls?”

“Doesn’t look like it—unless there’s other stuff he’s not telling us.”

“No. I’d say he’s pretty straight and decent. Maybe that’s been the trouble. He’s the sort of person sees something needs doing, just jumps straight in, just what a country parish needs … but not so good when you get into all kinds of that clever clogs theological stuff. Still, that’s not our worry, I wouldn’t reckon.”

Greg nodded. “So what’s with the girl here?”

"She's just admitted to killing her father. Her father almost certainly abducted and raped the four girls. You'll have to dig him up and check that he did die from a bang on the head. And you'll need to get her some support and Legal Aid. Are Garcia and Crisp still anywhere around or are they both back in Brisbane to get after more 'persons of interest'—"

"Still looking for this Richard Dillon character—so far as I know."

"No such person. They let Maryann Dillon pull the wool over their eyes. She was more worried about losing her welfare payments if they turned up a husband, even a de facto, who might be expected to chip in with child support and tell her to spend the money on Tracy instead of drinking herself to death—so she tried to send them off on a wild goose chase to Sydney. Tracy's dad was Richard Scully. His dad Vern runs the car yard over past the hospital in Winville. I'd say it's ninety-nine per cent sure it's Richard that Dougie can now enjoy digging up."

"So how did you get on to him?"

"I just had a vague idea that Maryann's uncle was a Dillon … in which case it was very unlikely her husband was also a Dillon. In which case—"

Greg nodded. "Who was he? Good point."

"I'd better give Guy a ring. And if you'd hold the fort a while, Greg, I'll just duck round and drag Tracy's mum out of the pub. I want Tracy out of here—for her own safety as well as making sure they put the case together nice and clear."

Greg Sullivan, too, seemed to be still trying to put it all together. At last he said cautiously, "Dennis, are you saying that—that this guy raped his own daughter?"

"Yep. He wanted her to come away with him, not because he loved her but because she was turning into a beautiful young woman … and she turned him down. Not because she wanted to stay with her mum but because she had struck lucky, she had found two really nice caring friends here. She didn't want to leave them. So if he couldn't *persuade* her into coming with him—he thought he could *scare* her into leaving with him. I don't think he understood that the more scared and unhappy she was the more her friends and their support mattered to her. I've charged her with involuntary manslaughter but you can probably bring it down to assault. I'll leave you to sort that one out."

"Poor kid." Greg stood up again. "I know we can't turn a blind eye. But there's times when you find yourself thinking … "

"Yeah, I know. But you can always take out your frustration on Garcia, the corrupt bastard."

"Not Crisp?"

"I think she was always trying to rein him in, get him to focus on the girls and their families, but I think he did a deal with Doug."

The two men dropped their voices further. "I think," Greg said soberly, "the two Hoysted boys might have more say in the whole business than we originally thought. And Jim went back and took that dog out of Japana. A health hazard. I haven't heard if he's got what Jim thinks he might have."

"Keep me posted."

It was nearly another hour before Sergeant Walsh had seen Tracy, her mother, DS Sullivan, and Mavis Barnard off to Winville, Mavis driving Maryann Dillon who was at that stage of tipsiness incongruously described as 'merry'; and Doug Towner, Ali Deane, and two uniformed men had turned up, collected Guy Briggs, and gone on out to walk through the Kuhl farm.

He felt it was a lifetime since breakfast and he was beginning to dream of a Sunday roast with piles of crisp vegies and gravy. But his house was empty and the only sign of life was a note from Fiona. 'I've gone home. Home? It dawned on me after you'd gone that I'd promised to cook a roast for lunch as Kieran and Matt and Vince are coming round. Probably a very late lunch. They're planning something about a 'stocking project'. I am as always the ignoramus. I know you probably won't want to come and join us … so I'll save some of it and bring it around later. Yours F.'

It was already after two. 'Oh well, what the heck—' He lifted the phone. Raelene answered. If he felt faintly awkward with her it was a mutual awkwardness. But as Kieran had pointed out, and as she knew without it being pointed out, to turn up to Dennis's wedding whilst keeping him at arm's length socially was a bizarre situation.

He asked if he could speak with Fiona. She hesitated then said cheerfully, “You can, but why don’t you come round? We’re just about to sit down to this famous roast with all the trimmings that Fee promised them. There’s more than enough.”

For a moment he was unsure how to respond. She spoke into his hesitation. “Dennis, I really would like to have you here to lunch.” She sounded polite rather than welcoming but he would have found enthusiasm surprising. He felt a fleeting desire to want to make her expand on that, to beg, to grovel, then the impulse passed. No point in asking for miracles.

“Okay. Thanks. I’ll be about five minutes.”

Guy had taken the station car so he walked around to Creek Road and along to Raelene’s bungalow. But it was Fiona who came to the door as he opened their front gate. He had changed into slacks and a check shirt; not least because his uniform had taken on some of the more unpleasant aromas and stains of his morning.

She smiled, that unexpected little pixie smile she let free when she wasn’t being her serious professional self, but said only and with a gesture to wave him in, “Welcome to the lion’s den, you brave man.”

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Country Casebook: Book Eleven

Case No. 1: More Things in Heaven and Earth …

South-westerlies were the bane of life to many of Buckton’s residents. The problem, people felt, was that they had an unimpeded run across great reaches of countryside before they fetched up in the small country town on the Darling Downs. But May had been a mild pleasant month, weatherwise. People still spoke of the month’s beginning with a sense of surprise, even amazement. Talk of the big CWA dance got mixed in with ‘poor Father Meagher’ and the excitement and speculation surrounding the man’s body unearthed on the Maxwell farm. The body had gone to Winville. Father Meagher had returned, rather tired and dispirited, to Buckton from the hospital in Winville.

“Do people know?” he asked Carmen Cavanagh as she put lunch on the presbytery table his first day home.

“They do.” She had long since ceased to have any sense of deference or awe where priests were concerned. “Mrs Applegarth said you were a right ninny not to go straight round and tell the police.” It wasn’t Mrs Applegarth who worried him particularly; she was Anglican and he did not have to face her in church or outside of it.

“I did think of telling Dennis … then I funked it. I don’t think he makes allowances enough for ordinary mortals. Just to drift peacefully away seemed so much nicer.”

“I didn’t think I would ever live to hear a priest say that,” she said sharply.

“No. I should be ashamed to say it. But then I have come to the conclusion that I am not a good priest … not even a good Catholic. I am thinking of resigning. Starting over … somewhere else.”

"No one starts over. You always carry it around with you."

He was sorry he had started this conversation with her; she was conventionally kind but she did not make much room in her life for empathy. But then people probably thought his reaction had been totally over the top. People often put off telling the police things. It hardly seemed a good enough reason to try to kill yourself. And if Carmen Cavanagh saw her job in life to be bracing then Father Colgan as he came in and sat down saw no objection to being doubly bracing.

But as Carmen cleared the plates away to the kitchen and left them to their coffee the older man said quietly, "Now, I want to know what is really going on."

For a minute Michael Meagher toyed with the idea of simply sitting back and talking about things he had never spoken of. Then the sheer impossibility of putting memories into words claimed him and he said quietly, "Apart from me being a coward and a fool I don't think anything is going on. I'm sorry to give you and everyone so much trouble. It is something I'm going to have to learn to live with. Not so much like ex-soldiers who have to find ways to live with the things they did, the deaths they caused, I'm going to have to learn to deal with the things I didn't do."

He looked away to the sunlit day beyond their front window, the occasional traffic of people coming into town, the distant sight of trees in the little park. Life, as his old-fashioned mother was fond of saying, went on. But then she sometimes said, without explanation, 'for the nonce'. What the significance of this was he had never thought to ask.

"Don't worry. I won't try again. I don't think I could handle being blown into next week again by Dennis Walsh. He doesn't mince his words."

With that Father Colgan had to be content.

*

Except for his outburst to Fiona Greehan after he had been called to deal with Father Meagher and get him to hospital Sergeant Walsh had not referred again to the situation. But like bad pennies local issues often turned up over and over to bother him. It was old Herb Wilkins who had been a stockman at the local saleyards for as long as most people could remember who asked Sergeant Walsh one evening in the Coolibah Hotel if he was still keeping an eye on Wayne Booth.

Booth was a local farmer, quite comfortably off, who had been found to be using an unregistered brand. He had promised to be more careful and, in the rush of other things, Walsh had left him to his own devices.

Now he said, "I'd have to say—not really, Herb. Why? Have you seen him up to any funny business again?"

"There's funny business there all right," the old man said seriously.

"In what way? I checked out that hint I got that he has a son up Longreach way. He says he hasn't got a son." Walsh turned back to his beer. But Herb was not prepared to let it go.

"They're pullin' the wool over your eyes, sarge."

"They probably are. But it's hard to find the time to go digging—"

Herb had largely lived a blameless life. Just once he'd been pulled over by a country cop and breathalysed. To his relief he had been under the limit. But he had stayed parked in his old ute alongside the road for a further ten minutes before he had finally felt confident enough to drive on again. He wasn't one to rock any boats and he felt the temptation to say simply, "You're probably right. I must've got something muddled up."

But something held him back from this. "Don't know about the son business but he's got some interest in a place up past Long Hitch. I'll bet my last quid on that. They mostly sell straight through Cannon Hill. But they've been spreadin' a bit. That's what I reckon they're doin' out there."

"Long Hitch, eh?" Dennis fell back into a long reverie. Herb, not much of a talker at any time, left him to it. Fiona Greehan had mentioned the Longreach connection. But she had only been on the periphery of the conversation. Wayne Booth had been dealing with Brian Collyer at the Bank of the Darling Downs. She might've misheard. And Fiona had probably never heard of Long Hitch. It was north-east of Garramindi, a low line of hills with flat country on the west. A big cattle and grain place owned by … but he didn't know the owner. A pastoral company of some sort. And some people referred to the area, rather than just the property, as Long Hitch.

"Herb, I'll take your word for it. But keep your ears wide open. It's hard to take the time out to deal with maybe crimes when I've got plenty of the straightforward variety coming at me."

"Don't worry, mate. I've got 'em flappin' away like the old elephant out in a windy day."

He could put Guy Briggs on to doing a bit of research. Guy preferred to dig things out of the computer than go out and ask tough questions. And it wasn't as though tough questions had got very far with Wayne Booth anyway. He was all smiles and apologies and polite puzzlement.

And if it *was* Long Hitch instead of Longreach … then what might son turn out to be. But although plenty of things sounded a bit like 'son' nothing really gripped him. Not a 'son out Longreach way' but a 'run out Long Hitch way'? It was possible …

But George Johnson, the longtime barman at the Coolibah, diverted him later by mysteriously beckoning him through to the kitchen leaving his brother Bob to mind the bar for a little while.

"I'm just going through to make myself a corned beef sandwich," George said in a rather artificial way. "Can I make you something?"

But when he'd drawn Walsh through into the big hotel kitchen he closed the door and said, "There's something funny going on."

Sergeant Walsh was tempted to respond with something sour. He'd had enough of the nod-nod-wink-wink stuff for one evening. "Okay, tell me what it is and I'll see if I can work up a laugh."

"Not that kind of funny," George said rather glumly. "I heard a couple of fellas talking earlier on. One of 'em said they'd be at Birdy Bend next Saturday arve, same as in the old days."

Birdy Bend was what some of the locals called the area above the little park in Burleigh where the creek turned and ran down through a small area of bushland and reedy lagoon. It had originally been Bird's Nest Bend because there had been a big crow's nest in a tree there until a local farmer got to it and brought the tree down in the hope of getting rid of all the unwanted birds. The tree, silvery-white and ghostly now, still lay like an impromptu bridge across the creek there, half-hidden in scrubby wattles and bottlebrush.

"As in the old days—what?"

George dropped his voice further. "A coupla local blokes used to arrange a bit of … a bit of dog fighting. They'd come down there and they had a little place marked out with a rough fence around it. You'd hardly notice it. But people knew what went on." He looked vaguely worried. "A few of the old toughies. It sort of died a natural death."

"Did you recognise the men?"

"No. 'fraid not."

"How do they get in there these days?"

"Through the park, I s'pose."

No one would take much notice if they saw cars parked there for a while; just the assumption that people were wandering in the far reaches of the environment park. But the idea of dogs being brought there in numbers …

The local shire council had taken the position that it was no good banning dogs because it would be impossible to police. Instead a sign at the entrance urged people to be responsible, to remove their rubbish and keep all animals on leads …

"Did they say a time?"

"No." George shook his head cautiously. "I wasn't listening exactly." The trouble with this, with people who heard or thought they heard something, was that he really didn't have the time to go running off after red herrings.

"Thanks, anyway." He knocked back the offer of a sandwich and went to the back door. "How is Bill?"

"Not too good. But he might brighten up when the weather warms up. Bob's been helping him in the kitchen but I think he's going to have to advertise for someone. Trouble is—he's scared to get someone like Cherry Morton. That was one tough little cookie. He was more scared of her than she ever was of his complaints."

But as he went home Dennis Walsh was pondering on ways he might get to see what, if anything, was going on of a weekend at Birdy Bend. The problems were large. Wherever he parked there was a good chance someone would see the car. And without knowing the time …

If he got there early they might change their plans and go somewhere else. If he got there late he might miss them. If he got there on time there was a good chance they would hear him and simply turn back into a few people walking their dogs of an afternoon. A little run in the country. That kind of thing. But he couldn't ignore the tip-off.

Instead of going home he went into the station and rang the RSPCA inspector in Winville. Jim Holland took his work seriously but he had a huge area to cover.

"Jim," he wasted no words when he got on to him, "have you heard any whispers about dogfighting round the Burleigh area?"

"Not anywhere specific. But I was called out to look at a dead dog about a month ago. The person who called me thought it might've got its injuries from being hit on the road. I wasn't so sure. But it had been dead a few days and no sign of an owner so I had to let it go. But the injuries were around the head rather than the body. Some older scars. Just a bit iffy. And the bastards tend to move around rather than stick to the one spot anyway."

"True. And what happened to the Dobermann you took out of the feed lots? Did they track anything down?"

"Oh, he was sick alright. He's with a vet here now and he's about right again. I arranged to get the cats put down. They can clean out and get another lot if they're a bit more careful. They said they wouldn't bother; easier to put Warfarin down."

"It was toxoplasmosis then?"

"Definitely. Just coming back to your question, Dennis, why Burleigh? Have you got on to something there?"

"Don't know, Jim. But I've just been told that they used to get together up Burleigh Creek … and it could be starting up again."

"Blokes on the dam site, you mean?"

"Could be. But it's likely to have a local connection." He had found three dead greyhounds a while back. But that was unlikely to be connected. The three had probably been too slow, not too gentle …

He hung up and went on home. The men building the dam on Burleigh Creek were working a seven-day-week to get the contract done and move on. They might like a little 'light relief' and mightn't be fussy about its nature but he couldn't see them doing the organising … which made it odd that George Johnson hadn't known the men …

Or were the men doing the talking merely potential gamblers on the outcome of each fight … not the movers and shakers …

And besides these dogs he would need to ring Eve Rogers and tell her to go and have her health checked. Playing around with a sick Dobermann wasn't a good idea. And although the Labrador he'd seen there looked healthy enough there was no guarantee it didn't harbour the same infection. But when he got through to the Caritas Farm Stay centre out near the feed lots it was to get Adam Rogers, her supposed husband, who said the whole thing was a beat-up and they had never owned a Dobermann.

"I didn't say you owned him. But if you're prepared to let him near your wife you've got a problem. Or are you now going to tell me she isn't your wife?"

"Of course she's my wife! But I will just say again, loud and clear in case you're deaf or haven't twigged—we do not and have not ever had anything to do with a Dobermann and I doubt very much whether you can prove otherwise, Sergeant Walsh."

Perhaps Mr Rogers might've phrased this a little differently if he'd realised that statements like this were like the proverbial red rag to a bull.

*

Ashley Turner had been a constable in Buckton for a short time and now worked for the Missing Persons Unit. Almost in spite of herself she had developed a soft spot for Dennis Walsh. But when he asked her how he might go about finding out whether Eve and Adam Rogers were

married she first went off into a peal of laughter. “Is this a joke, Dennis—Adam and Eve and Pinch Me went down to the river to bathe. That kind of thing?”

“No, deadly serious. Adam and Eve got drowned. Who was saved? I wish the bloody buggers *would* get drowned. They’re more trouble than they’re worth.”

“And you want me to see if I can dig up a wedding for them? Date and place? And what about your own wedding? That would be a nicer idea.”

“You’d like to come, would you?”

“I’d love to come—not least, to make sure something actually happens.”

“Okay. You’re invited. Very small. Very quiet.” He gave her the time and place and said, “Now about these people—”

“I’ll be there, Dennis. But does Fiona realise that she will always have to fight the seriously criminal public to get a bit of your attention?”

“Seeing we’ve managed about one night together without the bloody phone ringing—I guess she does.”

“But why do you want to know if they’re married?”

“I don’t think they are. He turns a blind eye while she takes everyone from local schoolboys to decrepit old dodderers from South Africa off to her bedroom. I’ve heard of open marriage and wife-swopping … but this is serious stuff.”

“Does she charge?”

“It seems not. But I have the feeling people may end up paying in ways they hadn’t factored in.”

“I see.” After she’d promised to see what was around to be dug up she sat a moment thinking. Fiona Greehan was a nice woman. But now Ashley found herself pondering on a curious thought. Does Fiona *really* understand and appreciate this aspect of the man she is going to marry. This powerful need, almost an obsession, to see justice done—no matter how large the obstacles in the way.

Dennis too hung up but on a different thought. If Eve Rogers, or someone, could manage to slice and doctor a video to make it look as though his constable and Eve Rogers and the Dobermann were all in a sexy romp together—then maybe he could do his own slicing and expurgating. He needed to be able to cut out the segments with Guy in them then compare the rest with the sick dog in Winville. If it was genuinely a different dog then … but there wasn’t any point in rushing ahead to the next hurdle …

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Dennis Walsh had just come in from talking to the local editor of the monthly broadsheet, the *Buckton Bugle*, when the phone rang. George Hickman had said cautiously, yes, he did have the facilities to copy and edit a video. He had shown Dennis how the machine worked. He had said, “Is this for a case or can I sit in on the excitement?”

“A case. Sorry, George. But if anything comes of it—you’ll get the story.” The real difficulty was not so much the editing of the video, (which appeared to be a fairly simple stop-go-record business), it was the matter of finding time to do everything. He and Fiona were supposed to be getting married in two weeks’ time and his leave started just before that. He had booked himself in for three days at the beach to unwind and buy a suit.

But this interim was beginning to look impossibly crowded with things to be done before he left Buckton. They were sending someone to interview him about the death of Richard Scully; not because they had reason to doubt that Scully’s daughter Tracy Dillon had hit her father on the head with a heavy ashtray but because they wanted to know if any aspect of his interview with her might give the defence a way to further water down the charges. He didn’t mind too much if she got off with a short sentence or even a Good Behaviour Bond, she had had a pretty rotten life with two irresponsible and unpleasant parents, but he wanted his part in the whole sad saga down on the record in clear and unequivocal terms.

And once he had the second video, minus Guy Briggs but still containing the beautiful Eve Rogers and her pet romping—her word, not his, or more correctly her husband’s word—he needed to find time to get to Winville and make the comparison.

The only advantage about this call was that it was out along the road to Winville. The Daltons had moved into the district about six months ago, buying the old homestead over on the little gully off Buckton Creek and away to the left of the Winville road. It was one of the oldest houses in the district and was up a long lane from the place along the road where there'd been an old pub many years ago, in the horse-drawn days. The pub had been a small ramshackle place with a yard and some stables and a windmill behind it. All that was gone now except for the gap-toothed windmill, silent and still and rusting away in the open landscape with nothing but a couple of gnarled old pepper trees for company. The lane ran over a grid and across the nearly flat land. The gully was fenced off and rarely ran these days because of the earth dam the McLeod family had built across it further up. The Daltons grew wheat in spring and sorghum in summer. They had begun ploughing again and the stubble paddocks stretched away into the haze in long rows of turned straw.

No one knew much about them as their three teenage children had finished at high school and were, in their father's words, now 'on the land'. Local knowledge suggested the Daltons were city people and that their knowledge of farming was limited. Though there were people willing to say critical things about 'city slickers' most people were pleased to get a new family settling in the district. Their main regret was that the Daltons showed no sign of joining in with local people, attending local functions, patronising local businesses …

They came occasionally to the supermarket in Buckton but otherwise appeared to shop in Winville. Dennis Walsh, as he negotiated the ruts in their lane, looked around with interest. They did not appear to be doing anything differently to their neighbours. But the call from Mrs Dalton had sounded vaguely panic-stricken. There was something or someone in the house with her. He thought it was probably nerves or imagination, even a stray animal. Late afternoon on a cold June day could begin to seem rather strange and grim to someone not used to the vast and lonely stretches around her.

And the house itself was not exactly welcoming. It had been built in a little dip, more a flat space slightly lower than the surrounding countryside, and was enclosed by trees and sheds. The house itself had been added on to over the years and the chaotic whole was painted grey with a dark red trim. With the sun lowering and the shadows lengthening there was something a little spookish about the place and not even the distant roar of the tractor did much to make the place seem ordinary and mundane.

Karen Dalton came out to meet him. He had not seen her before and his first thought was that there was something odd about her. Tall and slender with long silver-white hair drawn back loosely in a plait. But it wasn't anything physical, he didn't think, more something about her as a person. Beyond that he couldn't decide.

She had an unexpectedly soft sweet voice as she said, "Thank you for coming. I'm sure it's just me being silly. But this house is haunted."

"Then you've got the wrong person," he said drily. "I can check for a prowler. Ghosts aren't my field."

"I'm not sure they're mine either. And maybe it was the way the shadows came over, something about the sun going down." But she shivered as she said it. And he thought, spurious call-out or not, she had been frightened.

"There was no one here with you?"

"No. My husband is out in the far paddock. The kids have taken the car and gone to Winville."

"Right. Well, show me where the … thing was. And what you were doing."

She seemed to hesitate then turned and walked inside. The house was growing dark and she had turned on the light in the kitchen. It was a confusing house with rooms and tiny landings going in every direction but maybe the Dalton children found it an interesting place to live. It seemed to be filled with drab lino and dark furniture.

"We bought it as is," she said as though to explain something. "We hope to be able to repaint eventually. We brought a few things with us. But not a lot."

"Where did you live before you came here?"

"In Melbourne. We saw this place in summer and it seemed so pleasant and so full of possibilities. Roland grew up on a farm. He liked the idea of having a try at it again."

"Okay. So where were you when you saw … whatever?"

"I was just starting to get dinner ready." She waved a hand around the big kitchen. Vegetables were on a big chopping board and she had begun making pastry on the well-scrubbed pine table. "There was a sort of rattle at the window there as though something was trying to lift the window and get in. At first I thought the wind had started to get up and I'd been too busy to notice but I looked out the door and the trees were still. I went out here and walked around."

She suited the words and went out a side door on to a small wooden landing next to two large rainwater tanks. She pointed to the window.

"I couldn't see anything but I walked along here to where you go to the bathroom and laundry. And I saw something just out of the corner of my eye. I thought it was someone standing there. But when I turned—there was nothing there. I thought it must just have been a shadow flickering. So I went back inside and went on with my work. But then it started again. The rattle at the window."

She led the way back into the kitchen. "Maybe it was the light reflecting but it was like a face there. I went over and opened the window. I've opened that window dozens of times and never had the slightest problem. But this time it was such an effort to lift it. It was like a very old window that gets stuck in a groove … or as if something was bearing down on it and I was fighting them to lift it. Usually it stays up when I lift it. But this time I'd hardly got it up when it came crashing down again and I just managed to catch it and stop it hitting the sill. But there was no sign of anyone. I just don't know what to think." There was a faint tremor in her voice and her eyes had widened as though she saw things he couldn't.

"I'll have a look around there. Something might've ducked away down there by the tanks."

He suited his actions to this. But if anyone, anything, had gone down there they'd done so without leaving any obvious marks.

"Well, haunted houses aren't my thing. Have you ever had anything else odd happen here?"

"The kids say this place is full of odd noises and rattles. But I always said that's just because it's an old house. Draughts. Things that don't quite fit. I suppose whatever it is isn't exactly dangerous. But I did get the wind up a bit."

"Then the best thing is if I come back and talk to you all together. Try to see if there is any substance, any pattern … that sort of thing." He had the odd feeling that she didn't really want him to meet and chat with them all. But she said quietly, "It is very good of you to take it seriously. It must've been my imagination."

"Do you have any religious connections?"

"No. No, we're not churchgoers. Just ordinary people."

He had been under the impression that most churchgoers *were* ordinary people. But perhaps things were different in Melbourne.

"Do you think we should call in a psychic person?" She gave him a sidelong glance as she continued to stand and gaze at the seemingly innocuous window.

"If that would make you feel more comfortable. But don't ask me where you find one around here."

"I have a friend in Brisbane … she might come … "

"Go for it. But it might help, still, to get the family together and share. If someone round the district is trying to scare you … well, I'd like to know now before they start to get cocky. Did you ever have any problems with anyone, neighbours, people you deal with at a business level, anyone who is critical of city people moving in."

She gave it long thought before shaking her head. "My husband might know. I don't go out very much."

Did that mean that she saw herself as a traditional housewife? Or that her husband objected to her going out? Or more simply that she was shy and not very outgoing? And yet, as he drove away, he thought there was something odd about the way she had set out the vegetables on the kitchen table. Neatly lined up. Almost as though they were there as a kind of prop … Or was she just an obsessively neat person …

He was still pondering on Karen Dalton, all the Daltons, the farm, stories that occasionally cropped up, reflections in windows, as he came into the outskirts of Winville. He had arranged to

meet Jim Holland, the animal inspector, and go round to see the dog at David Gurney's surgery. Gurney handled most of Winville's pets … or those whose owners could afford to seek professional care …

*

"Did you have any trouble getting the dog away from that lot at Japana?" Dennis Walsh asked Holland.

"I just said that dog could be infected. If you don't want the feed lots shut down as a hazard to human health you'd better let me take him. The guy I spoke to said, go for it, he didn't think it was much of a life for a dog."

"Was he South African?"

"Same as you or me. I don't know if he got into hot water later."

Gurney took them through his small surgery area and out into his yard where he had runs and pens for larger patients. The presence of the dog seemed to make him a bit tight-lipped. "Are you going to take him back there?" He indicated the animal with a slight gesture.

"I s'pose we have to, unless we can prove he is at risk from the people there—or the people are at risk from him." Holland ran an observant eye over the big dog.

Gurney also stood there looking at the dog for another minute before saying, "Well, don't let him near any women."

"Why?"

"Because he isn't safe with them."

Dennis Walsh had also been looking at the dog very closely. "I'm pretty sure it's the same animal. That slight scar on his shoulder."

Jim Holland had lived as conventional a life as anybody and he wasn't sure that he really wanted to see anything which might suggest other people's ideas about the conventional were vastly different. He turned to the vet and said non-committally, "Dennis has a video which might give us an idea of why they've got the dog—given that he hasn't been used as either a guard dog or with stock."

The segment Sergeant Walsh had re-taped was less than twenty minutes long but at the end of it Jim Holland sighed. "I hoped you were away with the birds, Dennis, but it *is* the same dog. I'd go bail on that. And I'd say he was already infected then. So what happens now?"

"I'd like to go in and take that place apart. But I guess the answer is that we hand the whole mess over to the health department."

"People are fools," Gurney said angrily. "They seem to think bestiality is something left over from the Victorian era and they are all modern and enlightened. It never seems to occur to them—" And then words failed him. He shook his head several times. "I can get the dog back to health and fitness but I still think it would be better to have him put down. As soon as he smells a woman—that time of the month, you know—he's—" he shook his head again. "My poor wife thought he'd gone mad."

"But is it likely people could have been infected by him?" Dennis continued to stand four-square and look down on the puzzled animal.

"The sixty-four-dollar question," Dave Gurney said wearily. "I'm inclined to think not. If the men at the feed lots are getting sick I'd say they've picked it up directly from the cats there."

Small comfort. Dennis suggested they get on to DS Sullivan as well as the health department. Then he set out for home.

Lights had come on across the darkening landscape. A farmhouse here. Another some distance away. An occasional vehicle on the road. He could pick out Wayne Booth's place. But there wasn't any comfort in that situation either. And as he drove in by the station and parked there was also the gloomy thought: how to write up these problems. Easy enough to put down Mrs Dalton's 'thing' as a prowler for the time being. But the dog and Winville and Eve Rogers and how DI Towner might fit into any of the sorry mess …

Treat it as an animal welfare issue for the moment?

*

Fiona came over a few minutes later and found him sitting over his waiting paper, pen in hand, and a rather blank look on his face. “I won’t be very long. Hard to find the words sometimes.”

But it wasn’t really that, he knew, but the way these people had managed to undermine things which should be tender and beautiful and make them seem sordid and unpleasant; and there weren’t really any words to explain that intuition. “I’ll just finish up and come on over.” It wasn’t just the thoughts in his mind; it was also the sense that he didn’t want her to touch him until all this faded away again; as though he feared he would contaminate something precious.

She found him hard to deal with when he was angry. But in its own way this sense of distance was nearly as difficult.

“Ten minutes.” He wanted her to go away.

“Ten minutes.” She smiled slightly and went out again.

In the end it was more than twenty and he still hadn’t decided what to do next about anything. He went into his bathroom and scrubbed his hands with Solvol and the abrasiveness was a help in bringing him back to the moment.

She had done sausages and vegetables and the kitchen was filled with their homey smell and for a few minutes as he sat down it seemed to banish everything else. But at last Fiona said cautiously, “I know it’s a case and you probably can’t talk about. But you look too distracted to talk about the weather … or the wedding … or what’s on TV … ”

“It is a case. And I don’t have the resources to tackle it … to be frank, I don’t seem to have the brains either to get around it. I’d much rather just be able to go in, wham, bang, see you in court … because I don’t really know what to do. And I don’t really want to leave it with Paul either. Or Guy.”

In the beginning of her sojourn in Buckton she might’ve agreed with the general assessment that Dennis Walsh used brawn to make up for a lack of intelligence. But she’d had ample time to discover the deficiencies in that view.

“You know I’ve seen you in court. I’ve seen you put two-and-two together faster than the speed of light. It isn’t really that, is it? It’s that business of how to deal with people.”

“People with clout. Maybe. And I can’t deal with their attitudes to things. They leave me with the feeling that I want to keep washing myself. I never thought of myself as a prude but maybe I am.”

“Isn’t there something about Irishmen being that way inclined? Fixated on the purity of their mothers or something?”

“I’m not Irish.”

“You mean—” She looked at him in surprise. “You mean you were adopted as a baby by a family named Walsh?” Her flatmate Raelene had said something to her about “what do you really know about Dennis? His family? His background?” and she had said flippantly, “I’ve seen photos”. But some not very good photos didn’t prove anything.

“No. I don’t mean that. All that stuff that people with nothing better to do burble on about—that’s a cop-out.”

“You mean—who am I, who are we, what is our identity, what does it mean to say Irish-Australian … any of that.” It didn’t really surprise her.

“Something like that. That stuff is for people in universities who’ve got nothing better to do.”

“Some people find a source of pride, of understanding, maybe of self-esteem in it.”

“Maybe they do.” He went back to eating and a short silence fell.

But at last she broke it with a different question. “Dennis, you already have in-laws, don’t you? Do you see anything of them still?”

“When I’m up that way, yeah, now and then.”

“And do you feel any sense of … belonging?”

“In the sense of belonging to their community? No, not particularly. In the sense of always being their son-in-law, brother-in-law, sure. Marrying you isn’t going to change that.”

The trouble with this discussion, Fiona felt, was that there were no simple insights into him, no simple ways to understand him. Raelene didn’t understand that—not least because she felt that

someone who saw policing in black-and-white terms must somehow also be a black-and-white personality, no shades of grey, no shadows, no subtleties, nothing hidden.

The phone rang and she was left to her thoughts. For the first minute. But whoever was ringing was obviously very angry. She could hear the faint bellow and see Dennis growing grimmer by the minute. Finally he said, "You want to pretend there's nothing wrong—you go right ahead."

More squawks. Then he said, "Best thing they could do to the bloody place. But they've got money and clout and protection—"

She had the horrible feeling that Dennis might explode at any moment and the other man was clearly on the verge of doing the same. Another minute of it and Dennis crashed the phone down and said, "The bloody bastard. Not hard to see where he's been getting his fun—Sorry, you don't want to hear this rubbish." And she couldn't answer his key question: how had DI Towner found out about his visit to Winville so quickly?

"Whoever it was isn't good for your blood pressure."

"Towner." He sat back and let a long breath out. "Don't spread it around. But I know he's corrupt. And I don't know what to do about it, not without damaging Greg and Ali and the others."

"And you're sure they're all … clean."

"I'd say so. Which is more than I can say for that Garcia that was here."

The phone rang again. At last he said, "Okay, I'll go round. But there isn't much I can do."

"My poor darling," Fiona said as he got up from the table. "Would you like me to keep it hot." It probably didn't do his digestion any good either, all these interruptions.

"It's Mrs Kees. They've taken her to hospital. She collapsed on her way home from the Co-op. God knows what'll happen to Artie. But it isn't really my concern. He's got some relatives. But he's angry because his mum isn't there to cook his dinner for him. She's waited on him hand and foot all these years—" He picked up his car keys.

After he'd gone out and she'd wrapped his dinner in foil and put it in the warming drawer she finished her own meal. Would she now be in this complex and often difficult relationship with Dennis if it hadn't been for Artie Kees abducting and terrorising her? It wasn't gratitude which had made her start to think seriously about Dennis as a friend, as a lover, it was something much more profound, more visceral, more imperative. Almost as though she had felt at that moment of rescue and hope and relief that she'd given her life and happiness into his safe keeping …

But if she felt in some way she *had* come to belong to him … then this evening was yet another reminder that he did not reciprocate that profound sense of belonging …

*

It was one thing to set Guy on to trying to track down anything about Wayne Booth's other possible landholdings and the area around Long Hitch; it was quite another to decide how to deal with this dog-fighting tip. In the end the best thing would probably be to tell Guy just what he planned to do and arrange for him to come as back-up if the tip turned out to be right.

But in the meantime there was Artie.

He parked at the gate and got out. The house was in darkness. Had Artie finally succumbed to Sister O'Brien's blandishments and gone around to the hospital to sit with his mother? He knocked on the door. There was a faint sound inside the house but no lights went on.

He knocked louder. Still nothing. He couldn't very well break down the door just because Mrs Kees was in hospital. He went round to the back door. The same thing.

The old man from next door turned on his back porch light and came over to the fence. "He's gone out," he quavered, "Artie has. And he looked really wild. He had chisels and all … really … wild. Yeah, that scared me. Him looking like that." He put his hands up as though to demonstrate someone jabbing things with chisels.

"Which way did he go?"

"Along there."

But after going 'along there' and to and fro and back and forwards round town without sighting Artie the main likelihood seemed to be the hospital. Artie seemed almost traumatised by his experience in prison and he had lived much more quietly since coming home; once or twice

Walsh had seen him out along the roads but mostly he just mooched slowly round the streets, in a seemingly aimless fashion.

He didn't want to spend a lot of time with searching; Artie wasn't lost or missing or wanted. Just gone. And presumably he could find his way home again when he decided he wanted to go to bed.

Sister O'Brien came out on to the lit verandah as he drew into the hospital car park. "It's not looking good. We may send her on to Winville. But it is probably only staving off the inevitable. And I am sure she would fret if they tried to keep her there."

"Well, I can't find Artie so I guess you'll have to make the call. But if she's comfortable here that seems best. What seems to be her problem?"

"Heart. But I don't think she looks after herself very well. I've heard people say she's half-starved herself all these years to make sure she put away enough money to have Artie cared for when she goes. I don't think she ever understood that it wasn't the money side of things. It's where to find someone willing to risk their life to care for Artie."

He nodded. "Steve Rolls is s'posed to be a distant relative."

"Is he? But you know they've got their own problems *and* three children. I wouldn't wish Artie on to them."

"We'll just have to hope she gets better. Anyway I'll have another drive around. With luck he's simply gone home to bed." He spent another half hour going down side roads, out along the creek, up past the cemetery. Still no sign. He went round to the Kees' home again and knocked. Still in darkness. But again that noise. Did they have any animals? He had never seen anything and he wouldn't wish Artie on any unfortunate cat or dog. But maybe the old man hadn't realised that Artie had gone out and come back. Maybe that was Artie inside sitting in a chair in the dark or someone had left a radio or TV on. 'Blow this,' he thought. 'I'm going home to bed myself.'

The warming oven was still on. But in the end he put the plate away in the frig. It could be bubble-and-squeak in the morning. Fiona had stayed. But she shifted away slightly as he got heavily into bed. It had been the thought uppermost for much of her quiet evening. In some way Dennis would subsume her and give away nothing of himself. The adjustments, the reaching out, would be hers. Somehow she needed to take back her self, her integrity, her self-esteem, her identity … she wasn't sure what it was that was most at risk. There was something too effortlessly powerful in the way he would come to take over. A small physical distance seemed the only way to reassert herself.

She felt the light kiss he dropped on the top of her head. And it suddenly seemed churlish to try and keep him at hands' length. She rolled over so she could face him in the light of the small bedside lamp.

"Was it something I did or said—or just me being me?"

"It was that thing with Artie … it was so nice to feel safe and secure with you. But I can see now there is another side to it. Somehow I get lost in you … in your life. I can't stand up and assert myself."

After a long silence to digest this he said, "Is it me—or the job that's taking you over?"

"Both, I suppose. But you would still take me over even if you sold insurance or tractors."

"I see."

"I know it sounds silly when I try to explain. And maybe you don't see yourself as I see you. Other people, your constables, they will move on. I don't mean I want to move on … but maybe a time will come when you will have … when I will sort of disappear. I don't know if that makes sense to you. But I think I felt that need of a little space."

"I do understand. I almost wish I didn't." He rolled on to his back and stared up at the shadowy ceiling. "It happened to my gran. The little shadow behind my granddad. I don't want it to happen to you."

She reached out to touch his face softly, feeling the faint stubble there, unsure whether to continue the conversation.

"There are worse fates, I know. But I want you to love me as much as I love you. At least that would make for one kind of equalness … even if other things aren't."

"And what makes you think I don't love you?"

"Do you?" Then she wished she could take back the question.

"More than life itself." He wasn't usually vehement with her. "You know, I wanted to be firm, to make a point, over that business with the book and everything … and then I couldn't face each day without you."

"And your grandmother … do you think she loved and was loved … to make up for everything?"

"Maybe. She belonged to the family of the wild Clancarty earls … but she was still no match for him, from what I remember. And times were different. I think he respected her. I can't say more than that. You can ask my father if you like, when you meet him."

"Would he mind?"

"Try him. He's a kind man." Then he seemed to think that conversation had reached its natural end because he reached out and said, "Can we?" and her last small shred of resistance melted.

But half asleep she had the strange sense that to be loved in a way that engulfed and absorbed might be terrifying—and yet any other way of life might become pallid by contrast. Perhaps that other woman had had that consolation.

And then the wintry morning came filtering in, and breakfast, and she wondered at the sense of drama she had felt in the night …

*

Dennis sent Guy Briggs round to check on Artie Kees. It might be feeding a mouse to a snake—but Guy would need to deal with Artie while he was away. He might as well start now. Guy, though, faced with a closed door and a non-appearing person went through his usual agonies of doubt. Should he simply go away? Or see if the doors and windows were locked? Or bang away till someone came? Or smash something in?

The answer proved to be much more domestic. As he peered in the kitchen window he was sure he could see someone lying on the floor. He finally managed to jimmy the back door open and get in. Artie Kees was lying in a pool of congealed fat on the floor. He was alive but out to it. It looked as though he had tried to cook for himself but he had spilt the fat or slipped and dropped the pan and hit his head on the corner of a kitchen cupboard. Guy eventually found a telephone under a pile of old newspapers and rang the doctor.

The house wasn't dirty exactly, no dishes sitting unwashed, but it smelled of mice and he could see the marks where they had nibbled at the spilt fat. As he waited for the doctor he went through the house in the hope of confiscating any chisels Artie might currently have handy. In what was obviously his bedroom he found a whole set of them in their plastic pockets. But more disturbing was the picture beside Artie's bed. For a moment Guy had the horrified thought that it was Fiona. Then clarity returned and he could see it was merely a coloured picture cut from a magazine and put into a cheap frame. But the woman did suggest Fiona in her colouring and hairstyle.

He wasn't sure what to do. It wasn't a crime to keep such a picture. But if it indicated that Artie still had an unhealthy fixation on Fiona, maybe was stalking her, watching her, trying to get something which belonged to her—

In the end he opened the front door in case the doctor turned up before he had finished a quick call to his boss to explain and say "What shall I do? Leave it—or bring it away with me?"

At last Dennis said, "Leave it. But bring all the chisels."

And was it the sound of Artie groaning or snoring last night—or the sound of those mice scampering around the kitchen? And the other question: if Artie was going to knock himself cold his first evening alone then how was he to be minded? A voucher so he could eat a hot meal at the café every night? Presumably he could make himself toast and a hot drink … though that wasn't absolutely guaranteed. And a take-no-nonsense someone to go in once a week to check. It was about the only time in his life he regretted that Cherry Morton wasn't around; despite her manifold faults she could probably stand up to Artie.

At least Artie would be reasonably safe in hospital for the next few hours. He could get on to some routine work before going out to meet the Dalton family in the late afternoon.

*

It was late when Sergeant Walsh got on the road, well after four, and the low hills had a purple wintry feel to them and star grass blew across the cultivation paddocks and fetched up against the fences. But his thoughts were on the Dalton family already. Three teenagers. Did they indulge in pranks, hoaxs, attempts to make their mother upset and frightened?

He was nearly to their gate when he realised the large figure walking doggedly ahead of him on the gravel verge was Artie Kees. What the heck was Artie doing all the way out here when his mother was back there in Buckton Hospital? He drew in a little ahead of the slightly-hunched figure and got out.

Artie, when asked, said he was going to Winville to see his mum there in hospital. "How do you know she's there?" To that Artie said simply: "They said she's gone. I gotta get there."

"You mean they took her there by ambulance?"

"Musta." And the hospital assumed Artie would simply go home and wait? It would take Artie at least another two hours of walking to get there. It wouldn't hurt him. But then there was the problem of what to do with him when he got to Winville. The hospital probably wouldn't want him settling in for the night.

"Okay. You can come with me while I go in here to see some people. Then I'll take you to the hospital to see your mum. But you stay by the car. Is that clear? No wandering off."

Artie didn't show any real sense of taking this on board and Walsh felt uneasy leaving him. In the car he might go looking for tools. Out of the car he might go poking through the Daltons' sheds and abstracting chisels …

"I won't be long. Just sit there by the woodheap and don't move." At least the Daltons had put their axe away.

The family had come in and were now sitting round a big living room with French windows opening on to the verandah in front. Mrs Dalton introduced Sergeant Walsh to her husband Roland and three boys, Timothy, Michael, and Oliver, before asking if he would like a cup of tea.

"No. Thanks. I've got someone I'm taking to Winville out there."

"One of the bad guys," one of the boys said with an engaging smile. "Handcuffs and all."

"No. But I don't trust him. So if you'd all tell me if you've ever seen or heard anything odd here. Noises or shadows that might suggest a prowler."

"Plenty of both, officer," another teenager said cheerfully. "But they don't suggest a prowler. They suggest … well, that's the question. What do they suggest?"

"They told us, after we'd moved in," Roland Dalton said mildly, "that there was an old derelict pub at the corner there that'd been demolished but there'd been a murder done there, many years ago of course, and the murdered man still 'walked'. Not walking so much as gliding and screeching. Quite unnerving apparently."

"And we think," the third boy said with unabated good spirits, "that it simply moved in with us. They probably used some of the old wood here."

"As firewood possibly," Roland explained, "or to build yet another shed or wing or porch. This place is like a carpenter gone mad."

"It *is* an interesting house," Mrs Dalton finally ventured to say. "And it could be lovely if it was done up." She looked up at Dennis Walsh with a strangely wistful air. He wasn't sure how to interpret her gaze. Perhaps she couldn't find the amusement the others obviously found in mysterious bangs and rattles and disappearing shapes.

"Did you experience anything strange before you came here?"

"Oh, strangeness is our middle name," the oldest youth said carelessly. "We were told we had sparked a poltergeist in Melbourne. Of course it wasn't. But we let people think that. It gave 'em a buzz."

"So what was it?"

"Ah now, there you have us. We never knew. But Karen was reading a book called *The Temple of My Familiar* … we felt that was as good an explanation as any."

"What was?"

"Our familiars. They had moved in with us and weren't behaving with proper respect and courtesy."

"Don't take any notice of them, sergeant," Roland said mildly. "They're pulling your leg. But whether we've got possums or something out here … who knows?"

"Not likely to be possums out here. They need some bushland. But you could have a stray cat, a dog. Even a vagrant coming by."

"But why was there no *sign* of anything?" Karen Dalton said fervently. "I could deal with a cat or even a person—it's this sense of invisibility."

"Ghostbusters! That's what we need," the second son said happily. "We can watch them at work."

"Well, whatever it is, it doesn't seem to wish you any harm," Dennis Walsh said cautiously.

"Doesn't it?" Karen looked away to the dying day outside.

"Ring me if anything else happens. We might be able to see if there's a pattern. The other thing is—you haven't got a dog. Would it be worth getting that sort of protection?"

"I wanted a dog." She turned back to Dennis. "But they said I am hardly ever alone. I guess that's true enough."

"Still, wouldn't hurt."

He left the conversation at that unsatisfactory juncture and went back to see what Artie was doing. There was some relief in the fact that he was sitting exactly where he'd left him. "Okay, get in, I haven't got any time to waste." A minute later the police car drove away—leaving three teenagers to indulge in hilarious shouts and some mimicry of the local police sergeant's style and comments; "Still, wouldn't hurt" immediately passed into family lore as a kind of shorthand for ending a conversation. Roland smiled indulgently. Karen conjured up a small rather forced smile.

"Dear Karen," Timothy came over and put his arms round his mother's shoulders, "we won't let them hurt you. Have their fun, yes, but nothing more."

She didn't respond. But her husband said briskly, "Well, there goes our reputation as sober sensible farmers. He's probably wondering if we're barking mad or if it's actually him. I don't think, sweetheart," he said to his wife, "that calling in Mr Plod was really a very sensible idea."

She couldn't help the little shiver that passed through her, the tiny spasm Timothy's hands registered, but she could also be brisk enough to say, "Mad or not, I must get dinner on."

Dennis Walsh had a much more mundane question. Why did the boys call their mother Karen? Was it simply that they felt they had grown too old for using 'mum' or that she was a second wife and only their stepmother?

*

The hospital in Winville acted with surprise. "Mrs Kees? No, we don't have anyone of that name in at the moment. And no one's come from Buckton today. There must be some mix-up."

To get Artie mixed up wasn't hard. To persuade him his mother wasn't here was more difficult. In the end one of the nurses walked him through the wards to convince him his mother wasn't hidden away somewhere.

"Maybe they had to turn back for some reason," Dennis said. "Anyway, get in the car, and we'll get back to Buckton and see what's happening at that end." The drive with an upset Artie was unpleasantly long and Sergeant Walsh drew in to the car park at Buckton Hospital with a sigh. Whatever had or had not happened he would now leave it to the nursing staff to deal with.

But it was the new director, Susan Denby, who came out briskly and said, "Artie! Where on earth have you been? We've been looking everywhere for you."

"Went to see me mum." He sounded sullen. "Wasn't there."

"Yes, she is. I'm so sorry. But come along now. You might want to say goodbye to her before Mr Waddell takes her."

"You mean—" Dennis Walsh turned back, "Mrs Kees died?"

"Well, of course." She gave him a puzzled look.

"Then, next time, tell it to him straight. Saying things like 'passed on' or 'gone' doesn't mean a thing to Artie." He put a hand briefly on the other man's shoulder. "I'm sorry, mate, but go and sit with her for a while and someone'll bring you a nice cup of tea."

Susan Denby later repeated this to Dr Leslie Davis; he found her attempt to mimic Sergeant Walsh saying ‘a nice cup of tea’ rather amusing.

Dennis Walsh went out to his car. Of course it made no sense to say ‘next time’. For Artie there wouldn’t be a next time. There was no one else in his life. His mother had been everything. Everything? He thought back to what Guy Briggs said he’d found beside Artie’s bed and wasn’t sure what to make of it.

*

On Saturday Dennis Walsh parked his old brown station-wagon by the roadside and raised the bonnet to look as if he’d broken down and had gone for help. Then he walked the long winding way down the rough gully which gradually formed itself into Burleigh Creek.

He had rung George Hickman who brought out the local monthly, the *Buckton Bugle*, last night and asked him if he remembered a murder out at that old pub before it was demolished. “Wasn’t a murder,” George said firmly. “Just an unfortunate accident. Three boys were playing the fool and they frightened a horse which bolted and caught an old man that was standing there, the end of the shaft of the cart hit him in the chest. I heard the boys were playing with fireworks—but later on Ray Werner told me one of them had a slingshot and hit the horse on the rump. As Ray was one of the boys, only a kiddy then, I’m talking about sixty years ago, Dennis, that would probably be right. The other two boys are dead now. Very sad. But not murder and mayhem. Well, mayhem maybe.”

“I wonder … do people tart it up to sound more terrible? Someone told the Daltons it was a murder.”

“Not that I’ve ever heard. After all, there’s plenty of people around that remember it.”

“And nothing happened before that?”

“Not that I’ve ever heard. Mind you, it was a pretty seedy little place. Think ‘sly grog’ and you’ll have a better idea of it. But people used to stop off there on their way to Winville in the old days. It was called Croxley Corner. And there was a woman there, don’t think she was the old man’s wife, but she used to make marvelous pies. They called ’em Croxley pies. But otherwise it was just a little place to stop in on a hot day, give your horse a drink, or re-fill your radiator, have a bite of lunch. Nothing very mysterious about it.”

Maybe someone was pulling the collective Dalton leg. Maybe those boys had created the story to enliven a quiet life. Because it *would* be a quiet life for three intelligent and energetic boys. A day of ploughing or harvesting would hardly engage their full faculties.

He found Birdy Bend without difficulty. No sign of anyone around. But there was a scuffed open area which might be a makeshift arena. And he had only pushed his way through the scrub and up the bank when there was a loud bark and a dog seemed to explode from the trees.

A heavy chain brought it up short but that didn’t stop it straining towards him. He stopped and stood still to look it over carefully. ‘Well, if you aren’t a fighter, I’ll eat my hat,’ he thought grimly. It was a mongrel but he could see some bull terrier in it, combined with cattle dog, even a touch of mastiff. It was very unlikely those bits had come together naturally. It suggested some one was breeding their own idea of what made a good fighting dog.

But what to do with the animal was the next serious question. If it was already tethered to wait for other animals to arrive—or to make it impatient and ratty—then there was a good chance its barking had warned off anyone in the vicinity. He could leave it and go. He could call up Guy to mind the entrance to the Environment Park though it was possible aficionados were coming through one of the farms up this side of the creek. Or he could simply remove the dog. Someone round town might recognise it. That wouldn’t catch anyone ‘red-handed’ but he was inclined to think there would be no one to catch, not today.

He moved back into the trees, sat down quietly against a trunk, and prepared to wait. After barking and slavering for another ten minutes the dog finally gave up and returned to lie down and keep watch.

Keep watch. Did this mean this was a local dog which was regularly brought down here to give notice of anyone lurking—and therefore the swift cancellation of the afternoon’s entertainment? A half hour went by. Then an hour. At some point the owners might return. But if

that point was 2 a.m. then he could hardly put everything else on hold to sit and wait. Finally he got up and let the stiffness wear away before entering the open space again.

He had hardly moved when the dog threw himself to the end of his chain again, teeth bared, small eyes filled with an apparent hatred for human beings. “I don’t blame you, pooch, but how do I nab you, untie you, get you back to the pen?”

He regretted not bringing some heavy duty gloves. So it would have to be his coat instead. It wasn’t the world’s most stylish old parka but he was sorry to see it mutilated for such a pointless reason. And with it over the animal’s head it was simple to unclip the chain and clip on the piece of strong rope he had brought and whip it round the dog’s muzzle and tie it tightly.

“Right, mutt, let’s get going.” But the dog was not going to come without struggling every inch of the way. He might simply exist to fight and all other requirements had been overlooked in his training. On the other hand he might’ve acquired a strong sense that that arena was his patch and he wasn’t going to leave it unguarded.

It was a fight to get the animal in the back seat. It was unpleasant to drive home with the animal struggling to get free and climb between the seats. The only thing to do with the beast at the end of everything would be to get him put down. He couldn’t be farmed out as a pet or even a guard dog. But the really depressing thought was: somewhere round here probably tucked away on a quiet farm were, more than likely, other dogs like this.

He drove back into town, turned into the supermarket, bought a bag of dry dog food and a couple of soup bones, and took the animal back to the station and put him in the wire pen out the back. It would be a job to get him out again. But he might settle in a couple of days and decide that this new life was better than the old. If not he would have to be shot in the pen.

Guy presumably was out at the football oval so he put up a notice on the pen ‘DON’T TOUCH DANGEROUS DOG’ and a note inside on the counter. Then he sat back in his swivel chair and thought on what to do next. Would the owner try to ‘liberate’ the dog tonight—or would he simply cut his losses? And if the former—was it possible to catch him in the act? There was a padlock on the gate but someone with wire-cutters would soon get through and make a hole large enough for the dog. He could set up a spotlight so as to keep the area visible all night. But he wanted an owner …

He was still musing on this when the station door tinkled and Fiona in grey slacks and a bright Fair Isle sweater came in.

“I am so glad you’re going on holiday soon,” she said with a smile. “It seems to be the only way to get you to stop working.”

“I’m not really working. I’m just sitting here thinking.”

“I’m half-inclined to say ‘same difference’. Thinking—about what?”

“I’ve got a dog out the back—”

“And you’d like me to look after him for a few days?”

“Not this dog, my darling. I want something left to marry—”

“He bites?”

“Tear you limb from limb more like. I don’t like the thought but it looks like I’ve got some bastards running some dog fights on my patch—and I hate the thought of leaving it to Paul and Guy—”

“Can I see him?”

“We-ell … I guess so. I don’t mind who knows he’s here. In fact I’d like the bastards to try and get him back. Might give me a line.” He came out the front door and walked round the side of the building to the netting run.

The dog, seeing his hated captor again, threw himself at the wire in a frenzy of snarls.

“I see what you mean.” She looked at the dog nervously. “But how could anyone do that to an animal?” She pointed to the scars round his head and neck where other animals had managed to get their teeth in.

And then a strange thing happened. Dennis moved across to tighten the tap he’d left dripping slightly … and with his seeming departure the dog came up to the wire and looked at Fiona and gave a little whine.

"So the beast has a woman in his life? A woman who feeds him by the look of it." But as soon as Dennis returned the dog's ferocity also seemed to return in full force. "I wonder if it's just that he knows you're female—or if it's something about your voice, your clothes, your perfume … "

"I'm not sure that I want to find out. But I think he would like a kennel or some blankets. It's going to be a frosty night."

"I'll see what I can find." But it struck him that even when she was nervous and unsure of a situation she never stifled that sense of consideration; not even for this unprepossessing dog. "And I'll set up the house to look like I'm home. Someone just might come sneaking around."

"And where are you actually planning to sleep?"

"In the station."

She was tempted to try and talk him out of it; then set the idea aside as a waste of breath. But she got him to take a Thermos back with him in the late evening and a large slice of rich fruit cake and an apple. Then he took the bell off the door, put himself half in an old sleeping bag and settled down to wait.

He was disappointed that the night passed uneventfully. The dog didn't bark and no one came bumbling round behind the station. In the crisp chill of a winter morning he managed to unpadlock the gate, catch the dog and muzzle it, and remove its collar in favour of the old one from the station shed. The chance of getting any prints except his own from the collar were poor but he went through the motions and managed to lift quite a clear thumbprint …

Fiona came round with hot coffee, containing a dash of brandy, and hot muffins with the butter melting into them.

"I might as well of stayed home. Then I could have both this," he waved at his mug and plate, "and you as well."

"We might've argued over something. We do occasionally, you know."

"Those aren't real arguments." Then he wondered if that was true. Not his kind of 'real argument' maybe. But he did not doubt that she was disconcerted by their occasional differences. "But I did have a question I meant to ask you." He scrabbled through his notes. "Have you ever heard of a book called *The Temple of My Familiar*?"

"Ye-es, I think so. I haven't read it. Alice Walker, the black American writer. Why?"

"And what is a familiar?"

"A spirit. A demon. A sort of personal helper … perhaps for a shaman or witchdoctor … like a witch with her black cat. Why?"

He shook his head slowly. "I wish I knew … "

Case No. 2: A Different View

Dennis Walsh spent an afternoon just sitting along the esplanade near the jetty in Redcliffe, watching people and cars go by, watching kids and seagulls. The wind was quite cool but it could not compare with a winter wind across the paddocks beyond Burleigh. And it was nice to have no larger thought in mind than whether to go across to a café and have something to eat or wait till he got back to the guest house in the evening …

And the problematical suit to get married in had turned into a simple issue. Merrilyn Hart, who ran the guest house, had put him on to a shop in Brisbane and the thing was bought and altered without fuss. She also helped him buy a small gift for his soon-to-be mother-in-law …

But this sense of peaceful progress was broken by a ring from Paul Ramsay. Paul and Guy had inherited the unwanted dog. They had inherited various unresolved cases. They had inherited the need to keep an ear out for gossip and rumours on everything from dog-fighting to more amphetamines surfacing at Buckton High.

"Dennis, sorry to bother you, but George Johnson has just given us another tip-off. The next fight's shifted over to the back road behind Gus Mortimer's place. I've just been organising Guy to go and see if he can get a line on it. But are you sure George is reliable?"

"No. I'm not. But you can't ignore it."

"I s'pose not. But y'know it's beginning to look like someone is planting information on George because they know he'll probably pass it on."

"It does. Keep the good work up, Paul, and we'll have a yard full of has-been fighting dogs. But make sure you take heavy gloves and a muzzle with you. And take the collar and chain off very carefully. See if you can get some prints. Even if we're being set up—it's just possible they don't realise we can pick up bits of evidence. And talk to Jim Holland again. If he's got any names or photos of anyone from Winville—it just might be worth running them past George. It seems odd that he doesn't recognise these bods."

"Or says he doesn't."

"True. But the people doing the gossiping may not be the people we want. It could be we're getting sent off in the wrong direction."

"Why not keep the whole thing very quiet then? We would not have known what they were up to."

"Maybe too many people know I take a close interest in all the local dogs … and they thought a red herring might work better. Don't know, Paul, but we'll get there. Everything else okay?"

"So far." Paul Ramsay sounded cryptic. He had been lulled into the belief that Buckton was a quiet little sinecure before now. But he was one of the few people let into the secret of Dennis Walsh's impending marriage and he said, "Don't go worrying about this place, mate. We'll muddle through. Just enjoy your wedding."

In theory a nice quiet little wedding should be an easy thing to get through. In practice he didn't quite trust Fiona's mother, Mary Greehan, not to invite dozens of relatives … or, alternatively, to feel he wasn't good enough for her precious only child and therefore the fewer people who knew the better …

But they would be on the plane to Townsville tomorrow evening. He only had to get to the house, get through the ceremony, be nice to everyone over the food and drinks Mary had insisted on organising … and the thing was done …

Yet there was still that element of disbelief in the whole thing. Maybe he would wake up tomorrow morning and find that Fiona as his wife, Fiona expecting his baby, had all been a lovely dream. And he was really just the same old single sod spending time with the half-dozen men pretty much in the same boat here at the guest house.

But morning came and he got up and packed and dressed and Merrilyn Hart gave him a close scrutiny to see if anything had been overlooked before saying, "Well, whoever she is, she's a lucky woman. You look very impressive, Dennis, and I'm sure that suit will wear well."

Whether Mary Greehan saw things quite so generously was uncertain but she had had a lifetime to develop the tact and grace with which she welcomed him. And while Dennis and Fiona, looking beautiful in pale cream with a bouquet of trailing tropical flowers in shades from white to vivid yellow, stood up to say 'I do' Guy Briggs was facing a ferocious dog tied to a tree up a little-used back road and trying to decide what price he might put on his own life.

Not even heavy gloves and a wire muzzle seemed sufficient protection from the animal's attempts to leap at him and close its jaws. Unwilling to go back and admit to Sergeant Ramsay that he didn't know what to do he instead drove round to the vet surgery to ask Vince Bromby to come and help him capture the animal. But when he got back with him, half-an-hour later, it was to find the lane empty of any dog.

He hadn't thought to photograph the animal. Now he simply stood there and stared about him, the sense of failure heavy and shameful. Vince walked to and fro for several minutes. Finally he said, "If it's any consolation—someone *has* tied a dog here. You can see the marks on the tree trunk, and a pile of shit, and where he's scrabbled around. A fair-sized dog by the look of things. But I can't tell you any more than that. Never mind. You won't have to face your turd of a boss for a few more weeks."

It wasn't much consolation. The dog was still gone. But Guy said without guile, "Why do you hate Dennis? He's a good boss."

"Dinny Walsh is an A-grade bastard and I am just sorry to see you're too scared of him even to admit it."

"I'm not scared of him. Not now."

"Have it your own way then, you poor boob." Bromby shrugged and got back into the car. "Anyway, I've got to get back to the surgery." Guy came over and got in the car too. There might be other clues left in this place but, if so, he couldn't see them. So there was nothing to do but go back to the station and admit his failure to Paul Ramsay … and wonder if Vince was really transferring some secret gripe over losing Joanne to him on to Dennis instead …

*

It came on to rain unexpectedly across the Downs while Fiona was enjoying the Sunday sun in Townsville, cold glum winter rain which left the paddocks sodden and brown and veiled the low hills. It was still raining as she drove 'home' to Buckton late on Tuesday afternoon. She had not been able to get Hilton Browne to agree to a longer break from the bank.

As she sat in the car, the wipers working, and watched a long stream of wet cows, heads down against the beating rain, and long brown muddy 'stockings' on their legs, make their slow way across the road and up to their milking yards all her doubts returned in full force. Nothing would ever turn her into a country person. Nothing would ever make Buckton truly home. And telling herself that at least her job was inside with heaters and carpets wasn't sufficient consolation.

It didn't get much better as she came into the main street of Buckton, almost deserted, with the gutters running with dirty brown water and the awnings flapping in the wet gusts, lights coming on early in the gloom. She turned into Creek Road and parked in front of Raelene's house; then it was a matter of gathering up her bags and making a run for the door. Inside things were a little better with a big vase of crysanthemums and a card to say 'Welcome Home — Beautiful Bride'. Beside the vase on the polished table was a large parcel tied up with silver ribbon. She put down her bags and took off her damp coat and untied it.

In it was an antique cuckoo clock and a note from Kath O'Brien. 'I know you'll need something to cheer up that old house so this is a small start. I also know married life probably won't be terribly <u>easy</u> with Dennis but you've picked yourself a fine man and I am sure the joys will far outweigh the difficulties. I pray they always will. With love and blessings, Kath.'

It didn't turn Buckton into an island of tropical bliss and beauty but she was touched by the gift and the message. Perhaps, if she had remained in Brisbane, all her friends would be people like her; quite ambitious, career-driven, rushed, upwardly mobile … but also a little greedy and superficial. It would not include people like Kath …

Rae and Kieran came in just as she finished her unpacking and was starting to think about cooking something. They had brought food and wine from Domenico's and were cold but cheerful … and avid to hear every detail of her couple of days in Townsville meeting Dennis's family.

"Everything now, mind," Rae said cheerfully as she portioned out the food.

"Well, not everything," Kieran said drily. "Let the poor woman keep her secrets."

"Since when do women keep secrets from each other?" Rae demanded with raised eyebrows.

Not secrets exactly, Fiona thought, but some things were for sharing and others were hers to wrap and put away. She sat down with them and tried to sort out which was which and how to share … and it became easier to ignore the rain beating at the windows and the cold night outside.

*

It seemed still to be night time in that Townsville bedroom when a rat-a-tat came at their door and a voice said, "Can we come in?"

Dennis sat up. "Hold on a tick!"

Fiona also sat up in bed and said cautiously, "Who is it, do you know?"

"My sister-in-law."

"Oh! But I'd like to get dressed and fix everything first—"

"Don't worry about that. You look lovely. And we'll soon get rid of them again." But Fiona, who had the long ingrained habit of wanting to face each new day looking as perfect as possible, was tempted to dispute that.

Instead the door tumbled open and a large woman with masses of frizzy hair, a striped top and cotton slacks and pink thongs, and a great engulfing of them, plonked herself on the bed beside Dennis and gave him a hug and a big kiss. Then she bounced around to do the same thing to Fiona. "I was so curious I just couldn't *wait* to see you!" There was something so happy and irrepressible about her that Fiona found she couldn't help but let down her guard a little. It would be churlish to say, "Not even another ten minutes?"

A man came and looked in their bedroom door and said, "Sorry about the invasion, Den."

"That's all right. Don't mind us. Invite all the neighbours round for a stickybeak. Round up a few derros and dossers. How many more of you are there?"

"Just dad and the boys in the kitchen." Terry came in looking rather tentative. "Sorry about this, Fiona, but I couldn't persuade Gerry to wait till breakfast. We've been on the road for hours."

When Fiona came to relay this story to Kieran and Rae she found herself trying to find words to explain that artless quality which overwhelmed her first morning in Townsville. Something which sounded, when put into words, so embarrassingly out-of-character wasn't really. She didn't quite know what to say to Gerry and old Mr Walsh and the young men who were her new nephews but neither did she feel upset or imposed upon. They had so obviously come to welcome her and get to know her …

"You mean—his relatives *aren't* like him?" Rae said curiously.

"Not really, no. I mean they are. Or Terry is—to look at I mean. But it is that sense that they all know that Dennis is the one with the stern and powerful personality. I had to keep reminding myself that he was the young one in that family, not the patriarch."

Kieran nodded. "Yes, I can well believe that." He hesitated then said, "Fee, what about you? It doesn't sound the sort of family you would feel instantly at home in."

"It *was* really strange. But I found I liked them all. And they so obviously seemed glad I had joined their family."

"You're stuck with them now, Fee," Rae said drily, "so I hope you never feel you have married … I suppose your mother would say you have married down … but where you'll never really belong."

"The Walshs of Wexford, descendants of the ancient Welsh kings and all that stuff … the McKays of Jura and the Inner Hebrides … the Greehans of suburban Brisbane … who can say? They made me feel very special, very welcome. That's all that matters." She thought of mentioning those 'wild Clancarty earls' and then she wondered if Rae and Kieran would actually believe her. They preferred their long-held view of Dennis. And she wasn't sure what 'family of' meant precisely. Then she turned the conversation on to what had been happening in Buckton in her short time away.

"Now they're saying that house, you know the old Redpath house, the Daltons bought it recently, is haunted. You know the old house down there in the dip on your left on the way to Winville—"

"The one with all the trees around it, and the yards, and the old windmill?"

"That's the one. That family from Melbourne bought it a few months ago … Roland and Karen, I think. They've got several children, teens maybe."

"Haunted? In what way haunted?"

"Things turn on and off. Things move around. They hear noises in the night time. Things on the roof. Faces at the windows. You name it … "

"Possums?"

"I don't think there are any possums out there. Too much open country around the house. Never mind, Dinny can investigate it when he gets back. I'm sure he'll come up with an ordinary everyday sort of explanation or send any ghosts packing with a flea in the ear … and if he can't he'll probably arrest them all for wasting police time." Rae went off into a gurgle of laughter. "It won't do you any good to suggest it might be supernatural causes … "

"I don't think ghosts have ears, do they? So what are people actually suggesting?"

"Everything. It gets crazier by the day. I don't know who started the rumours." And Rae and Kieran had their own wild suggestions to add to the melting pot. But Fiona found herself thinking

instead: nothing has changed, really, between Dennis and Rae. They'll go on finding fault and poking fun and calling names … or Rae will. But at least I know they can be friendly and polite in any face-to-face encounters. That is the main thing. And although Rae will never admit it I am absolutely certain she enjoyed our wedding to the full …

"And even if Dennis and the supernatural don't seem like natural partners—you might feel differently if you'd met his mother." Fiona had wondered what if anything to say about Dennis's mother.

"Well, don't keep us in suspense. What is she like?"

"She's this dear old lady with this lovely soft Scottish voice, like something left over from a past era, very formal. And *I* had been expecting some tough countrywoman, all leathery, and not thinking twice about mustering a thousand head of cattle before breakfast—not to mention whipping up scones with her eyes closed and keeping the local CWA going, single-handed. If she hadn't looked so much like Dennis, her colouring I mean, her eyes, I might've thought he was playing some sort of hoax on me."

"I always thought of him as Irish," Rae said. "Always spoiling for a fight."

"You *know* that's a silly stereotype—probably promoted by the English." And yet she couldn't pretend that Dennis ever shied away from any kind of confrontation; verbal, physical, even moral. But confronting the supernatural? Was that what he had meant by his question about that book?

And perhaps Janet McKay Walsh wasn't someone to be bandied about over dinner and a bottle of wine. More someone to be pondered on in quiet nights.

"What other news?"

"Well, you'll probably get to hear soon enough so I might as well tell you. Tara Morton is expecting a baby … and she's going round telling everyone Dennis is the father. *We* know he isn't … but a lot of people seem to be quite willing to believe her. They think all that rape stuff was a beat-up … "

"We don't actually know what people believe," Kieran said mildly. "But it's that old business—no smoke without fire, that sort of idea. I'm sorry about it all, Fee, and with luck the baby will arrive with black hair and brown eyes."

For a little while there she had forgotten this was Buckton with its inward focus and its petty gossip and its unending willingness to believe the worst about Dennis. Now she felt her fears and worries back in full force. She reached out and half filled her glass again. And tomorrow she had the depressing chore of breaking the news of her marriage to Hilton Browne who would probably wish he could turn the clock back fifty years and fire her on the spot for the crime of becoming a married woman …

*

Late on Friday Fiona went round for her appointment with Dr Kamala Davis. She didn't like Les Davis but she hoped she could build a good rapport with Kamala; enough anyway to see her through any ups and downs in this still largely-secret pregnancy. Rae and Kieran knew. Her mother and her mother-in-law knew. But she had been reluctant to tell other friends in case too much talk might … of course it was silly and superstitious to see talk of babies as an omen. But she would be thirty-six-and-a-half when the baby arrived. She didn't want to tempt fate in the slightest.

Kamala was a gentle softly-spoken woman, originally from a Tamil family in Malaysia, who had met Leslie while doing her training. As a social occasion, even perhaps as a friend, Fiona thought she and Kamala might get along. But at the end of her appointment to check her general health she felt a vague disquiet. She wanted someone she could both feel comfortable with and feel confidence in.

And as she left the consulting room and spoke briefly to Joanne McNally in the office and then went out through the waiting room she heard Leslie Davis come through and say to his wife, "What did that bank dame want?" and his wife's simple, "She came for a check-up." For a moment Fiona hesitated to make a scene. Then she turned and walked back. They were both standing near the consulting room door, Kamala Davis still with her patient card clearly marked GREEHAN in

her hand, as Fiona Greehan walked over to them, plucked the card from the doctor's hand and tore it in two.

"If that is the way confidentiality is treated here then I am sorry but I won't be coming back." She turned and went out again. The small incident left her feeling slightly tremulous and breathing too fast.

But it was one thing to do that; quite another to know what to do next. It would mean finding someone in Winville. In spring it might not seem daunting but right this moment she had absolutely no wish to do another long drive. She could simply go home now and have a quiet night. But the little incident had left her feeling upset and faintly rattled. All the women who wanted to keep their health matters private … she hated the thought of Leslie Davis going through their files and making cynical comments …

She went into the newsagency. They had quite a good selection of magazines but not very much in the way of paperbacks. Something fairly light and cheerful to take home. A Maeve Binchy perhaps …

Her mother, unsure what to give Dennis for a wedding present, had asked her advice and she had suggested a set of James Herriot's works. He wasn't a big reader, where was the time to read in his life, but she thought he might enjoy them. And her mother, off her own bat, had had a video made up of those of her daughter's various ballet performances which had been filmed. She'd had it professionally prepared and a lovely cover done. But whether Dennis would now while away his evenings watching it was a question still waiting on an answer … After all, implicit in it, was the message that her new life as a married woman in Buckton would contain no ballet …

Her musings were interrupted by Kathleen O'Brien coming over. "Fiona! I didn't realise you would be back so soon."

"Yes, it's only Dennis who gets to lie in the sun … not that he *does* lie in the sun … but a chance to relax." She said she was thrilled by the clock and couldn't wait to hang it when Paul Ramsay moved out again. "But, could I ask you something very personal, Kath? About doctors?"

"Of course. Have you got time to pop into the café for a cup of tea? I'm going out to see Betty Low later and re-bandage her leg."

They ordered a pot of tea and two chester cakes in the little café and Fiona told her the story of what had just happened round at the doctors' surgery. "I suppose I over-reacted but I was really upset at the thought of him looking at my details. If I'd wanted him to know I would've gone to him in the first place. But the awful thing, Kath, is that although I think Kamala is a lovely *person* I don't think she's a good *doctor*. I would like to feel I am in safe hands—"

"Let me guess. A baby?"

"Yes. But I'm afraid I had to remind her to take my blood pressure. I thought all doctors did that automatically."

"The real trouble is—he has undermined her and put her down for twenty years or however long they've been married. He's pushed all his most tedious patients off on to her. He's stopped her doing anything which might help her to really get to know people and make friends. He even stopped her joining our Mums and Bubs group at the hospital. He has turned her into the sort of person who is scared of her own shadow, not because she's any threat to him, but because he got a kick out of doing it, I think, and now the little scumbag is carrying on with Susan Denby at the hospital. I just about see red when anyone mentions Leslie Davis. But that's not your worry. If not Kamala—then who?"

"Yes. I'll have to look for someone in Winville. But I hate the thought of the driving."

Kath nodded. "Why not see if Alistair Thompson there can take you? He's semi-retired and he only takes the patients he really wants. So if he takes you—then you'll get time and care. He might be a bit more old-fashioned than you'd want but I know Dennis goes to him, so it would be worth talking to him about what you really want. Jeannie and me and sometimes a couple of the others occasionally have a day out in Winville. If you'd like to come with us it would save you the long drive—and with all of us to keep an eye on you … " Kath laughed at the image she had conjured up. "Your good fairies or guardian angels or something."

"It is very kind of you. I'll try him and see how I feel. I *would* like to try and do everything as gently as possible."

"And why not? When I look back and think of all those poor little bubs coming from the dark straight out into glaring powerful lights … and getting smacked the minute they arrived in the waiting world … the mind boggles really. I always used to think that baby calves had a more gentle peaceful entrance to the world. They just got up when they were ready and had a nice warm drink and no one wanted to weigh them or measure them or whip them away into a huge unfriendly nursery … "

"Yes. And I'd like Dennis to be there if he can. I know some older doctors still think fathers only clutter up the room … "

The thought of Dennis Walsh in a delivery room *was* a bit intimidating but she smothered a quiet smile and agreed. "I've got some videos that I'll lend you, exercises, breathing, all the things you probably haven't started thinking about. When is the baby due?"

"Next February. I am going to take leave without pay. But if Hilton Browne decides to stay on I think I might resign. There are times when I don't think I can take much more of Hilton … but at the moment February still seems far away in the future. I still find this baby quite hard to believe in."

"Wait till morning sickness kicks in." The conversation had cheered Kath and she went on her way with a smile still flickering; Dennis and babies and birth and nappies and everything. It *did* take some getting used to—

But as she let herself into her house to get her bag and her cats came out to greet her she dropped back into a more serious mien. Tara Morton was expecting her baby in a few weeks and she had told everyone, from Les Davis to the fly-by-nights at the pub, that it was Dennis Walsh's baby, and quite a few of them including Davis appeared to believe her. Tara herself was a silly irresponsible woman still vaguely looking for a man and romance. But Kath O'Brien was inclined to think that Tara's mother had put her up to this just as she had put her up, reportedly, to trying to pin a rape on Dennis. She felt sorry for the baby. But more than that she felt sorry for Fiona. The thought of Tara deliberately trying to accuse and undermine and draw Dennis into her own pathetic messy little life would inevitably remove some of the pleasure and excitement Fiona should be able to have in this baby …

And she had a deeper worry; one that she couldn't share. Christine Hewett had come into hospital here last week and died soon after her arrival. Leslie Davis, backed up by Susan Denby, had written a death certificate to say she'd died from pneumonia. Both Kath O'Brien and Jeannie Martin had their doubts. But when they'd urged that a specimen be sent away the idea had been vetoed. Christine had fought a long and wearisome battle with cancer. It was natural that her immune system was in poor shape and that she had succumbed to a disease she might've shaken off in other circumstances.

Her niece had brought her in. Her niece had even said, "I'm afraid it looks like pneumonia. I am so upset that I didn't realise sooner that it wasn't just a winter cold … but she kept saying, it's nothing, I'll be alright in a day or two, and I thought she was right."

Christine had continued to run the farm after her father died. The two of them had loved their land with a passion; too much passion, some older women said, because Christine had turned down a nice man many years ago rather than contemplate leaving the farm. But things had begun to go wrong when she started her chemotherapy in Winville after her operation. She hired men occasionally but she had never been able to find someone truly steady and reliable to mind things when she was away or unwell. Then her niece had started coming out to stay with her. It seemed to work quite well. Christine was immensely capable in the times when she was well. The niece, Prue Dare, managed to keep things ticking over when her aunt had to return to hospital.

The question that the two nursing sisters faced was a simple one: it might be pneumonia but they didn't think it was and they found the willingness to sign a death certificate without proper investigation a deep worry. But against a doctor and a matron they felt there was nothing they could realistically do.

"I wish … " Kath said to her two cats as she fed them, "I wish I could talk this over with Dennis. He might know if we are just reading things into it which aren't there."

*

Fiona, too, had moments when she longed to be able to talk things over with Dennis; not least this business about Tara Morton's baby. If Tara was expecting a baby in July … she counted back and tried to remember what she and Dennis had been doing then. What cases were going on. Whether that had been a time when they weren't seeing much of each other. But even if it had coincided with a moment when they had been apart … her time in Garramindi … she still came up against the absurdity of Dennis and Tara …

And Guy Briggs faced with the knowledge that he never seemed to make the right decisions had applied for the job of Council Librarian. He had no idea whether he was in with a chance. He didn't know what Dennis would say. He wasn't even sure he wanted to stay in Buckton. The thought of Vince Bromby spreading it to Joanne and her sister and from there to most of Buckton that he couldn't even capture an old dog …

Sergeant Ramsay had only sighed and said, "Can't win 'em all. We'll just have to keep our ears to the ground. But if they want us to have another dog they'll make sure we hear some more gossip." They already had one unwanted and unpleasant dog out the back. George Hickman had promised to publicise the animal and its probable use to the best of his ability. But the only person in Winville who had taken any interest was Jim Holland, the RSPCA man, and he was still struggling to get the police in Winville to take an interest in the animals at the Bruloder feed lots. Doug Towner and a man in uniform had come by and asked a few questions. Beyond that all had been silence and speculation. However, George Johnson, barman at the hotel, had said that of course he would get on to them if he heard any more gossip. It wasn't much, Paul Ramsay thought, but he had to be content with it.

Mrs Dalton had called them out once more; but Guy, although willing to believe in paranormal explanations, had merely looked around and asked questions about visitors and neighbours and come home again. Although he was tempted to use the word 'baffled' he didn't. Police were never 'baffled', only 'pursuing enquiries', and he did have one small insight. Karen Dalton he felt certain was frightened. But was she frightened before—or only after—the small unsettling incident? If her life was full of small unsettling incidents then she was possibly nerve-ridden all the time.

It was Fiona who looked out on a Friday evening and saw the old brown station wagon turn in beside the weatherboard station house. The garden looked rather grey and gloomy in the wind though the wattle was coming into flower. Little hard yellow knobs almost ready to burst. But the sight of Dennis getting out and carrying bags into the house was infinitely more cheering than the thought of wattle in flower. He had planned to return on Sunday afternoon … so had they called him back sooner because of a problem? She put the thought firmly aside and went on with her own work. Hilton Browne often napped through the afternoon but it did not mean he embraced the daydreaming moments of his staff in a kindly and tolerant understanding …

Even so she kept a slight eye out to see if anyone went from the house to the station or vice versa. He might simply have settled in for an early night, a bit of unpacking, a chat with Paul, and sleep …

In the end she couldn't resist going over as soon as she had locked up at the bank and set the alarm. If he was asleep she would not wake him. But if he was simply sitting there catching up with things over a cup of tea she would say hello and then go on home.

Just about everyone round Buckton said something like 'Yoo-hoo! It's me!' but she knocked politely then went in. Dennis was in the kitchen, cooking a stew by the smell of it, and he turned, expecting to see Paul Ramsay. The house had room for the two men but there was always the small chance that Paul had chosen to invite a friend or relative to come and stay.

Fiona said, "I couldn't resist coming over although I thought it might be some emergency they're having that's brought you back early."

"No. I just wanted to get home … to you."

‘Home’ sounded perfectly natural when he said it. If only she could do the same. But the house had not grown more homey in the interim; Paul had not been able to impart a domestic flavour … and the idea that their cuckoo clock could work miracles …

But he left his cooking and came over to engulf her. Not home as in a place but as a sense. A few minutes later she said, “I’d better go on home. I’m sure Paul will have lots to tell you about what’s been going on here.”

“Yeah. I see that bloody dog is still there. But what if we went to Winville tomorrow night? A motel or something. Get out of his hair and I’ve been thinking about you all the way back.”

“I would love to. Buckton is not altogether a comfortable place at the moment.”

“Why so?”

“You probably know about Tara Morton expecting a baby? She seems to be making a point of watching out for me. And then she comes up close and she sort of rubs her big tummy and says ‘me and Dennis made him’ and then she sort of gives me a funny look and goes away again. I just try to smile and look … I don’t really know what I look like. Disconcerted, probably.”

“I know. She’s been going round telling everyone it’s mine. Pest of a woman. I wish I’d charged her over that other business. But it was her mother I really wanted to get. Didn’t work out that way. And the thought of sending her home to that house with a new baby … and one that’s s’posed to be mine. Christ! If it wasn’t so dangerous it’d all be a bit of a laugh.”

“Dangerous?”

“She isn’t safe there with that mother of hers. People think domestic violence is only men on women or parents on kids. But sometimes it’s weird people like Lynnell Morton … ”

“I know. And I think I do understand … Tara, I mean.” She went over to the window and looked out over the dark yard to Jenny Roberts’ empty house. “Why she wants you. Why she has managed to convince herself she means something to you.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Don’t you? The same reason really … we aren’t so different … ” She felt the odd impulse that the situation demanded tears … for all its impossibilities, its regrets … “She wants to be *safe*. And not just the kind of safeness that having you out and about might mean. She wants you right there in her life, in her bed, so she can feel safe all the time.”

“Well, there’s obviously a father in the equation—unless she really was raped and I don’t think she was. But I’m not sure he’s going to be much use in this situation … ”

They heard heavy footsteps outside. “I’ll pick you up, say two tomorrow.” Fiona nodded and went out, saying hello to Paul Ramsay on her way through the laundry. There *was* another safety issue on her mind but she didn’t know how or even if it need be mentioned.

She had gone out last Saturday afternoon to show Mrs Grant the pictures Rae and Kieran had taken at the wedding. The old lady had made up her dress and Fiona thought she might enjoy seeing pictures of the finished result. She had stayed for tea and johnny cake. The Grants’ granddaughter had gone home to her parents. It was possibly the only good thing that had come out of the little girl’s abduction and rape: that her parents were making an effort to get things sorted out and give her a real home. But whether they really were resolving issues or just indulging in mutual recriminations was not yet clear. Mrs Grant looked rather wan and dragged-down. But the photos did seem to cheer her up. And she said at least three times, “Well, I never would’ve thought … ” as she looked at the images of Dennis Walsh. She seemed to find it quite natural and expected that Fiona would look charming in the dress she had sewn. But the idea of their local police sergeant looking … debonair … seemed to be hard to accept. Not that Dennis looked totally comfortable in his new suit; more that he was someone able to dominate such trivial things as clothes …

And on the way back to town she had seen Artie Kees walking along the verge. People out here usually did offer lifts if they saw someone walking. But she couldn’t bring herself to stop and offer Artie a lift. It probably *was* perfectly safe. Artie was unlikely to attack her in the car or try to hijack the controls. It might even help her to lay some of that old fear to uneasy rest. But when it came to the crunch she simply couldn’t find whatever was needed to pull over and ask. He probably was lonely and disorientated since his mother had died. But she couldn’t rouse up any real

sympathy. Yet to drive on past was to leave her with a faintly guilty feeling. It was getting late, getting cold, and she was the person in her comfortable car who had no intention of stopping …

When she finally got round to mentioning it to Dennis more than a week later he said simply, "Good. Don't go near Artie if you can possibly help it. He's still got a thing about you. I don't trust the bugger. And he's got two good legs. He might as well use them."

Paul had brought round a letter addressed to 'Sergeant Walsh and Buckton Police'.

"One of the nursing sisters brought it in. I was going to open it but as she hadn't said it was urgent I thought it could wait." Paul came over and sat down and poured himself a mug of strong tea from the pot on the table. Then he said, "So what brought you back two days early … or can I hazard a guess?"

*

The letter was from Kath O'Brien but contained a postscript to say the two other nursing sisters at the hospital agreed with it. Kath wrote: 'I don't know if this is something for you but we've all been rather worried. Christine Hewett died recently and we were all concerned about the level of jaundice she showed but Les Davis insisted that was a natural symptom for someone who had been receiving chemotherapy for liver cancer. Christine believed she was free of the problem, or at least in remission, but Davis insisted her liver function was so severely impaired that almost any infection would result in the reappearance of jaundice. We have all seen dozens of cases of pneumonia between us and we are certain that although she had some flu-like symptoms these could as easily be the onset of hepatitis—which would almost certainly be fatal for someone like her. We asked him to send away to get a test done—not least because hepatitis is infectious and depending on which type is also notifiable. If she'd picked it up in Winville or from someone working on the farm, even from her niece, then the sooner we know the better. There are vaccines and treatments, of various effectiveness, but all we got from Les Davis was the categorical statement that he knew pneumonia when he saw it. It is probably as much as his career is worth to miss an outbreak of hepatitis. But I really think the problem is—he digs in his heels if nurses query anything. He makes out that he is the All-Knowing and we are just there to empty bedpans and make beds. To ask tough questions is an absolute no-no.

'We need to know if there is the slightest chance of a hepatitis outbreak here—a.s.a.p. not least because the disease is mostly highly infectious in its long incubation period—before the actual symptoms show up.

'We know this is a tricky question to put to you—but as always we appreciate your thoughts.'

After reading it, Dennis tossed it over to Paul. "See if it's something you want to follow up."

But Paul, after reading it and sitting back to consider his response, finally said, "Why are they so sure the doctor has got it wrong? Has he made other mistakes?"

"He signed off on Bernie Goodrick as dying from heart failure when the old man had been stuffed full of arsenic. I s'pose it's a mistake anyone could make. But I think Kath's hit the nail on the head. As soon as anyone dares to query anything—he leaps on his high horse and refuses to budge. Pope Les—thinks he's infallible." But he agreed to ring Kath and arrange to go and talk to the niece if Kath could give him sufficient insight into the nature of hepatitis, its symptoms, its likely targets, how it might've spread, and maybe lay some fears to rest. He could ask to get the body exhumed but he had no idea if any virus would still show up …

Kath and Jeannie Martin were more than willing to give him a crash course in what to look for. "All you need to know about hepatitis—and then some," he said drily.

They both smiled but he did not doubt they were both seriously worried. "The most likely one is hepatitis A," Jeannie said soberly, "which can be serious in the elderly, even when they haven't had liver cancer." She handed him a couple of leaflets to take home for more study.

"And you're certain there haven't been any recent cases in Winville where Ms Hewett might've picked the virus up?"

"Not that we've heard. And hospital isn't the usual place to get it—not unless their hygiene standards are really the pits."

In the end he said, "Okay, I'll go out and see this niece tomorrow. How did she strike you?"

"Quite a pleasant woman. Seemed genuinely worried about her aunt. She said she brought her here rather than to Winville because it was a shorter drive and we could start the treatment sooner."

"And who gets the farm now?"

"It seems it will be the niece but she isn't a country person so I suppose she'll sell eventually."

He had thought to spend Saturday morning in more pleasant ways and instead he took the drive out to the Hewett property on the plains beyond Burleigh and bordering Prickly Creek. Although the farm wasn't postcard pretty, being almost dead-flat, he always thought it was a reminder that farming didn't have to be the sort of occupation that left problems for future generations. Christine and her father had treated their soil with the sort of love other people expend on antique furniture. And unlike other similar grain farms they had planted hedges and little coppices across the farm as refuges for birds and wildlife and to act as windbreaks. Christine herself rarely went out but when she did it was more than likely to be to a field day; any ideas which could preserve and nurture her precious soil was grist to her mill. Ley farming, rotations, low-tillage, mulching, the adding of lime, anything which would make her soil 'happier', as she sometimes put it, was worth knowing about.

But the niece, who came out as he parked in the pleasant area by the machinery sheds, had had to turn to commercial contractors for ploughing and planting this year. "They," she said after he'd offered his condolences and asked about the farm, "are a pain. Always being held up somewhere. I've had to go back to depending on Garth and that isn't working either. But I can't sell because my poor aunt didn't leave a will so I'm still waiting on everything. All I can do is pack and store the family stuff in the meantime and wait on the powers-that-be. Anyway, won't you come in? I've just put the kettle on."

It was a lovely old house with its sweeping lawns and verandahs, its old trees, its summer house and little alabaster fountain and broad steps with leadlight windows round the front door. It wasn't hard to see why Christine had never wanted to leave.

"So how can I help you," Prue Dare said, as she handed him a cup of black tea. "Are you sure you wouldn't like a piece of cake to go with it?"

"No. I've got other calls to make. It's just that questions have been raised about your aunt's death—whether it was pneumonia. Do you have nursing qualifications?"

"No. But I'm trained in First Aid and I have a fair knowledge of common ailments. I thought my aunt had the flu … which wouldn't be serious if it was me … but her health was in such a parlous state that I insisted on her getting to hospital. She seemed to get worse along the way which is why I thought it was turning into pneumonia. The doctor there agreed with me."

"The only trouble is, or so I understand it, that flu symptoms can be dozens of other things. Including hepatitis. And Les Davis is a totally useless doctor. If he says it was pneumonia it was probably leprosy or measles."

"Oh, come now! He's not that bad and he did look over my aunt very thoroughly. It wasn't just my say-so."

"So why did he categorically refuse to send samples away just to check that the symptoms were not masking something else?"

"You would need to ask him. I didn't know that he had made that call. But I am not altogether sorry that Aunt Chris went that way. It was a pretty poor prognosis for her and I hated to see her so weak and unwell. And you know it would've broken her heart to have to move into a nursing home or something."

He agreed. That was probably true. But he thought Christine Hewett was probably more resilient and accepting than this suggested.

"So why do you need First Aid?"

"I think *everybody* should have basic training, Sergeant. You never know when it may save a life." He nodded. "But I am co-director of a childcare centre in Brisbane. So, for me, it is essential." She gave him her slight but pleasant smile. "And I am glad I insisted on getting her to hospital. If nothing else she did get support and care for those last two days of her life. I know they did their very best for her."

"Have you ever come in contact with hepatitis?"

"Probably. I'm sure most people have. But I've never had any obvious symptoms. And I am not involved in the day-to-day care of the children. I run the office and do all our bookwork and occasionally drive the centre's bus … but other than that … " She raised her hands, palms upward. "I don't mind to go and have a blood test done, if you think it would be reassurance. But thousands of people are carriers and don't know it. I'm not quite sure what it would prove."

In the end he asked her to provide her home and work addresses in Brisbane. She handed him her business card. "If you think those tests are essential then I would, of course, agree to them. Aunt Chris is in the same plot as her dad … in Buckton. I suppose we could arrange very discreetly for some fluid to be taken and tested. But it does seem like profaning the dead. She was a very private person, you know, and would hate to think of anyone seeing her as a bloated corpse." That too was probably true.

"It's not up to me. But thanks for telling me what went on."

"When you say 'questions have been asked'—what do you mean by that?"

"I mean that no one at the hospital was happy with the way the doctor behaved. If they've got any chance of contamination or infection there—then they'd naturally like to know before another case pops up."

"I see."

As he was about to get into his car and drive away Garth Hamilton came out of the shed carrying a grease-gun and said diffidently, "Why are you here?"

"Not happy with the cause of death given for Ms Hewett. Are you working here permanently now?"

Garth Hamilton was in his mid-twenties but painfully shy. He was also one of those rare people, Dennis Walsh thought, who were born farmers; no matter what family he turned up in he would naturally gravitate to somewhere like this.

"She doesn't like me, that Prue," he said abruptly. "She says I was sucking up to the old lady, wanting something for nothing."

"And were you?"

"Yeah. I guess I was." He turned to look away to the paddocks. He sort of clenched his fists for a moment then made the effort to behave normally as he turned back to the police sergeant. "Wouldn't you?" Strangely, it seemed the most natural question in the world.

Walsh nodded.

"She pays me—nine to five—but when I said I didn't mind to stay on and do other things … like pruning the grape vines and things like that … she didn't like that. She said all she wanted was to keep the place ticking over till she could remove family things and put the place on the market."

He seemed to choke on this last sentence.

Dennis Walsh had not been convinced that the mistake, if it was a mistake, over the old lady's death was in any way criminal. Wrong things got said and done in hospitals every day of the week. But now looking at this young man with his confused attempt to deal with what the loss of this place would mean to him—he began to wonder. The defining aspect of Christine Hewett's life had been her love of her land. Would she really have wanted it simply sold off or had she been considering any other ways to keep it 'safe'. Of course it might be bought by someone who also cared. But this place would probably fetch a million or more on the open market and there was a good chance that it would be bought by a company of some sort which would treat it as a money-maker, pure and simple …

"Tell me, did Ms Hewett ever say anything about the farm to you? What she was thinking of doing with it if she didn't recover."

"Lots of times. She was thinking of working out a scheme … I'd run it for her and if she was happy that it would work then I could get to buy it over thirty years … some of the money going back into the farm and some to her niece. She came round to discuss it with mum and dad about two months ago."

"Did she now. And did she get on to a lawyer, do you know?"

The young man shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe she ran out of time."

"Maybe she did. But I'll check. Don't get any hopes up. But when a person dies intestate any statement they made about their wishes should be taken into account. So far as I know, anyway."

With that he drove away. But it seemed to be worth just calling into the Hamilton farm next door and checking Garth's story with his parents before they'd heard the story of his visit from their son. Mr and Mrs Hamilton said, yes, Ms Hewett had come to see them, they could even provide the date in their farm diary, and that she had obviously been seriously considering her proposition but that she had asked Garth to give it a lot of thought because it would involve a long-term commitment on his part.

"In what way?"

Mr Hamilton, like his son, had reddish-fair hair and an easily-sunburned skin, and, like his son, he was painfully shy and rather abrupt. "She said he would need to commit himself to her farm and he might not feel up to doing that. She said if he just liked the idea but not the work—then she might as well sell the farm and give most of the money to her niece."

Garth's father took out a large raggedy handkerchief and blew his nose. He too obviously had difficulty in putting feelings into words. "Of course she knew he would give his eye-teeth to live there. Ever since he was a kid he'd go over there and offer to help old Mr Hewett round the place. It was like his second home. And it breaks his heart to see everything going downhill."

He gave Dennis Walsh a rather defiant look.

"Do you know if Ms Hewett had a lawyer?"

"Charles Mather."

And Charles Mather did not like Dennis Walsh and was unlikely to offer any information. But it could probably be dug out of him. With difficulty. He was sitting down to Saturday lunch at Domenico's when Dennis Walsh came by, thankful for the orderly habits of certain Bucktonites.

"Just a quick question, Mr Mather, and I'll leave you in peace. Did Ms Christine Hewett ever discuss her will with you?"

"She did."

"And?"

"Nothing. She died before making her final decisions."

"Was she considering entering into some agreement with Garth Hamilton?"

"The question is irrelevant."

"No, it isn't. Did you make notes of the conversation?"

"No."

"In other words—you disliked Ms Hewett so much that you now regard her most likely wishes as irrelevant."

"I don't deal in wishes. I deal in documents and signatures, properly witnessed."

"Good man. So do I. So now I'd better get cracking. Every day the old lady lies there decaying the harder it will be for me to prove she didn't die a natural death." He got up again, loomed over the annoyed solicitor for a moment, then went out. Charles Mather half rose in his chair as though to follow him. Then he decided against it and went back to his meal.

*

"Dennis, I'm sorry to bother you this time of the night," Sister Kath said wearily, "but we've got a problem here. Tara Morton came in yesterday and had a baby boy. When we brought round the forms for her to fill in to register the birth today she insisted on writing your name down as the father."

"Did she now? I didn't think she'd go that far."

"Could you come around and try to talk some sense into her?"

"Okay. I'll try. Is her mum there?"

"No, she says Tara should've picked a 'decent man' quote unquote … and that she doesn't want anything to do with the baby."

"Be thankful for small mercies maybe. But where else is Tara going to take the baby? Because she and it won't be safe there with Lynnell."

Sister Kath hadn't thought forward to this aspect but Dennis was probably right. There was no way in the world that Mrs Morton would give this baby the time of day if she thought Dennis really was the father …

She had tried hard to get Tara to drop her claim; not least by saying "if Dennis was the father you need to know his second name to put it all down, where and when he was born, something about his family—"

"Nonsense!" Susan Denby said firmly, "Lots of young women these days don't know anything about the father's family."

Kath O'Brien was tempted to say 'then they should' but she said only, "In Brisbane maybe. But here in Buckton a girl who knew nothing about the family she was marrying into would be seen as a real odd bod. So if Tara wants to insist that she is the odd-one-out then she's going to have to come up with more evidence than her say-so."

Dr Les Davis had turned up to support Matron Denby and Tara; leaving Kath O'Brien and Jeannette Martin as the voices of reason struggling to be heard. Kath had finally said, "In that case we are going to have to get Dennis Walsh out here to find out what he has to say on the matter. A demand that Tara has a DNA test done won't reflect very well on all of us. And putting down someone's name you've never even had sex with is probably a serious offence."

"You don't know that, Sister," Dr Davis said mildly.

Kath O'Brien could think of quite a few sharp retorts but in the end she said a non-commital, "I'll go and ring Sergeant Walsh."

When he turned up about fifteen minutes later it was, surprisingly, in company with Father Michael Meagher. The priest looked ill-at-ease but managed to say a pleasant 'good evening' to everyone.

"I don't think the Mortons are Catholic," Matron said with a smile, "though it is very kind of you to call by."

"It isn't that, Matron," Meagher said with a sigh. "But we do need to get this business resolved, if only for the child's sake." He came into the side ward where Tara had been moved and gave her a nervous look. Tara, suddenly faced with a priest and a policeman, looked dismayed rather than pleased.

"I don't quite understand," Leslie Davis also showed no sign of pleasure in the arrival of the two men. "She says you, Sergeant Walsh, are the father of her baby. I assume you are going to claim you're not."

"I know perfectly well I'm not. But this young lady first went round hinting that Father Meagher was the father of her baby, then she had a go at me. But so far as I know the only man she's been going out with in the last nine months is Gordon Drewe. Even if she has no plans to marry him I assume he has a right to know that he has just become a father."

"Who is Gordon Drewe?" Susan Denby looked at Tara Morton. Tara had insisted on sitting up and putting on heavy make-up earlier in the day. Now it looked tired and messy.

"He works at the butter factory," Jeannie Martin put in. "And it is true that I've seen Tara with him a couple of times. But wouldn't it be better to register the baby without a father until Tara decides to tell the truth—"

"Are you saying," Leslie Davis looked astonished, "that you are accusing Ms Morton of lying? Do you really have so little concern for a woman who has just come through … everything? Talk about bullying the poor girl."

"Do you feel bullied, Tara?" Dennis Walsh said grimly. "You don't have to go back to your mum's place if you don't want to. People here will find you somewhere safe to stay with your baby."

"Can I go away somewhere, away from Buckton?"

"If you want to. Sister Martin and Sister O'Brien will help you find a flat and put in for the single mother's benefit. But you do have to be honest about your baby's father."

A spasm of anger crossed Leslie Davis's face; he appeared to believe he had been effortlessly circumvented. Susan Denby had enjoyed his sympathetic company and thought she understood that he might find his little clingy wife rather tedious. But now she felt an invisible boundary had been

drawn with her and Leslie on one side and her two nursing sisters on the other side with Walsh and Meagher. She found the idea curiously unsettling.

"I think," she said calmly, "we need to contact this Mr Drewe. Jeannie—would you ring him? If he doesn't know about the child it may be a shock to him—and we haven't got any proof. Yet. But I assume he does know whether or not he had unprotected sex with Ms Morton."

"The thing is becoming absurd," Dr Davis said sourly. "Pick a father. Either Ms Morton is seriously mentally defective and shouldn't be in charge of an infant—or there are a lot of men in this town who don't see a need to face up to their responsibilities."

"You would know all about that, wouldn't you?" Dennis Walsh said without apparent interest. "But if Tara doesn't feel able to care for a baby—then I assume you can help her arrange to have it adopted."

Sister O'Brien had half-thought of suggesting that; she was glad it had come from Dennis though. Undoubtedly some men didn't care who took their babies, at times, but the image didn't fit him. He seemed to wage an endless battle to try to get people to act more responsibly. She couldn't see him worming his way out of acknowledging fatherhood …

She felt she understood something else as she watched the group around the bed; Dennis Walsh, Michael Meagher, even the absent Gordon Drewe, were men with very similar colouring even though Gordon was much shorter and slighter. And there was a corollary to that. Putting down Dennis's name as father was Tara's wishful thinking. Her mother, her older sister, might hate Dennis and never miss a chance to badmouth him … but Tara, pathetic little Tara, wanted Dennis and knew she could never have him.

It was Tara who said in a small voice, "I want to keep my baby. He's all I have."

"In that case," Dennis turned to Susan Denby, "we have to make sure you and the baby are safe. But before you go to Winville or wherever you'd like to go to live—you do need to sort things out with Gordon."

Her eyes filled with tears but Father Meagher, still standing awkwardly beside Dennis, was inclined to think they were tears of relief.

"Could I … could I call him Dennis?"

"You can call him anything you like. He's your baby. But think about it a bit more before you decide." Dennis put his cap back on. "The only thing you can't do is put my name down as his father."

Tara looked up with wet eyes then she nodded slowly. "Okay, I won't."

In the car park as Michael Meagher got in the front passenger seat of the police car Dennis Walsh said to him, "I don't know exactly what went on between you and Tara but I assume she tried to trick you into something and made you feel compromised. Was it that, rather than reporting your car stolen, that upset you?"

The priest looked across. "You could say so." He let out a heartfelt sigh. "Or both." He had thought about discussing the situation but every time he had found himself baulking at the idea of confiding in Walsh; it somehow seemed easier to let go and talk finally, sitting here in a car in the twilight. Even though everyone knew the vehicle there was something oddly anonymous about being present inside it. "I remember going to a boys' school. It wasn't that anything actually happened to me. It was that atmosphere of suggestiveness and carnality. As though the Brothers kept the letter of their vows but undermined the spirit. When I decided I did want to help people, follow this call, the one thing I thought about most was whether I could cope without sex. I didn't want to end up like that. Because it always seemed vaguely smutty and dirty without being actually … wrong. If there was one thing that mattered to me it was a need to be true to my vow."

Dennis nodded. "And?"

"Last year … you probably know Gavin Kearney? He and John Goodrick bought that paddock and the old house out past the motel and Gavin is a devout Catholic and he asked me if I would officially say a few words, bless their venture, turn the first sod to make it into a caravan park. I said I would. They put up a big marquee, had drinks and nibbles. But about halfway through the evening I started to feel terrible. Dizzy. Nauseous. I couldn't think what was wrong. I had only had one glass. Gavin asked one of the women there to take me into the house so I could lie down for a

while. I must've passed out because I don't remember anything more. But I sort of woke up and the room was dark but I knew there was someone in there with me. I tried to pull myself together but my head was swimming and I must've dropped off again."

"And the person was Tara Morton?"

"I honestly don't know. But she had been there as one of the waitresses during the evening. The part I've never been able to deal with, Dennis, was that this person … I am certain they had been … " He looked away with sudden anguish, "I think they, this person, had been playing with me, with my … "

He swallowed with difficulty. "About three or four weeks later I was in the newsagency when she came in and as soon as she saw me she sort of thrust out her stomach and rubbed her hand round it and gave me a wink. I honestly didn't know what to do or say. I did a short stint as a prison chaplain … and I know some of the prisoners claimed they could get their wives or girlfriends pregnant … you know … simply by passing it out at visiting times. I really don't know. But the thought that something like that might've happened … I felt I couldn't live with myself. And quite a few people were saying I was a lush and must've drunk too much. I hate to say it but it was almost a relief when I heard Tara was going round saying you were the father. And then I hated myself for that too."

"You didn't think of putting in for a transfer or something?"

"It would follow me. Those things do. Nothing would be said openly. But people would watch me to see how I behaved. I felt I could handle something said to my face. It was all this sense of things being whispered behind my back."

Dennis Walsh nodded. It struck a chord. That was the trouble with gossip and rumour: it could wreck a life and yet no one would ever own up to being the originator. "I don't know if it's consolation or not—but I think she may have chosen you for two reasons. Because you look a bit like me. And because she desperately wants someone who can keep her safe from her mother."

"I wondered what you were getting at."

"I don't know but I think her mum has some strange mental thing. She hits Tara, really seems to go to town on her, then she turns round and is all lovey-dovey, my poor little baby girl, who's been giving you a hard time, that kind o' talk. Seems weird to me. It's no wonder Tara doesn't know what's real and what isn't. And I hate to think of her starting the same thing on the baby."

"It sounds a little bit like a condition called Munchhausen's by Proxy—which *is* pretty strange. Mothers hurt their children at home on purpose and then they rush them to hospital to demand the best care and to play the devoted and concerned mother when they get there. She maybe hurts Tara so that Tara will then have to turn to her for comfort."

"Or alternatively the mother is a right old battleaxe and she enjoys the hitting while she's doing it and only feels vaguely sorry when she actually sees all the cuts and bruises."

Father Meagher smiled slightly. It didn't surprise him that Sergeant Walsh would always look for the most prosaic explanation. "And do you think the baby is an attempt to get away from her mother?"

"Could be. But it's out of our hands now."

As Dennis Walsh dropped him at the gate beyond the church Michael Meagher said quietly, "I suppose this is the ultimate in penance. Having to live every day with people who look down on me as being weak and venal."

"Bollocks! A month with Tara and the baby gone and people won't remember. Or if they do they'll be glad you came through everything and are out and about in the parish again. They may not know when to hang their bloody tongues out to dry … but I reckon they know which side their bread is buttered on."

Not that he was totally averse to spreading rumours, or giving them a chuck under the chin and sending them on their way; it was all round Buckton now that Christine Hewett had probably died from hepatitis. What people had not been told was that he'd got on to Brisbane, both the police station nearest to the Early Days Childcare Centre and the Health Department, with a simple question: had there ever been a case of hepatitis at the Centre or even fears of one leading to

suggestions to parents about vaccination … or any rumours of staff or ex-staff going down with the disease …

Prue Dare might unwittingly have transferred the infection to her vulnerable aunt with her lowered immunity to infection. But Prue Dare had only begun visiting her aunt regularly after her diagnosis of cancer. That might simply suggest that aunt and niece accepted they didn't have much in common and it was only Christine's illness which brought them closer …

He didn't object to that distance; he had never felt a need to live in his family's collective pocket. But he did not doubt that the old lady had looked with more than gratitude on young Garth. Several of the neighbours were willing to say that she regarded Garth as next-best-thing to a son. They all concurred: of course she would want family things to go to her niece but she would rather the farm went to Garth in some form.

That way Ms Dare could expect to receive a very nice income as her share over the years under any such arrangement with Garth Hamilton … but it would come in installments. This way, a sale as soon as the legal situation was resolved, would make her rich overnight.

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An anonymous call came in later that same evening. It had turned into a most unpleasant winter's evening with strong blustery wind and racing cloud hiding the moon much of the time. The person at the other end gave out a breathless gabble to the effect that they had seen someone up by the weir and they might be thinking of jumping in.

It was a temptation to say: then let 'em jump. Instead Sergeant Walsh went out to the car and drove out of town to where the small dam on Buckton Creek provided a supply of faintly brownish water to augment people's rainwater tanks. The water level was higher than usual for this time of year but the concrete wall with its tempting top was clear and dry. Jumping into the cold water would certainly be extremely unpleasant but it would not necessarily be fatal. Possibly the someone only wanted to get away from home and couldn't think where else to go.

But as he parked nearby and walked down through the black shadows towards the water he realised someone definitely was there though it was impossible to guess their identity; they seemed to merge into the darkness of water and scrub with the moon hidden behind cloud.

As he came out into the clear he took out his torch and shone it. He couldn't hide his first surprise. "Dr Davis! What on earth are you doing here?" And then he thought that was a silly question. Who knew what she might've heard of the situation with Tara Morton. It was even possible that someone had tried to tell her Leslie Davis was the father …

Kamala Davis turned and walked slowly towards him. "I could not think how to make it look like an accident," she spoke very softly and it was hard to catch the words over the wind in the trees around them. "But I suppose there is nothing for it but to go home again."

"Let me get this straight. You came up here with the thought of committing suicide by jumping into that water?"

"The water in the creek, not the water in the weir, Sergeant, yes."

"I don't blame you for the thought. But I can't let you do it. So you'd better get in the car and I'll run you … " His first thought, to say 'home', gave way to a second one, "to get this … to find out what's going on."

"No. I don't want to get in any car. I'd rather stay here. At least there is no one here to point the finger."

"Maybe. But I haven't got all night to argue. So just get in before I lose my temper."

For a minute he thought she was going to ignore this threat and he wasn't sure that manhandling her into a police vehicle would go over very well. If nothing else her husband was spoiling for a way to get even for his dig this evening … Then she sighed and came over and seated herself in the car. But it was like watching someone accept that the prison gates were going to close again and there was no alternative.

He waited for her to belt herself in and then drove back to the station house. Whether her husband was starting to get a little worried—or whether he was around at the hospital still, perhaps having a little nightcap with Susan Denby—it seemed to be about time to try and find out whether

Kamala Davis was genuinely at risk from her husband or it was just an unhappy and unfortunate marriage …

He ran the police car into his own driveway and said, "Get out. There's a spare room here if you need to stay the night. Otherwise I'll run you home later."

For a moment she seemed to spark; perhaps in fear at the thought of being alone with him. Then she shrugged herself back down into her scarf and heavy parka and followed him into the house. Fiona was in the kitchen cooking a casserole. But as the doctor came in she smiled. "You've come to eat with us? How nice. I'll do some soup as well."

It was hard to know what Kamala Davis was thinking but Dennis Walsh thought, not for the first time, that Fiona could give even the most ordinary of words and thoughts that extra little something which made them seem kind and welcoming.

"Would you like to take your coat off? This is a cold old house but the kitchen is the warmest room."

"I can't stay here." Dr Davis looked from Fiona to Dennis and her face seemed tired and cold but curiously uninformative.

"Well, you can," Fiona said kindly. "The bed in the spare room is made up and we can put a heater in. It's not the Ritz but—"

"I have to go home."

"There's no 'have' to it. You go home *only* if that's the place you genuinely want to be." Dennis Walsh didn't make it sound like a nice option. "But people don't go out on miserable winter nights with the thought of throwing themselves in a very muddy creek unless they're pretty unhappy."

"It would look as if I was walking and I slipped and fell."

"As you walk up there every night. Sure. If you want me to assume your husband drove you to take your own life then that was an excellent idea. Did you?"

"I don't think it matters any more. I'm no good at anything. He hates me. I might as well be dead."

"Rubbish! I never heard such a lot of twaddle in my life. If he hates you then that is his bad luck and the man's a fool. And he's worse than a fool. He's useless and if he's telling you how to do things—then God help us."

"He's a very good doctor. I'm the one that doesn't know anything and—"

"Good! The man's an idiot! When Cherry Morton poisoned me your brainless husband told me I had an upset stomach. He put Bernie Goodrick down as dying from a heart attack when the old sod was full of arsenic. Now it looks like he's put someone down as dying from pneumonia when they had hepatitis. If that's being a good doctor—words just about fail me. The man's useless. And I s'pose he turned round and stopped you updating your skills and kept telling you you were hopeless and all the rest of it?"

Dr Davis had sat through this with her mouth slightly open. Then she seemed to pull herself together enough to say, "Even Ms Greehan didn't want to come to me because I'm no good."

"As your husband wasn't prepared to treat my visits as something confidential between you and me then I didn't feel I could keep—"

"What d'you mean?" Dennis came over and sat down at the table with the two women. "Are you saying he isn't treating your patients and your files as confidential?"

"He *is* my husband. If he wants to know why people have come to me—I can't refuse to tell him—"

Fiona had the horrible feeling that Dennis was going to explode and any chance of helping Kamala Davis sort things out would go up in smoke and flames. For a moment it seemed to hang in the balance then he hit his forehead with the flat of his hand. "I don't believe this! You mean every woman in the district who has ever come to you for treatment, possibly for some private woman's sort of complaint, has had your husband going through her files with his grubby little mitts?"

Put like this Dr Davis seemed to shrink into herself with embarrassment or regret. "I couldn't help it … and Joanne sees everything."

“Doesn’t matter what he is. Father, brother, husband, lover. A lot of people around Buckton aren’t going to be too happy when they hear what’s been going on there.”

“But—surely you don’t need to tell them? It would only upset people—” Dr Davis turned from Dennis to Fiona and there was something beseeching in her gaze. Fiona said gently, “Don’t worry about it now. I’m sure things can be worked out.” But she understood very clearly the gap between the way Dennis saw this as a betrayal of people’s trust and the way she saw it as being primarily the need to try and find some sort of comfort and help for this vulnerable woman.

“Then you had better do some hard thinking, Dr Davis, on what you’re going to tell the Medical Complaints people about what’s been going on. I’m not blaming you. I think your husband has made sure he’s never going to have to answer any questions from his wife. But that doesn’t mean I’m going to turn a blind eye. So either you write the letter to detail just what’s been happening—or I will. Tomorrow I’m going to Winville about another case so I’ll take you with me and you can look around for some work there—”

“I’m not sure that I can do that. My husband will be wondering—”

“This husband you were just planning to turn into a widower? Let the bastard do some wondering. I’m not a ruddy social worker. But I think it might do him good to do some decent wondering.”

Fiona was inclined to think this was good psychology; just not phrased very sympathetically. But a knock came at the front door before she or Kamala could respond. Dennis got up without enthusiasm and went along his hallway.

It was Leslie Davis standing there. “Is my wife here, Sergeant Walsh? Someone rang me to say she was.”

Was this the same busy anonymous caller—or just someone who’d noticed her in the police vehicle? “She is,” Sergeant Walsh said. “What’s it got to do with you? She’s quite safe here.”

“Then—tell her I’m waiting to take her home. She’s given me enough trouble for one evening.”

“Given you enough trouble for one evening? In what way?”

“Just tell her I’m here. It’s none of your business.”

“Oh, it is, Dr Davis, it’s very much my business—when I find that you are misbehaving with patient files.”

Dr Davis felt himself at a disadvantage, standing on the top step of the house with Walsh looming over him and the wind whistling round his ankles. “I don’t know what you’re talking about—”

“In that case you are even more hopeless than I took you for. In case you’ve never twigged, Dr Davis, patient files are confidential—regardless if they went to see your wife or Joe Blow.”

“If she’s been telling you stories—you don’t need to take any notice. She’s off with the fairies half the time. It’s got me really worried.”

“Then the sooner we set up a proper enquiry into what is going on over at your surgery the better. You’re useless. She’s off with the fairies. Frankly, I think Buckton deserves better than that.”

“What do you mean—an enquiry? And would you tell my wife to hurry up. I’m freezing here.”

Dennis Walsh stepped back without enthusiasm. “Come on then. And I was thinking of the usual sort of enquiry. Subpoenas to your wife and receptionist, requests for unhappy patients to come forward, that kind o’ thing.”

Dr Davis made no response to this but it was educational to see the way he entered the kitchen and looked around. He kept his face well-schooled but there was a tiny flicker of anger as he looked over to his wife.

“You’ve given me a great deal of worry, coming home and finding you gone, and some irresponsible person ringing me up to say you were going to jump into the weir—”

“Mrs Davis, it’s over to you now. You can stay or you can go. But before you go I want you to understand one thing very clearly. Domestic violence is a crime. But I can’t do anything for you if you keep on trying to hide it. He hits you, doesn’t he?”

Fiona turned to stare at Dennis. She thought Davis probably verbally abused and humiliated his wife. But she had never thought of it as a physically abusive relationship and she wasn't sure that Dennis could get any charges to stick. Leslie Davis seemed to be thinking this too.

"You're out of your tiny mind, Sergeant. Tell him, darling, tell the old fool that you're quite safe with me."

Kamala Davis might be an educated and attractive professional woman; but now she looked like a cornered animal. It was Fiona who said very sadly and gently, "You *are* safe here now. Whatever has happened in the past—you can say it—and we will move heaven and earth to keep you safe." Afterwards she wondered at her own hyperbole. But it was the fear that old ways, old conditioning, would overpower any sense that there might be another way.

And afterwards Fiona wondered how long they actually sat there waiting for Kamala Davis to answer; it seemed like endlessly long minutes …

The Indian woman began to shake, her hands tremulous on the table top. She moved them down to her lap but the anguish was no less evident. When the waiting became unbearable and Leslie Davis looked about ready to leap at her and shake an answer out—Kamala Davis said, "Yes, he hits me. That is how I lost my baby. He kicked me in the stomach."

After Kamala had cried herself into exhaustion in Fiona's arms and been put to bed with a hot water bottle and a small glass of brandy, Dennis Walsh said tiredly, "I wonder who made those anonymous calls tonight? I didn't recognise the voice."

"Just be glad they did." Fiona felt herself wrung dry of everything. But there was a key difference. Dennis came over and she felt the warmth of his arms around her …

Case No. 3: Serenity

Dennis Walsh got Constable Briggs to open the station next morning. He needed to get himself organised to go to the first sitting in Winville of the inquest into the death of Richard Scully. There had been some debate over whether charges should be laid against anyone other than Tracy Dillon. A lot of people, from Tracy's mother to Richard's family to the detectives assigned to the case, might conceivably have a case to answer. In the end the decision had been made to widen the inquest to allow some of these questions to be aired.

He had rung Dr Thompson in Winville as well as DC Ali Deane to ask if they could take time out to meet with Dr Davis and see if she wanted to lay charges against her husband. Fiona lent her some extra winter clothes and wished her well. Now it wasn't hard to understand how stressful Kamala Davis must've found it every time her husband shunted what he called 'tiresome women and puking babies' in her direction.

So it was Guy Briggs who took the call from George Johnson towards lunchtime; George said he had heard two strangers talking about what he took to be dogs … fighting dogs probably.

"Did they say where or when?"

"Somewhere out near Dinawadding, apparently. This Saturday arve."

"Dinawadding is a big area," Guy said without enthusiasm.

"Don't I know it." George also sounded gloomy.

"You're quite sure they didn't give out any other clues?"

"They did ask me if I knew who owned the dog over behind the station. I said I didn't. I said I assumed it was a stray and it would have to get put down if no one claimed it. They said they might call round and see you about it."

"And you didn't recognise them?"

"'fraid not." George seemed to mull on this dismissal a moment then he said, "But I don't reckon they were country fellas."

"Nothing to do with those film people?" Those were the only strangers Guy could think of.

"Well, now, that's a thought. But what would they want with dog fighting?"

"Same as anybody else, maybe."

A skeleton crew was now based in Garramindi with a number of interviews set up with various old-timers willing to talk of their memories and anecdotes about the prickly pear infestation which had covered much of the district seventy years ago. They had turned up various bits of old film footage and old photographs for their documentary which they hoped to finish in September and which would whet people's appetite for the tele-drama which would start filming in early spring and go to air in the summer holidays. But it was hard to see where dog fighting might come into it … even if the district's pioneers were not always the saints and heroes their descendants might claim …

As he hung up Guy couldn't think of anything else to do except tell Dennis; it was easy to think up clever questions and cleverer answers for his characters in his half-written mystery story. But there he never had the awful feeling of being put on the spot. He often lay in bed letting potential conversations and interrogations wander to and fro, dropping the more mundane aspects and keeping those ideas he thought would fit best. There was a problem though: the scintillating conversations and superbly-focussed interviews his fictitious police officers indulged in bore little relation to most of his everyday talk here. People might not believe in his characters. They would probably scratch their heads and say 'well, they may be like that in Sydney … but I've never met anyone like that out this way … '

But the plans he made with Dennis when his boss got back from Winville, minus Kamala Davis, went by the board that Saturday morning. Adam Rogers rang them from the Farm Stay Centre to say he had found his wife dead in their swimming pool. Dogs, dead or alive, could not compete.

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"What on earth is anyone doing in a swimming pool in July?" Dennis Walsh said grimly as they drove. "And how come he's only just found her?"

"Do you think he got angry with her?"

"I think he often gets angry with her. And husbands are always first port-of-call." Dennis looked across at Guy driving with a set face as though he didn't dare let any of his emotions show. "In this case, there would seem to be quite a lot of lovers to muddy the waters."

"Will you … have to tell them … about the video?"

"Hard to say. Let's hope it's an open-and-shut case. She slipped. She left a suicide note. Whatever. But that video's always worried me. Who made it. Who sent it to you. Why did they want to get it back."

"I thought it might be … Eve … a cry for help." Guy said it diffidently.

"Then why not put a note in with it? She wasn't a prisoner, for crying out loud. She could've told you what the heck was going on there. And if she needed help then you going out and running slap-bang into a tree wasn't going to be much use to her."

"I know. I sort of panicked … thinking other people might … see it … "

"If it's any consolation … it looks like there was only the one copy. Why go to such lengths to try and get it back if there were dozens of copies floating round. This might've been their master copy."

"Do you think it might be something to do with those drugs?"

"Chances are she was taking something. But maybe her husband doled them out … or maybe she was getting them from one of the men at Japana."

The crisp winter day sparkled round them. A few last patches of frost in the dips were disappearing. They drove into the car park at Caritas Farm Stay and got out. Adam Rogers came round to meet them.

"I was going to get her out," he said immediately, "then I realised she was cold and starting to stiffen. She must've been there for hours."

"When did you last see her?"

"About seven last night. We finished dinner then she went through to watch TV or a video. We've got two guests here at the moment and they sat chatting with me till maybe nine … then they went back to their rooms." He pointed to the guest accommodation beyond the swimming pool.

"You don't share a bed with your wife?"

"No."

"Very wise, no doubt. How long have you been married?"

"About six years."

"And where did you get married?" Sergeant Walsh didn't sound terribly interested; but Ashley Turner had been unable to turn up an Australian marriage to fit. So a key question remained.

"In South Africa."

"She met you there?"

"She did."

Eve Rogers looked curiously un-dead as they walked along the paved edge to the pool. The water looked distinctly uninviting but she lay in a large inflated rubber ring, her legs and hands trailing in the water, her head back so that her blonde hair spread wetly around her. Yet from a distance there was something relaxed and natural about the pose. She wore pink shorts and a tiny white top. It seemed an odd thing for anyone to have on in July. But was this what she normally wore to bed or had someone stripped away her heavier clothes?

Dennis Walsh came over to the edge nearest the inflatable. "How did you touch her?"

"I just reached out and caught her ankle."

"Did you touch the rubber ring?"

"No."

Mr Rogers stood looking down at his dead wife and shaking his head slowly as though he still couldn't quite believe in the evidence of his eyes. "I don't understand … why she would be out here at night." His voice showed no emotion, unless its flatness was evidence of emotion kept under rigid control.

"Does she come over to check on her guests at night, see that they've got everything they need?"

"Sometimes. But I didn't hear her go out."

"Did you hear her turn off the TV, go to bed, go to the bathroom, anything to indicate she was simply going to bed."

"I guess so. I didn't take much notice."

"So why make your guests go out into a cold wintry night—when you've got guest rooms in the house?"

"We ask people when they book. Sometimes they like the extra space and privacy."

"Well, go and ring Winville. CIB will have to take this over. There's no sign of it being a simple accident. Ask for Greg Sullivan."

"Why not Towner? He's got more experience."

"Because I understand Towner came here several times. I don't want claims of bias down the track."

"I can assure you, Sergeant, that Doug Towner has never been here."

"Doug Towner came with someone and removed the dog from Japana that we know was used in a sex film with your wife. What he said and what he did may've been innocuous but it isn't independent and unbiased."

"Then you will need to take your constable off the case too. And as you took that video to Winville you have also disqualified yourself on those grounds."

"All of Winville has probably seen that video clip by now. Are you suggesting you want whoever killed your wife to go unpunished?"

"I am simply saying that my wife had an unfortunate accident and I want anyone who wants to read more into it than that to be taken off the case. I assume they can send someone from Brisbane if there are any unanswered questions after the autopsy. But I think you will find that my wife had been drinking heavily before she fell in."

"Do you leave that rubber thing in the pool during the winter?"

"We do. It makes the scene look more … cheerful."

"Okay. Now, we'll want to speak to your two guests. But I would also like to see your wedding certificate. And one more question. Why did it take you until nearly nine before you got on to us?"

"I slept in. I do sometimes. I have a sleep disorder. Severe apnoea."

"Okay, call up your two guests and go and get that certificate."

"I have no idea where it is."

"Then you can give us the date and place and we will check."

"Do you always waste police time so frivolously … or are you one of those who laugh and say it isn't likely that an Adam would marry an Eve?"

"No, I am one of those who find the set-up here highly suspicious. So it makes sense to start with basics."

"If I find you have compromised this investigation, Sergeant, you will be the one treated with suspicion. I don't take kindly to people like you using my wife's death to carry out some private vendetta."

"Just do as you're told and then we can get that unfortunate woman out of the water and off to the morgue."

Adam Rogers gave them a long considering look then walked away towards the guest villas. Several minutes later two middle-aged men came over to join them. Rogers then went away to the main house leaving them all standing in the chill morning.

"Terribly sad," one of the guests said quietly. "We had no idea she was out here or we would've urged her to go back inside."

"She came over to see you in the late evening? Good hostess, that kind o' thing?"

"No. We didn't see her after dinner. Adam made coffee."

"You didn't hear her call out? A splash? A cry for help?"

"No. I'm afraid not. We sat a while and listened to music and chatted. We came up here really to discuss a business proposition in private. Nothing to do with Caritas. It was just a place to be sure no one would interrupt us."

"And what was this proposition?"

"It's to do with a factory in Victoria. We wanted the chance to go over the figures without anyone trying to persuade us in one direction or another."

"When you saw Eve at dinner—what sort of mood was she in?"

"Very cheerful. A bit … a bit too much of the big come on for my liking … but no sign of depression or worry."

"And you?" Dennis Walsh turned to the other man.

"She was quite the extrovert, sort of bubbling over. It was a relief when she went away to another room and left us in peace."

"You definitely didn't hear anything? It looks like she was in the water as early as ten last night." This was only a guess. The cold air and the action of the water on those extremities of the body immersed would make this a complicated question …

"Not a peep. I'm sure we would've heard if she'd screamed. But I understand she was a good swimmer. Even with the cold water she would've soon got herself out unless, as Adam thinks, she'd been drinking. He says he has been a bit worried over her liking for exotic cocktails."

"Any sign of drugs here? Even just sleeping pills?"

"I understand Adam occasionally takes something. She might help herself. It does look like a tragic accident."

"Did she offer, in words or actions, to have sex with either of you?"

"Of course not! And we would not have been interested."

"Why not?"

"We came here to do business. We don't have time for much else."

"But you sat chatting with Adam Rogers for two hours."

"He has money to invest. We wanted to get a line on how serious his interest was."

"And you don't seem in the least surprised that his wife might be available."

"I don't think it's a particularly happy marriage. She's a nympho. He's more interested in business. How they choose to deal with their incompatibility … well, that isn't our concern."

"You knew him in South Africa?"

"No. A mutual friend told us about this place."

He let them go. Then the two police continued to stand by the pool as though to guard the scene from contamination. At last Constable Briggs ventured a cautious "What do you think happened?"

"Strange that no one heard anything. I could almost believe in her falling in if the p.m. shows alcohol or something … if it wasn't for those clothes. It suggests someone wanted her to dress up to look like a little girl. Two ponytails. Cute little shorts. Fancy sandals. So if not her husband, who appears totally uninterested in her, and those two who strike me as seriously interested in money rather than sex … then who else was here last night?"

"You mean—she arranged to meet someone secretly? They sneaked in maybe."

"We'd better go … no, you stay here. I'll go and look for a note. If she did commit suicide it's just possibly she wanted the finger pointed at someone. And I don't believe him when he says Doug Towner never came here. The thing is … it looks enough like an accident for it to get under the radar screen. Flaky woman. Mad about sex. Comes out with the idea of going over to tempt her guests. Done up to look sort of sexy. Has been drinking. Or took some of her little red pills. Weaving about. Sees the inflatable there by the edge of the pool. Climbs in, passes out, dies from cold and … whatever. End of case."

Dennis walked over to the old farmhouse, now thoroughly spruced up, and went up the side steps. Adam Rogers was on the phone in the small office. As Dennis Walsh came to the door he said hurriedly, "I'd better go and see what Sergeant Walsh wants now", and hung up.

"Any sign of a note anywhere?"

"No—and believe me—I looked." Rogers came over to the door.

"Then, with your permission, I'll have a quick look so we can get on our way as soon as Sullivan gets here."

"He wasn't available. They said they'd send 'the team' to use their words. I'd rather they did the looking for a note, if you wouldn't mind."

"I do mind. You called us all the way out here then we get minimal co-operation. Anyway jot down the date and place of your wedding and show me your wife's bedroom and we can leave it at that."

"I'm sorry, Sergeant, I've handed it to the CIB team and that's the end of the matter so far as I am concerned. I'm sorry about dragging you all the way out here. But I didn't think of it as being any more than an accident, I still don't, but as you want to cover all bases … then that's what must happen. They're sending the van to take my poor wife—"

"Was she poor? Or was she in partnership with you in this venture?"

"No. She didn't have any money of her own. But I regarded her as a partner as she did much of the cooking and cleaning—"

"And servicing your guests. Yeah, that must've been a fairly full-on job."

"Believe me, Sergeant, that was never one of her duties. If she made choices … but I find your tone quite offensive."

"And I find the two of you handing out illegal drugs to schoolboys offensive."

"I don't know where she got them. Nor did I see her giving them away."

"Or you would've intervened? Of course." Dennis Walsh walked through the small room and into the main part of the house. "Very nice. Very … tasteful." He walked along to the dining room and kitchen. "So you were sitting here over your dinner … or somewhere else?"

"Here." Adam Rogers was realising that there wasn't a simple alternative when Dennis Walsh decided to take matters into his own hands. He couldn't be manhandled out of the house; only a complaint laid later. "It was easier to discuss business with the table to put things on. And it was quieter with Eve through there listening to something."

Walsh nodded and went to and fro as though looking for a note. Then down the hallway and into the various bedrooms and a large comfortable lounge with an open fireplace. "Very nice." He recognised the bedroom that featured in the video with Guy Briggs and Eve Rogers cavorting. He had studied it carefully enough to have a fair idea where the cameras would need to have been positioned. "I'm surprised your guests didn't take this. Much more comfortable than a room out the back yard."

As he spoke he wandered over to a big table lamp with a peculiar contorted figurine as its base. It only took him a minute of looking up and down the metal excrescences to see the lens. He turned back to Adam Rogers, being careful not to touch anything, and said, "How did she operate the cameras? Voice? Remote control? A button by the bed?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, I think you do. I'm not surprised those two guests of yours understood the rooms out the back are a lot safer."

He turned and came out into the hallway again. If Guy didn't get the library job he would make sure he was transferred or sent on leave as soon as possible. But it was one thing to try and compromise Guy. The real question was: who was their main target? Guy was too unimportant to be worth this elaborate set-up. And he could no longer believe that sexy romps played much part in Adam Rogers' thinking. Like those other two men he gave the impression that business was more important than personal relationships … or was that only a carefully-cultivated façade …

*

It was another twenty minutes, a very chill twenty minutes, before two cars and the van from Winville turned into the car park and various people got out including DI Doug Towner and DC Ali Deane.

"And what the fuck d'you think you're doing here?" was Doug's greeting.

"Attending a crime scene." Dennis looked more at ease than anyone else.

"Then you can butt out—" Towner seemed to dip in mid-sentence. "Crime scene? What bloody crime scene? The stupid dame fell in her own swimming pool. We'll get her fished out and get on our way."

Maybe. It didn't quite explain why Doug had brought reinforcements. But Dennis merely said, "Good oh. We'll leave you to it then." He walked away to the car and waited for Guy to get in. Then the two Buckton men drove away without a backwards glance.

"Do you think it *was* just a straightforward accident?" Guy finally ventured.

"Nothing about that lot is straightforward. I doubt they can even lay straight in bed, they're so bloody devious and twisty. Give me the Goodricks any day. At least I know where I am with them." In thought, he added 'mostly'.

"So why did you ask that about his marriage?"

"Well, doesn't it strike you as a pretty strange marriage? Would you simply go on chatting and eating while Joanne gets up and goes out with whatever men or boys happen to be around at that minute?" Guy had to admit he couldn't envisage such a situation. "They may be married," Dennis went on as though to follow an implacable trail, "but it would have to be a marriage of convenience. He wanted a visa to get into Australia. Great long queues of people with the same idea. He meets her, sees it will help his case, says he doesn't expect anything from her … no nice little wife … no kids … " He seemed to contemplate this for several minutes before saying, "but that still doesn't quite fit. Why not simply go their own ways. Why cart her round with you all the time and have people gossiping and pointing the finger. I think he's got some hold over her … but still—why bother … None of it quite stacks up."

"If she's addicted to something then she'll do anything he wants for the sake of keeping the supply going."

"And she's the icing on the cake for these old geezers that come for the weekend? Maybe. Even so … remember that note in DI Garcia's material when he was s'posed to be working on the case of those four girls … why would he describe Eve as a 'seriously loose cannon' when her husband can simply say 'this marriage doesn't seem to be working so let's go our own ways' and he can hire a reasonable housekeeper or get himself another lover or whatever. Does Eve know something that made her dangerous to … "

"How could she be dangerous to Garcia?"

"I thought—it seems pretty likely both Garcia and Doug were on the make—are on the make. But although that place isn't too bad the way they're setting it up … it doesn't suggest big enough money to be worth taking risks. Two people staying there at the moment. Even say they're paying a

hundred a day each … that's an income but it's not serious money … and I don't see Garcia being content with a fifty under the table. But it's out of our hands."

"Then … " Guy sounded gloomy, "it's back to the business with the dogs."

"So it is." Dennis seemed to cheer up. "Pull over and park. No point in charging back to Buckton—if they're setting up something out here. Good man." He clapped his constable on one unenthusiastic shoulder. "What say I drop you in Dinna. Go house to house, ask if anyone's heard or seen or caught a rumour or knows of anyone breeding dogs. Remind them dog-fighting is illegal. Tell them to get on to us if they hear even a whisper. I'll go round a few of the farms."

Guy nodded. "And what shall I say if anyone asks why all the police are there at the Farm Stay place?"

"The truth. Eve Rogers was found dead in her swimming pool. If people want to gossip about the Rogers let 'em. You never know. If people don't know diddly about one thing they sometimes have a line on something else." Was there a connection between dogs and the farm? The feed lots? He was inclined to think not. Not with the RSPCA's man coming by recently and still interested in the place … though these people might enjoy the brinkmanship of staging fights almost under Jim Holland's nose …

*

And when Dennis Walsh said he wanted to go farm to farm he mainly had in mind the farms within cooee of Caritas; more particularly the farm almost opposite. He'd had some good information from Erica Firkin there in the past; that he couldn't do a lot with it didn't alter the fact that she was observant and sensible.

He found her at home and asked after her health. "Not brilliant. But I'll survive. How can I help you this time?"

"It's pretty much the same thing. Did you happen to notice a car or cars either turn into Caritas last night … or turn out?"

"Something's happened, hasn't it? All those police cars there now."

"Eve Rogers died sometime last night. They found her in the swimming pool this morning."

To his surprise she turned away from him and went over to her door and looked out for several silent minutes. When she turned back to him he saw there were tears in her eyes.

At last she wiped them away and said rather wearily, "Not last night, Sergeant. But during the afternoon, yes. I didn't take much notice. I think it was a white car … or a light colour. It turned in. Maybe about four. I didn't see it leave."

There was a white car, a Toyota, parked there still. He had assumed it belonged to the two men staying there. It probably did. Except they had said they arrived in the morning. It was possible they had gone out for a drive in the afternoon and Erica had only seen them returning.

"Not the car parked there now?"

She came out to look down from the front steps. "I'm sorry, yes, it might be. I don't think I'd like to say one way or the other."

"Fair enough. I really came round to ask if you've ever heard of any dog-fighting going on."

"Down near the creek maybe, the gully, I've sometimes seen cars parked there of a Saturday afternoon. I like to think people are going for a picnic … but in this weather that's probably … wishful thinking."

"I'll go and have a look. I want to catch the bastards if I can. But I'd like to ask a more personal question. Neither Eve Rogers' husband or her guests showed any sign of crying over her death but you did. Is that just your kind heart … or did you actually know her?"

"I met her. One day I went down to the gully. It must be about a month ago. I just wanted to take a little break and it's only ten minutes away. She was there. She was lying on a car rug. At first I thought maybe she was asleep and I wasn't going to wake her up … but then I realised she was crying. I didn't like to intrude on something that might be private. An argument with her husband maybe. But in the end I thought I couldn't just go away. I asked her if I could help and she said 'no one can help me'. I really didn't know what to say. I'm not very good with upsets and people's troubles. But I said, 'there must be something I can do' and she said 'you can pray for me if you like'. Then she stood up and folded up her blanket and said she must be going and she walked

away. Maybe I should've tried harder to get her to talk to me. You don't think … you don't mean … that she's killed herself?"

"I don't think so. I think someone's set it up to look like an accident. But I honestly don't know. We'll have to wait and see what the Winville people say."

"He comes there sometimes, doesn't he, that Winville detective."

"You know him?"

"Doug Towner? Yes, my husband knows him. He pointed him out to me once when we were there. He just said, see that fella—and then he said something about him being very high up in the CIB and I thought that was quite exciting. I was down at the road gate one day to pick up the mail when I saw his car turn in. I'm sure it was him. I just assumed he was investigating something."

"Do you remember when this was?"

"It's at least two months ago. I was just back home from hospital. They told me to take things quietly. I thought walking would be good for me."

"Mrs Firkin, you are a jewel. I just wish everyone was as observant as you are. But I'm not sure just what is going on there. So if anyone asks just mention that we're looking into the rumours about dog-fighting. But before I go—do you remember just where Eve Rogers was down by the gully?"

"About twenty yards down from the bridge. There's a big 'blackboy' there with a big round stone beside it on the slope. She had her blanket spread out on the gully side."

As he went out she said rather wistfully, "If you find things out—could you tell me about it someday? I don't go out much and life is pretty quiet."

*

Eve Rogers *was* probably just lying there among the trees because it was quiet, it was peaceful, she could get away from her duties, her troubles, the people in her life maybe. But there was just a small chance she came there for other reasons. What those reasons might be was hard to guess. To meet someone? Possibly.

He parked beyond the bridge over the small gully. A shallow pool of brown water lay below the bridge but otherwise it was dry. He found the big grasstree without difficulty. The rock was a fair size but not so large that a woman couldn't move it. But was it a marker—'meet me near the rock and the tree'—or a handy seat or even useful to cover something? He sat down on its smooth surface and looked down towards the gully. At first the bushland looked largely untouched then he thought it might be possible to see marks further down. With the help of the imagination it might be construed as a makeshift arena.

He walked down to look more closely. Almost certainly dogs had been here … at some stage. Had the people got wind of police interest and moved on … or was there a kind of revolving door approach to the 'sport'?

He returned to the spot on the hill. Why did Eve Rogers sit in this particular place? And did she know about the people who came here … and why was she crying? The only thing left to do in the seemingly hopeless quest to understand Eve Rogers was to move the stone. It took him several minutes to manhandle it down the slope and bring it to rest against a gum tree.

"Bingo!" That there might actually be something here seemed almost as strange as everything else about this situation. Because the more he thought about dogs fighting here the more unlikely it became. It was too close to the road for one thing. Not that this little side road got much traffic … but it got some …

Or had a dog merely been tied here for some reason? Walking the labrador?

The thing covered with a thin layer of soil was a black plastic bag. He eased it out with his handkerchief. The bag was taped but it suggested something like a spool of film inside … or perhaps another supply of pills in a small container. He wrapped it in a spare plastic bag, he usually kept a couple in a trouser pocket, and put it in with a handkerchief on top. Although he went over the area carefully it yielded nothing else.

Guy had covered the hamlet of Dinawadding quite thoroughly without turning up any obvious clues. Dennis said, "Well, let's get something to eat then head home."

"You're not going to keep looking?"

"Not today."

Guy rarely argued. His natural tendency was to come at things obliquely. But now he couldn't resist saying, "You've found out something, haven't you?"

Dennis only shrugged and got back in the front passenger seat. "Let's get home and see what our home-grown baddies are doing."

*

They didn't seem to be doing anything in particular. The streets of Buckton were largely deserted except for an occasional child on a bike. It was an away day for the footie fans. And not warm enough to be out walking for the fun of it.

The two men went into the station and Dennis opened the grubby plastic very carefully. A grey plastic container rolled out.

"A spool of film?" Guy looked excited.

Dennis lifted it with a cloth and shook it gently. "I'd say so."

The local chemist did all the films for the various local photographers. But this might not be the sort of film to give to a respectable little business. "I think … we're going to have to take it to the lab in Winville. It might be something totally uninteresting, like shots of Caritas, but there's a good chance it's something more. Do you want to take it? I'll see if I can get Greg to come in and tee everything up for you."

But Neil Midgley in the uniform division in Winville took his call and said Greg Sullivan had gone out to investigate a robbery the other side of Winville and could he help—

"Neil, I need a film developed. Pronto. What's the situation?"

"I'll get Tony Chapman to handle it. Four of 'em, including Doug, have gone out to a place near Dinawadding. We're a bit short here."

"I think this may connect up. I'll send Guy with it. The sooner we see what's on the film the sooner we'll know if it's relevant or not."

Guy had chosen a fairly everyday situation as the plot of his novel-in-progress. Now as he took the package and got in the car for the run to Winville he wondered if he should've gone for something more dramatic. The trouble was—a first novel with a bizarre plot full of police corruption and hard-to-conceive twists and turns might be harder to get accepted by a publisher.

After he'd seen Guy depart Dennis took the choke chain, and the wire muzzle, and went out the back to get the dog that no one, not even his probably crooked owners, seemed to want. He had thought that someone might try to spring the animal but the weeks went by and nothing happened. Now he was convinced that the dog was unwanted. It might well be that his fighting days were over but another idea had formed in Dennis Walsh's brain … an idea that horrified him … but just might explain … something.

There was no sign of Fiona at his house. He was reluctant to take the animal out along the streets. But despite its unprepossessing and well-scarred appearance the dog had ceased to show any ill-will towards him. He walked down to the end of his short street and turned on to Creek Road. There were a couple of children throwing stones into the waterhole down below. But one look at him and the dog on the opposite bank and all four boys took to their heels. Throwing stones into waterholes wasn't a bookable offence, if it was most of Buckton would be banged up, but they weren't going to take any risks …

Several mothers later remonstrated with him for even thinking of taking the dog for a walk. "What if it got away from you?" was the gist of their worry.

Fiona when she looked out and saw him at her gate had a different worry. "What if he hurts you? Even with the muzzle he looks pretty fierce."

"I'm sure he hates men … but I'm not sure that he hates women."

"No, he just scares the pants off them."

"I think that may be truer than you think. But it's hardly something I can set about proving."

She looked at him with puzzled eyes. "Can I ask a lot of stupid questions? Just what is going on?"

"I don't know the answers. I'm beginning to wonder if I even want to know. But you do look very beautiful. Would you like to come to Winville with me later … when Guy gets back with the

car? I'm going to take him to Dave Gurney. He won't thank me but the animal can't stay here." All the while they were speaking he was watching the dog closely.

"Is it safe to take him in a car?"

"I'll tie him. I don't want him touching you."

"Then I'll risk it. I'll be about another half hour here then I'll come around." But she still had a small frown as she watched him walk away with the dog.

*

Guy was back by late afternoon. He too had a puzzled look about him but he said immediately, "The film had already been developed, just nothing printed off it. Tony did me prints of the whole roll. But they don't seem to make any sense. And they're not very clear."

"Even if they don't mean anything to us—they obviously meant something to Eve Rogers. So with luck we'll get there eventually."

But he was inclined to think this was an optimistic view after he'd shuffled through the prints. Most of them had what appeared to be a fairly young man in them. He wasn't doing anything in particular. In several he was sitting on a wooden chair. In one he was seated at a table eating. In others he was simply standing. The unclear photos suggested an open landscape behind him. It could be almost anywhere with some savannah country to be used as backdrop.

"A boyfriend? A brother? A friend? Someone from her childhood? I assume it was taken somewhere in Australia … but I s'pose it could be South Africa. But why did she hide it and why did it make her cry?"

"How do you know she hid it?"

"Not for absolute certain, no, but I'll run with the idea. Someone saw her up by the gully one day and she was crying." He repeated the conversation but left any hint to Mrs Firkin's identity out of it.

"Then it must be important," Guy said seriously. "I wonder if we could get those pictures made clearer by an expert?"

"Could be. See what you can find out if there's someone who knows, George Hickman might, while I take the dog to Winville. He'll have to be put down but I want to get Dave Gurney to assess his behaviour first."

"You mean—to see if he really is a fighting dog?"

"I'm sure he's been in fights—which may not be the same thing." He had one more look through the photographs before putting them aside with a sigh. "I want to see if he shows any signs of behaving the way that Dobermann does."

Guy turned and stared at him. "You don't mean—not a dog like that? That would be really—" Words seemed to fail him.

"Really what? Sadistic? D'you know something, Guy, I'm beginning to think that's more likely than kinky sex. I think Eve Rogers was being punished for something … "

"For what?" Guy seemed to take the idea and look at it cautiously.

"There you have me. For loving the wrong person, maybe." He picked up the car keys and the folder. "Ring me on the mobile if you hear anything from Doug." Then he put the keys down again. "I'd better take the station wagon. Less obvious. And you might need the car." He went to the door. "There was something odd though about that body—"

"Like what?" Guy always seemed to assume such questions were like exam questions; that there must be a right and a wrong answer.

"A cold night. A very cold pool. But she looked perfectly … peaceful. Almost serene. I don't know how she died. But I don't think she minded dying."

"Maybe she was too drunk to realise?"

"You'd have to be legless not to notice the temperature of that water. And if she was legless—then she didn't get there under her own steam."

Dennis went out, leaving Guy to think this idea through.

*

Dave Gurney, the vet in Winville, did not take kindly to the arrival of another dog. "How many more of the bloody things've you got lined up for me, Dennis? The way things are going no

decent dog-owner'll be willing to bring an animal in here—scared they'll either catch something infectious or get mauled to death—"

"I know. The animal will have to be put down. But I just want you to observe him quietly for a couple of days, just to see if you think he's got the same idea in his head the Dobermann had. Whether I can ever get to the point of laying charges … God knows. But we've got some pretty weird sicko people out there. I want to get them if I possibly can. So it seems to be a matter of getting down in the gutter with them to try and work out what makes them tick."

"Better you than me," Gurney said sourly. "But bring him through."

His wife was out the back of the surgery going round the pens and cages to feed the various patients their various invalid and post-operative diets. Dave Gurney had taken the chain from Dennis. But despite his years of experience with animals the dog caught him by surprise, jerking the chain from his hand and galloping towards Mrs Gurney. She turned in surprise at her husband's yell. Then the dog was leaping up at her. She dropped the bowl she was holding, spraying gravy and mince everywhere, but although the dog hadn't eaten since breakfast-time he showed no interest in this sudden bounty.

Nor did he appear set on hurting the unfortunate woman. Dennis caught his chain again and managed to drag him aside. But Dave Gurney only said, "You wanted to know if he had the same idea in his head … I guess you know now. My grandmother had a little terrier. It started to think it could put her armchair legs up the spout, poor little thing, and embarrassed the hell out of her. I wish this bloody monstrosity would stick to chair legs."

Peta Gurney managed to tidy and compose herself again before saying, "Is someone going to tell me what on earth is going on—before I lose my cool and scream at you both."

"I'm sorry." Dennis held the panting dog. "I'm afraid some sick fool has been teaching dogs to fancy women. And how many more are out there—I hate to think." He handed the chain to the vet. "Jim Holland said he'd come round and advise you this evening. I'll leave the decision on putting the dog down to you both."

He stood there for another minute in the twilit yard. Then he reached out and gave the battle-scarred animal a tickle behind the ears. "Poor bloody pooch. Not your fault."

Fiona was sitting waiting in the car out the front of the surgery. "What did he say?" she said as he got in.

For a minute he just sat back and closed his eyes.

"End of the road." It suddenly and unexpectedly seemed to buzz with many meanings.

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They went round to the Beefeater Motel after having dinner at Winville's one Chinese restaurant. Although he tucked away a fair-sized meal he was subdued and not very attentive throughout the evening. She hung up her coat and said with a smile, "I won't say anything about showers but would you like a hot drink?"

For a moment he simply looked blankly at her. Then he seemed to pull his thoughts together. "No, I won't. Thanks." He went over to his small overnight bag and took the folder of photographs from the side pocket. He had told her about Eve Rogers' death but as Fiona hadn't met her it didn't make a major impact, only her puzzlement over anyone wanting to go near a swimming pool on a midwinter night.

"You might have sharper eyes than me. Would you mind to have a look at these and see if anything strikes you."

She took the folder and sat down in the best light. After a minute she said, "I think some light got in the camera. They're all over-exposed." And after looking through the pile twice she said cautiously, "I don't think they were taken in Australia."

"Why do you say that?"

"It's only a thought … but see here … you can just see what looks like a thatched roof … like the thatched round houses in Africa. I suppose it could be some sort of summer house or thing for plants. But here too … " She pointed to the shape of a tree in the hazy distance in one photo. "I'm no expert on trees, as you know, but it sort of makes me think of Africa again. The shape of it. I'm only guessing."

"No, I think you're probably right. Eve's husband is South African."

"What did Eve look like?"

"A bit taller than you, say another four inches. Blonde. Don't ask me if she's a natural blonde. Blue eyes. A fairly strong face. Sort of big and busty."

"Every man's dream, in other words?"

"Heck no! Well, not mine. I've never gone anything on blondes."

He might protest too loudly but she did believe him. "And I'm not wild on blue eyes—even if I'm stuck with them. And big and busty just makes me feel sorry for the poor woman that's got to cart all that useless meat around."

"If you're trying to make me feel good about myself—you're doing a grand job, Dennis Walsh."

"Am I? I was really just trying to explain Eve Rogers to you."

Fiona picked up the pictures once more and looked more closely at the man in them. "I'm only guessing again. But he looks like the sort of man who might be related to an Eve Rogers."

He held out his hand for the pictures. At last he nodded. "D'you know, I think you're right. I just wish the pictures were clearer."

"You could get them blown up bigger and darkened. It might improve the definition."

"Excuse me a minute." He turned to scrabble in his bag and bring out his mobile phone. He still used it awkwardly and she half expected him to end with 'Over and out'. But he rang Ashley Turner at home, apologised perfunctorily, and said, "Adam and Eve again. I wonder if they could be brother and sister? Eve is s'posed to have married in South Africa about six years ago. But if she did marry there … wouldn't she need to register her marriage with an Australian embassy for it to be legal here? And maybe she went over with a brother before that … and something happened to the brother … "

"You're saying—the brother is the missing person?" Ashley had finally got her thoughts together.

"I think he's more than missing. I think the man now calling himself Adam Rogers might've stolen his passport, his identity … Is that possible?"

"All things are possible. So Adam and Eve masquerading as a married couple might not be … and the man calling himself Adam is really Pinch Me … very good, Dennis, if a bit far-fetched … but an Australian passport is worth good money. How do you want me to proceed with this idea? I can't simply contact South Africa on a whim."

"Eve Rogers died sometime last night, apparently by falling in a swimming pool. Doug Towner has taken on the case. I'm not happy about it as I think he had a prior relationship with both of them … business with Adam, sex with Eve … but I can't prove more than that he did visit there … even though Adam Rogers told me he never did. The whole thing is getting too complicated for me. My poor old brain is going to overload and blow soon."

"Baloney! I'd back you any time over Doug Towner. But where do you think this Eve Rogers came from originally?"

"Sydney, possibly. New South Wales seems more likely than Queensland."

"Okay, leave it with me and I'll see what I can find out."

Fiona had heard his end of the conversation. Now she said, "Would you like to bring that poor old brain to bed? Put everything on hold for a while … and you'll wake up tomorrow and everything will have fallen beautifully into place. I find it really does work for me … sometimes."

He came over and sat down on the edge of the bed. Then he reached out unexpectedly and raised both her hands and looked at them in silence. He had bought her a simple plain gold band for the ceremony but like many countrymen he resisted wearing anything on his hands; afraid of catching it when dealing with recalcitrant animals or problematic machinery—and they had chosen to put off buying what might be termed an engagement ring until they found exactly what they both liked. Now he said suddenly, "They get diamonds and gold from South Africa, don't they?"

"Yes. Why?"

"It's always struck me that there has to be money in this case—somewhere. That this business about Hendrik Bruloder and his loyal followers wasn't sufficient explanation. But I haven't a clue where to look or even what I mean by serious money."

"People *do* follow unpleasant people in a very fanatical and loyal way, you know. You only have to look at Hitler—"

"But if he hadn't delivered in terms of jobs and money … would they have kept on following him?"

At last she nodded. "For a while … but if talk about blood and race and glory doesn't put food on the table … yes, people do tend to prefer to follow those who have money … or a powerful idea which promises a better life some day … like Gandhi."

"So Bruloder Inc might be a … I don't know what to call it. Everyone can see it. It's out there in the public view … "

"A Trojan Horse maybe … everyone can see the horse … but they don't notice the men sneaking out of it at night."

He was still holding her hands absently. Now he found himself fondling them as though they were something delicate and precious, running his hands along each slender finger, as though they contained the knowledge that still eluded him. "You do have beautiful hands, you know, but I don't seem to want to buy gold or diamonds any more."

"Then we will have silver … a ruby … or an opal." She lifted his big hands, all the little chips and scars and roughness, and knew she never regretted the manicured cared-for hands of the men she had considered all her working life. They were just … hands. These held her life and happiness in them.

Case No. 4: This Sporting Life

Morning. The crisp paddocks flitting by. For Fiona they were simply paddocks, with unknown lives in the scattered farmhouses; unknown unless they were bank customers and had therefore put their financial details in her safe keeping. But for Dennis they seemed to remind him of all the problems he hadn't been able to solve, all the outstanding little mysteries which pressed in on him.

One of them was on the answerphone at the station when he went in after dropping Fiona off at Raelene's flat. It might seem mysterious to local people that she hadn't simply moved in with him but he had never pressed her; not least because he knew the flat was more comfortable and Rae stood in lieu of the usual parcel of female relatives to help her through this first pregnancy. Rae might not know a lot about babies but she was good company and did care—even if he did sometimes feel he had his own private bones to pick with her. And Rae and Kieran lived contentedly in two separate homes and were happier than most couples who shared a house and a bedroom; he wasn't sure if there was a moral in there or if they would be happy under any arrangement.

But the message brought him very thoroughly down-to-earth. It was Karen Dalton. Again. She was certain there was something in the house with her. She had felt something touch her—but when she screamed and turned around there was nothing there. He had taken her belief in the prowler seriously in the beginning. Now he was starting to feel that the problem must surely lie with Mrs Dalton, that she couldn't handle the moments of solitude country life inevitably brought. Or that her family, her three sons, were somehow playing some unkind practical jokes on her. If either of those ideas was correct then there wasn't a lot the police could do for her.

'Another case where I don't have a clue', he thought gloomily. And what might be going on out at Caritas under Doug's supervision? A whitewash, quite possibly, and again there didn't seem to be a lot he could do.

But he rang the Daltons and got Karen who said she was sorry to be a nuisance but she had been quite frightened. "I was okay once the family came home—but for a while there I didn't think I could stay in this house a minute longer. I know it sounds silly but I don't know what to think. The

boys tell me these gruesome stories they've heard about the old man that was murdered down at that pub … but I really don't believe in the dead walking."

"And he wasn't murdered. Three silly little boys were mucking round down there and hit a horse with their slingshots. The horse bolted and knocked an old man down. Sad. But it was hardly the sort of thing your boys are implying."

"Are you sure about that?"

"Absolutely. I'll take you to meet one of the men who was there all those years ago. He can tell you the story from his personal experience. He was about five at the time."

He half expected her to laugh or to say with some relief, 'that's all right then—I won't stew over it any more'; and instead she said with some fervency, "Would you mind? Maybe I just need to get away from this place for a few hours and meet some down-to-earth country folk."

"Have you got the use of a vehicle?"

"No. The boys are away in Winville. They left about an hour ago."

"Okay. Walk down to your gate and I'll be there in about twenty minutes and we'll go and call on Ray Werner. He lives not far from you."

Ray was a widower and still ran the farm on his own with occasional help from his son who worked as the handyman-gardener at the big retirement village in Winville. He grew lucerne and did his own chaffing and carting. He also ran a small herd of Murray Grey cattle on the lightly-timbered country behind his house where it backed on to the boundary of the McLeods' big property. He sounded cautious when Sergeant Walsh rang to ask him if he would mind telling his long ago experience to Mrs Dalton. "Why on earth would she want to hear that old story? We were just kids. We didn't realise what would happen. It gave us the fright of our lives when the horse took off."

"Someone's been trying to wind her up, get her scared that it was murder and the ghost has come back for vengeance, that sort of stuff. I'm sure she'll believe it wasn't like that if she hears it directly from you."

Ray agreed though he still sounded dubious. But he seemed to relax when he actually came face to face with Karen Dalton and realised that although she was an attractive and sophisticated woman she was neither an obvious 'fruitcake' or intimidating; two ideas he had been contemplating since the sergeant's ring—and two ideas he couldn't help finding a bit nerve-wracking.

But as she got out of the police car in his untidy yard and looked round at the various mysterious bits of old machinery she said, "What a lovely fresh sort of smell!" Dennis introduced Ray Werner to her and said, "Chaff, hay, lucerne, they all smell nicer than any manufactured perfume."

Ray was in his eighties, a weathered old farmer with a small mat of grey frizz under his battered old felt hat stained with oil, but he regarded himself as one of the more knowledgeable of the district's senior citizens and it didn't take him long to sit them down in a dusty sun-room and launch into the old story.

At the end, Dennis said, "So they hadn't put the cart's brakes on when they left it to stand there?"

"People often didn't. Quiet old horse. They'd just drop the reins. It's possible it didn't even have any brakes. Though I remember my dad telling me he'd been in Toowoomba with us kids and mum in the big buggy and the brakes had failed on one of the Range roads. There was no way the horses could hope to hold it on the slope so he simply let 'em rip. My poor old mum said it just about sent her hair white—the horses galloping madly and us littlies jouncing round like nobody's business."

He turned to Karen Dalton and said kindly, "This is a long time ago. Things are safer now. Though it was pretty hairy going down the Range even in a car or a truck years ago, you'd have to hold the gear-lever down to stop it jumping out of low."

"And what happened to the old man who got hit by the shafts?"

"They took him to Winville but he died soon after he got there. Loss of blood, I'd say. And us three got whaled within an inch of our lives. I don't reckon I sat down for a week. I was never game

to play with a slingshot after that. But if the old fella had a ghost I reckon it must be wandering round Winville, not your place."

Dennis Walsh wasn't sure how reassured she might now feel. But she thanked Mr Werner fervently before getting back into the car. As they drove away she said reluctantly, "Not that particular ghost maybe … but there is something in the house with me. I'm certain of that."

"It's not your boys playing some sort of trick on you?"

"I … don't think so. And my husband says if it's a poltergeist it'll settle down eventually."

"What's a poltergeist?"

"A ghost. Well, a sort of ghost. A nuisance ghost. Sometimes some … entity … call it what you like … a spirit … attaches itself to adolescent children. All that energy rippling through the ether … the … entity seems to be drawn to it."

He looked across briefly as he drove. It sounded total nonsense to him. But he couldn't escape the fact that she almost certainly believed what she was telling him.

"Okay. Let's get back to more basic things. I got the impression that you aren't the boy's mother? Is that correct?"

"I'm their stepmother. But they've never held that against me. I am sure they all like and accept me. I married Roland three years ago. In Melbourne."

"And why come so far? Couldn't you all find a farm you liked in Victoria?"

"We came up this way. Roland's got an old school mate living in Winville. We drove around the area a bit and we saw this place was for sale … and when we went in he and the boys said 'what a great place to live!' I wasn't so sure. But new wife, new mother, you try to fit in with everyone. And they've always been good to me. They know I'm not a country person. But they don't laugh when I say or do something that isn't … you know … the country way."

"What did you do before you met him?"

"I worked in a bank."

"But they do laugh when you say you felt this invisible something … this sort of ghost?"

"I guess so. Roland believes me. The boys talk about ghosts and the supernatural a lot. But they make it sound a big joke."

He drew into the verge by her paddock gate. "So what do they do in Winville?"

"What young men like to do, I imagine. They aren't very forthcoming. They've got friends there now and I think some of the friends are female."

She climbed out. "Thank you for that. I don't suppose it is really any good to ring up to tell you there's something invisible in the room with me. It's not the sort of problem you can do much about."

"It might be an idea to write down anything odd that happens. The date, the time. Maybe we can see some sort of pattern. And ring me any time. Even if you just need to talk about it."

"You don't believe me though, do you?"

"I honestly don't know what to think. But if it's scaring you—then it's police business."

She stood in the bare wintry day and looked at him searchingly as though to convince herself he meant what he said. Then she said simply, "Thank you," and turned to walk up the long lane.

*

Back in Buckton he went round to see George Hickman. George went to services at the small Uniting Church just over from his house. He had returned home and was making himself some lunch; pea and ham soup and some hot rolls. "I don't think there's enough to go round, Dennis, but sit yourself down and I'll get another bowl."

"No, I won't stay. I just called by to see if you were still interested in that Bruloder stuff that you picked up?"

"I am, as a matter of fact. Down girl!" He turned to his little Cairn terrier who had taken advantage of the diversion to leap on to a kitchen chair and try to reach the food. "I've just been logging on some evenings and having a bit of a wander around … "

"Do you happen to know if Hendrik Bruloder had any women in his life? You said you thought he was visiting one when he fell under a train."

"He gave me the impression he had tickets on himself. Come through and I'll show you a picture of him. Reminds me a bit of a picture I saw years ago of Reinhard Heydrich. You know the Nazi SS man."

George Hickman left his lunch preparations and went down the short hall to where he kept his piles of material from decades of putting out the *Buckton Bugle*. The little dog looked longingly at the table then turned and trotted after him. He went over to a folder he'd simply marked 'B' and opened it.

"It isn't terribly clear. It might be better to go and look at a book in the library. But those very clear-cut features, that arrogant way of holding his head, something very cold about the eyes. Maybe I'm reading into it things which aren't there—just because I remember hearing what a little lump of shit Heydrich was … "

Dennis took the rather smudgy picture and gazed at it. "I don't s'pose it matters how we see him. It's how women might've seen him."

"Oh, I'd say he'd have no problems in that area. Power, money, influence, good looks … if you like that sort of thing."

"George—could you keep looking. Don't push it. Just any little details you happen across. You know about Eve Rogers dying?"

"Yeah. People were talking about it after church."

Dennis nodded. "I've been told she was in South Africa."

"If she was as gorgeous as people say—"

"Didn't you ever meet her?"

"No. I spoke with her husband. He didn't leap at the idea of advertising in the *Buckton Bugle* … but I suppose I shouldn't hold that against him."

George came to the door. He still appeared to be processing some possible ideas and connections. But he only said, "I hope you're planning to come to our concert at the church. Fiona has a lovely voice. A bit soft. But she's going to do a solo while us old codgers croak away in the background. You mustn't miss it."

"I can't wait," Dennis said drily. "Just don't drown her out while you're at your croaking."

*

He was supposed to be going round to the flat to have lunch with Rae and Kieran and Fiona but he diverted along the way to stop at the Coolibah Hotel. He could buy a bottle of something and ask George Johnson about those 'strangers' who seemed to be so prolific with their tips on where and when someone might be matching up some dogs.

George, when put on a spot, looked vaguely uneasy.

"Since when didn't you know every bod that comes through here, George? And if you didn't know—how come you weren't going all out to get a few details?"

"Well, I … didn't like the look of them."

"What's that s'posed to mean?"

George sat down heavily on a bar stool and looked around the nearly empty place as though for inspiration. "Some people … you just serve 'em … and hope they'll get on their way. Know what I mean?"

Dennis Walsh nodded. "Fair enough. But tell me—what did they look like? What did they sound like? Did they have anything with them? A briefcase maybe? Did they look shabby? Do you know anything about the car they were driving? What sort of ages would you peg 'em at? Anything."

"I thought they might be reps for something. That's why I thought they might be something to do with this film they're making. Maybe in their forties. Quite well off. They had a white sedan. I didn't look to see what make. One of 'em had a brown briefcase and an overcoat. They were wearing suits."

"They don't sound like the sort of people who break bottles over your head, George, so what was it about them?"

"That's hard to pick. Look, mate, I'm doing my best. But those men just left me feeling sort of … a bit queasy."

"Okay, let me ask a leading question. Did they sound like you or me … or did they sound more like Pastor Kramer?"

In the end George Johnson was reluctant to commit himself. "They might. But it wasn't like they were talking a lot. Not loud. Just sort of murmuring. I'd need to hear them talking, just everyday stuff … "

"Okay. If you think of anything more. So how is Bill these days?"

"Well, he's none too hot. The doc told him it was old age and he needs to take things a bit easier. He's upstairs right now taking things easy."

"You know something, George, I think that Les Davis is totally useless. But if I push to get rid of him—I'll get blamed for losing the town another doctor."

George Johnson summoned up a slight grin. "So what do *you* reckon's wrong with Bill?"

He wasn't serious with his question yet Dennis Walsh took it seriously. At last he said, "I think it's that business," he put a hand to his throat, "that thyroid business. I can't remember if it's too much or too little. But I'd say that's the trouble. Bit of a goitre."

"I'll tell him. It'll cheer him up. He's been going round with his chin round his knees saying he's a useless has-been and he might as well sell up and go to … anywhere. He doesn't seem to care where he ends up."

But over a late lunch, when Dennis shared this idea, Kieran said immediately, "You just might be on to something there. They used to say goitres were common on the Downs because the cows got too much wild turnip and their milk was affected. Something about the brassica family affecting the take-up of iodine. I forget the details."

Lunch was never a totally comfortable experience with Dennis and Rae at the same table; Fiona knew perfectly well she watched everything Dennis did, or didn't do, with the idea of incorporating it into her later references to 'Attila the Hun' and his social 'infelicities'; she contrived to make it sound as though he gnawed on large ox bones before picking his teeth with the point of a spear. But in this case it was probably because the two men went away into a long conversation about local weeds. Rae listened without contributing anything but Fiona, lacking any real knowledge, drifted away into her own thoughts.

"So what's your take on this Eve Rogers business?" Rae finally caught them in a gap. "Is it true she was very beautiful?"

"Depends on what you fancy. Not my type. They're saying it was an accident. Funny accident, if you ask me. But it's not my case."

Later, as he went into the station, he found himself re-thinking that take; it *was* a funny accident but he needed to sit down and think through exactly what made it unlikely as 'accident'. And that other thing: James Garcia describing her as a 'seriously loose cannon'. Yet his own impression was that she did what was required of her and got a comfortable home, alcohol, pills, clothes in return. In what way 'loose' if her husband … but of course the question wasn't about the supposed husband. Garcia would be looking at her from the point of view of police … or more particularly himself and Doug Towner …

So in what way was she a danger to them?

*

Dennis sent Guy round to research in the library in his lunch break; was it possible to identify a tree from a vague outline? Not just identify it but work out where it was most likely to be growing. Guy felt he might turn round and write a book about lost causes when he'd finished his procedural.

But the real breakthrough of the day came late in the evening when Ashley Turner rang him from Brisbane. "It's just as well I've got a good boss, Dennis, or I'd be out on my ear by now. But I managed to get the passport office to run through back records for me and guess what?"

"You've found an Adam and an Eve Rogers both applied for passports, say about eight years ago."

"Just about. Adam got his just over eight years ago. Evelyn applied about six months later. Different addresses but both born in Ryde in Sydney. Would you like me to ring any Rogers listed for that area and see if I can find parents or relatives."

"I would. But be very discreet. If this bod masquerading as Eve's husband stole a passport then we don't want to tip him off that we're on to him. I know you can sound very sympathetic. So just imply that someone's suggested that Adam Rogers should be listed as a missing person, something non-committal, you know the blarney … "

"I'll do my best."

"Be very careful though. I think these people wouldn't think twice about killing if they thought it would protect someone."

He didn't hear back till late Tuesday afternoon. Meanwhile the day had turned into another frustrating call-out from Karen Dalton. She sounded close to hysteria. "They're all around me—sort of heavy and pressing in on me!"

"Then get out of that bloody house and stay out of it till I get there."

At least if she was standing outside with space around her she might be safe from any hoax things those teenagers might've set up. If it was something supernatural then he didn't know whether they would follow her outside. The day had clouded over and was rather grim and chill. That old house with its shifting shadows and dark corners might spook anyone. But if he couldn't see anyone or anything then he thought he probably should insist she go to Winville to see a doctor. Those boys might go to Winville for female company—but it was just possible they went for other reasons. Drugs maybe. If they were slipping something into her breakfast cereal maybe she was hallucinating …

She was standing out in the middle of the lane when he arrived. He stopped the car and said simply, "Get in and tell me what and when." She slid into the front passenger seat. She looked pale and tense.

"The others have all gone up to see the McLeods, something about re-doing the boundary fence. I was in the house. I'd just finished changing the beds and I was going to go down to the laundry but it was almost as though I couldn't move, as though I was pressing against something. Even to get to the phone was an effort. I didn't know what to do. I felt as though they were getting in my mouth and my nose and everything."

"They?"

"I don't know what to call it. It, I suppose. They. Something."

"Okay. Well, let's go and have a look around the house." He parked by the back gate and she got out again. "What sort of relationship do you have with your stepsons? Do you like them?"

"Very much. They're good to me. They bring me little gifts back from town. They're polite and helpful. They treat me as a friend. It was a bit daunting to take on three teenagers but I've never regretted it."

"Okay. Well, let's have a good look around. Have you washed up the breakfast things?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I was just wondering about something in the food. I had a case where lead was leaching from a jug and affecting the health of an old man. If you were getting some metal … some fungus … don't know, but strange things can happen."

He went through all the rooms; the big open pleasant ones opening on to verandahs and landings, the small poky ones slipped in as apparent afterthoughts. Without searching the boys' rooms thoroughly it was hard to know whether they might be hoarding something odd in their cupboards. But in one room he came upon a board set out on a table with a glass upended and letters around it.

"What's that?"

"It's their ouija board."

"What's that when it's at home?"

"To summon up spirits to give messages, answers to your questions."

He managed to keep his face straight. "Does it work?"

"They say it does. But I don't know that I really believe."

He went over and picked everything up. "Believe or not. Get the ruddy thing out of here and see if things improve. Put it out the back in a shed and leave it there."

"They'll just make another. It isn't hard."

"Well, let's get out of here. This room stinks. I don't know if your stepsons don't believe in changing their socks … or whether they're messing round with chemicals or something."

"Probably. They're very bright. They're all keen on chemistry."

He carried the board and glass out and put it in the tool shed. Then he went over and sat on a rustic bench by the back gate. "Okay. Let's get serious. You say you have a good relationship with your stepsons. What about with your husband?"

"That too. I've never felt that I was just a fill-in, a surrogate mother."

"Were you married before now?"

"Yes. My first husband died in a light plane crash nearly ten years ago."

"He left you some money?"

"Not a lot. But my father made sure I would come into money when I turn fifty. My sister and I. He insured our lives. The policies mature when we turn fifty. He felt that we had married men who were a bit wild, a bit irresponsible. He was the old-fashioned sort of banker. Grim rectitude. He thought buying a black car was a sign of moral decline. Everything had to be sober and unostentatious."

"What sort of money are we talking about—when you get it."

"Around three million dollars."

He couldn't help his surprise. "And what happens if you die before you reach fifty?"

"It will go to my sons."

"You mean your stepsons—or you've got children from the first marriage?"

"My stepsons. We put off having children. Till Victor was prepared to take the idea seriously."

"And, if you don't mind me asking, you are now—how old?"

"Forty-two."

He was surprised at that too. He had assumed she was in her mid-thirties. "So you … and your family … have another eight years to wait. I assume you have to die of natural causes for the money to pass to your stepsons."

"You're not suggesting … no, I don't believe they want to hurt me … and even if they really can call up spirits … those spirits are not going to harm me."

"How d'you know that? They whisper little messages in your ear. We just want to scare you stiff. That sort o' thing."

She was silent for a long while. The whole house, the whole marriage, her relationship with the three boys was saturated with a kind of sense of mystery, that *they* lived on the doorstep of strange otherworlds. What could this blunt uncompromising country copper understand of the excitement and the fear that that knowledge of the occult might generate?

At last she sighed and said, "I honestly don't know. If you are certain there is no sign of a prowler, of any one just trying to scare me … then I suppose I do have to accept that the boys are right and their spirits are all around me, getting in my way. Being a nuisance."

"Tell me. Why is it you always stay home. Every time I come it's to find you home here by yourself."

"I do go out. Sometimes I go shopping or to a movie. We go out to dinner occasionally. But I get tired easily. They help me with the house. I'm lucky in that way. And I did hope that living in the country, fresh air, good food, no pollution, might help me to feel better. I think it has. A little."

It was frustrating but he couldn't see what else he could do for her. "Do these … things come round you when your family is here … or only when they're all out?"

"I'm not sure. If I say anything when they're here they give me what they call a psychic cleansing. I don't know if it helps. Maybe it does."

"Okay. Well, keep calling me out if you need to. Maybe something will start to make sense."

"It's very good of you to come out."

But as he took the phone call from Ashley Turner he wasn't sure if it was 'good' or not. Maybe his willingness to treat her seriously was encouraging her to cling to her wild imaginings.

"Ash, any luck?"

"You might say so. Got a pen and paper? This is the address and phone number for Danny and Chris Rogers who say, yes, they had a son Adam and a daughter Evelyn who both went to South Africa *and* that they both died in an horrific train crash about six years ago. They were told a bomb had probably been planted on the train. There was nothing left of their children to send home."

"They got a nice letter from the police there, condolences, that sort of thing?"

"They did. They kept hoping there might be some mistake, that maybe one or both of their children had missed the train or decided to go by road or something. But after six years of silence they accept that their children are dead. I don't think they were willing to believe me. I don't blame them. It's awful to get people's hopes up—and then dash them again. I think you should talk to them."

"I will." But after he'd hung up he sat for a minute trying to organise his thoughts. Because he needed to make a compelling case. If he didn't the body would simply be handed over to Adam Rogers as next-of-kin and a cremation would immediately follow, along with a good clear out of everything to do with Eve, just a few useful films and videos put away for a rainy day … and the real Adam Rogers … but he couldn't guess whether the man was dead or alive …

*

Daniel Rogers took his phone call but sounded totally disbelieving. "Our daughter has been dead for six years. If this is some kind of hoax then I think you're being very cruel. My wife has been through enough misery."

"Look, I can't give you a cast-iron guarantee that this Eve *is* your daughter. But she's been living with a South African man who calls himself Adam Rogers and claims to be her husband. I think there is a good chance that he stole your son's passport and other identifications. It may mean that your son is dead and this bastard was just an opportunistic thief. But if there is the slightest chance that your son is still alive and maybe held hostage somewhere … then I think you should come here … or I'll bring some photos and come to you. I know it's a long way. But if this is your daughter here … then a serious crime has been committed."

The man conferred in a low voice with someone else. Then he said slowly and dubiously, "We'll come. How do we get there?"

Dennis told them how to get to Buckton, how to find the station. Then he said, "It could be a good idea to use another name. If they've stolen your son's identity … they may not take kindly to hearing a family called Rogers has turned up. What was your wife's maiden name?"

"Hendry."

"Okay. Mr and Mrs Hendry. I'll see you at the police station here when you arrive."

But it was the same thing Ashley had wrestled with. What if there was no connection? He hadn't simply got their hopes up. He was putting them to major inconvenience. But people who hadn't got to see and bury their children *did* cling to unrealistic hopes. They had probably half-convinced themselves that their children had suffered long amnesia … or were even now lying in a hospital somewhere with brain damage or confusion over their identities …

The family must've gone out almost immediately, packed themselves into their car, and driven all night. Because it was still a louring July morning with a dry westerly blowing when they parked in front of the small brick box that did duty as a police station in Buckton. Their own expressions said all that needed to be said: could this small unexciting country town really contain the answer to the mystery of two violent deaths six years ago?

Daniel and Chris ran a newsagency in Ryde, two middle-aged fairly brisk and businesslike people, along with their other son Peter, a fair-haired man in his twenties. Dennis put the jug on in case they'd like a drink to warm them. But he spread out the pictures of Eve he'd scrounged from Winville and by printing out a couple of frames from Guy's video on George Hickman's equipment. And the faint pictures of the man on Eve's roll of film.

All three of them sat in a huddle in the waiting room, such as the small space might be called, and looked from one picture to the next. Dennis poured out three coffees and passed them over.

When Chris Rogers looked up there were tears in her eyes. "You're right. That is our Eve. And I am certain that is Adam." She undid the briefcase beside her on the floor and took a packet out. "It has some of the pictures he sent back from South Africa in it. And Eve."

"What took him there?"

"He was a mining engineer. He was an expert in explosives. He got a job as soon as he arrived. He and Eve were always very close. He said, why didn't she come to stay with him and have a look around. So she did."

"But I don't understand," Daniel shook his head, his disbelief still evident. "How could Eve come here and not tell us she was safe?"

"I don't know. But I think she was being held as a kind of hostage. If she did what she was told here … then they might keep Adam alive and doing whatever they wanted there. I don't know who 'they' might be. But I assume some group in South Africa. I can't prove your son is still alive. There's no hint in those pictures as to where he might be. We don't even know when those pictures were taken."

"It must be less than six years ago," Chris Rogers showed signs of grasping at any straw. "You can see from this photo he sent us only about a month before the train crash that he has more hair."

"And it doesn't suddenly drop out—unless you're sick. So if that shows a natural progression … then it's possible this was a fairly recent photo."

Peter Rogers looked up from his scrutiny of the pictures. "What do we do now? Go to the morgue to see Evie?"

"No. This where it gets even more difficult. If they think their cover's been blown … then if we're right in thinking Adam is being held prisoner … they may simply get rid of him." Dennis sat back a minute and tapped his lips. "First things first. I'll ring Winville and try to find out if there's going to be an inquest. But last I heard they'd decided it was an accident—in which case her alleged husband gets to decide what happens next."

He left them to their coffee and rang Winville and asked for DS Sullivan. "Greg, where are things at with Mrs Rogers?"

"Doug's satisfied it was an accident. The autopsy didn't show any suspicious marks. She had enough alcohol in her system to impair her judgement. She's more likely to have opted for an early night than a late swim. But she just might've decided she should go over to the villas to check things … and didn't make it."

"So she fell *backwards* not forwards. Why was she standing at the edge of the pool but facing away? How did that inflatable ring happen to be in just the right position? And how did she manage to land smack-bang in the middle of it? Because if she hadn't landed precisely it would have bobbed up and tipped her out. And if she was bright and lively enough to walk out into a cold night … why wasn't she bright and lively enough to swim three yards to the steps and climb out? That is a very strange accident, Greg. But what's next on the agenda?"

"The body will be released to her husband tomorrow. He plans to have a small private service on Saturday."

"Then you'll need to stop it. Delay it. It's odds on he's not her husband. In fact no kin at all."

"C'mon, Dennis. You're letting those people spook you. He's co-operated fully with Doug and the others—"

"Others—meaning?"

"They did a thorough search of the pool area. No sign of anyone lurking. They say she died of hypothermia. Cold night. No clothes. Partly in the cold water. Nothing suspicious about it."

"Oh yeah! The whole bloody thing stinks. But you have to delay that creep getting the body or I'll ask for a court injunction."

"You can't do that! Dennis, I know you were right about Hoysted but you're wrong about this. That woman really was a flaked-out nympho—"

"No. She wasn't. And I can prove it. I've got her parents here." There was a disbelieving squawk at the other end. Dennis said angrily, "Just shut the fuck up and listen to me. Don't tell anyone but get straight round to the court and get an injunction and a search warrant for Caritas. We've got to get evidence before he clears the place out. It could be a matter of life and death. And don't, whatever you do, tell Doug we've got her next-of-kin."

"I can't do that, Dennis, not on your say so. It's more than my job is worth. Not unless you can give me something more to work with."

"Then make sure you get Adam Rogers' marriage certificate, passport, and birth certificate. If he cannot hand them all over immediately then tell him his wife's body's not going anywhere. Tell him questions have been raised about his stay in Australia, tell him anything you like. Just don't tell him I've got parents for Eve and the real Adam here."

"There's no way Doug is going to let me hassle him."

"You want me to come out there and chain myself to that bloody corpse?"

"No, mate, I don't. I want you to go away and see a psychiatrist."

"If you won't try for a warrant and an injunction—hang up now and I'll get on to the court myself. I'm serious, Greg."

Greg Sullivan didn't doubt that. But he saw the career he had clung to despite Doug's machinations and incompetencies dribbling away into forced retirement and a doubt left hanging forever over his sanity and his honesty …

"If I get the boot for this, mate, that's it. I never want to see or hear from you again." Later, Greg Sullivan felt ashamed for showing his own growing sense of panic. But to sit a mere desk away from Doug Towner and carry on such a compromising and absurd conversation …

Sullivan hung up, looked around the room like the condemned man having a last look at home and family, then he went out without a word. Ten minutes later he was trying to explain a situation that didn't make sense to him in the private interview room behind the office at the courthouse to a dubious magistrate.

The only thing he could really say with some confidence was the simple: "We know she's handed out amphetamines from that house. If she had her own secret supply I'd like to try and find it before he clears out all her belongings."

That made reasonable sense. "And an injunction not to release the body?"

"I'm still not happy about Doug calling it an accident." He repeated Dennis Walsh's reasons for doubt. At last Magistrate Hull said rather grimly, "I'll ask Towner to hold off till Friday. If you can't come up with anything by then—I'll have to let it go and the service can go ahead on Saturday."

Greg thought of a subpoena for the documents Dennis wanted to see then decided to stay with what he had. "I appreciate this. I'm the meat in the sandwich and I wish I wasn't."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning—Dennis Walsh claims to have evidence Adam Rogers is not married to Eve Rogers and therefore has no right to make decisions about her body or its disposal."

"Serious evidence?"

Sullivan resisted the desire to squirm like a schoolboy put on the spot; then he made the grim decision to cross this particular Rubicon. "If Walsh says he has evidence then I am prepared to take him seriously."

After he'd gone out again the magistrate lifted the phone and calmly asked for Doug Towner; just a small request.

*

Dennis sent Guy Briggs round to the Coolibah Hotel with the Hendrys and asked them to keep a low profile for the afternoon. If Greg failed him he might have to take them to Winville to demand to see Eve but to do so might be to sign her brother's death warrant …

But Greg pulled in, parked, and came in, looking tight-lipped. "This better be good, mate, or I'm going to be dead meat."

"Got the warrant?"

"I have. It runs from now till Friday. We don't find anything—the body goes to him with our abject apologies, kiss his boots, hope not to fuck up ever again. You know the drill."

As they drove out of town Dennis gave out his version of events, including finding the roll of film and ended up by saying, "We may find drugs—but what we really want to get is any film, video, photos, and if we can find his passport all the better but if it's iffy then he may keep it in a bank or something."

Greg drove in silence. He had ceased to be able to make jokes. All he could now see was going back in several hours to tell Doug what he had done …

The Farm Stay centre was quiet when they reached it. No sign of visitors. No sign of a police presence. But as they drew into the car park Adam Rogers came to the side door.

"Is there a problem?" He sounded affable and unworried.

"Probably not." Greg came up the side steps and showed him the search warrant. "If you'd just come round with us. We really need to check this place for drugs. If your wife had any hidden away we want to know if they came from the same batch she shared with those schoolboys."

"I think she was clean. I kept a pretty close eye on her. But I can't tell you where she got them from because I don't know."

"You'd better come round with us," Dennis Walsh said calmly as he slipped a pair of gloves on. "Don't want any suggestions later we contaminated evidence." Greg followed suit but looked far less calm.

The next couple of hours were a strange business, in Sullivan's view, given that he had always assumed this place was pretty much what it claimed to be. They found nothing more compromising than some prescription sleeping pills. But Dennis carefully removed every video from the racks and wrote out a receipt. They found no cameras, even the lenses had been removed, but without redecorating the room it had not been possible to remove evidence of the places they'd been. Greg only shrugged. "I s'pose if people want kinky sex that's their business."

But in the front bedroom, made up to look like an old-fashioned boy's sleepout, they came upon an old school desk containing some folders of photographs.

"Very interesting." Dennis took out eight thin packets and began to look through them. Adam Rogers stood watching them, his hands in his pockets, a bland look on his face.

"Ah now, this is more like it. All those little white lies. Doug doesn't come here at all."

Greg left the shelves he was searching to come over to join Dennis. The third packet was painfully revealing. "So now we know the poor sod doesn't have much to work with." Dennis tapped the picture lightly. It was of a naked Doug Towner and a naked Eve Rogers.

"Probably explains why he's such a sour old bastard," Greg said wearily.

"No chance you're in here, Greg?"

"What d'you bloody take me for! Unless they've done a cut-and-paste job."

But they found Ray Gould, one of Greg's uniformed colleagues, in another batch; not to mention a Winville lawyer and several other prominent local identities.

"Very nice insurance, if you can get it." Dennis wrote out a receipt for all the photographs.

"You're not going to be very popular, Sergeant Walsh," Adam Rogers said. He sounded amused rather than worried.

The two men didn't bother to respond. It was Greg who unearthed another supply of photographs inside a shelf of old annuals. One packet yielded up some stills of Guy Briggs. They added it to their collection.

It was getting late when the two men handed over the receipts and took several bags of material out to their car. "I'm sorry, Mr Rogers, but we've arranged to keep your wife's body till Friday afternoon, so there's no point in you driving all the way to Winville. But all being well you'll be able to have the little service for her on Saturday. I am sorry that we have to go through all this stuff first before we can release her to you."

"You won't find anything in there."

"Good. In that case you'll probably be able to pick it up next Monday. I assume you've got copies of all your blackmail photographs?"

"Not personally, no."

As Dennis and Greg got on the road again Greg said gloomily, "And what did he mean by that, the cocky little bastard?"

"We didn't find any personal documents either. I'd say he either keeps them somewhere on the farm—or at Bruloder—or in a safe deposit box. Maybe we should've asked for his driver's licence. He might keep stuff in his car."

"So what happens now?" Greg had been trying to decide how next to proceed.

"We didn't find a whisper of a dog … unless there's something on one of those videos. And I don't think Adam Rogers is the real issue. He is an issue … but he's not a Mr Big … if you see what I'm getting at."

"You lost me hours ago, Dennis."

"That's the trouble. We still don't really know what's going on."

"So did Eve kill herself or fall or get pushed?"

"I'm half-inclined now to think it *was* suicide. But I can't prove it. But I think she got to the point where she couldn't take any more. I'm only guessing."

Not a cry for help. But her attempt to make sure Guy kept well away from the place? Or was it that she could deal with sex and men and boys … but she couldn't deal with their use of dogs … or she knew the dog was sick …

It always came round to this sense of trying to understand the sort of person Eve Rogers was … and if she was Daniel's and Chris's daughter, Peter's sister, then she was probably a normal young woman who found herself in a world that no longer made sense … That day she'd looked him over and he'd wondered if she was thinking on how to seduce him—but now he wondered if the real question was a more basic one. Was he corruptible? Already on the take?

"You'd better come and meet her parents. But don't tell anyone what is going on. Yet. Because we still don't have a clue as to where this brother of Eve's might be … or doing what … unless we arrest Mr Cocky and beat some information out of him."

"Yeah, yeah, very funny. But I don't see that guy talking … even if he knows. And he mightn't."

"There has to be some regular contact with South Africa … or how did she get hold of that spool of film?"

"They would need to prove to her every so often that he was alive—or she might jack up."

Was suicide the ultimate in 'jacking up' or an overwhelming moment of despair …

*

Greg sat in the upstairs bedroom at the Coolibah for half-an-hour with the 'Hendrys' before coming heavily downstairs and driving round to the station. Guy and Dennis were there. Sullivan said only, "I believe you. Those are parents. Do you want to keep the videos to watch?"

"We'd better parcel them out. Chances are they're all perfectly legit. But we can't assume that. You take a third, Greg. Guy can take some."

"And the photographs?"

"Get Tony Chapman to do copies of everything. I think we're going to need some insurance ourselves."

"You wouldn't like me to set them all out on Doug's desk, sort of a little surprise for him tomorrow morning?"

"I think … keep everything under your hat. It might be useful to know whether Rogers gets straight on to Doug. I'm just sorry we didn't find Garcia on anything—doesn't mean he isn't, though."

"I'm sorry, full stop. But there doesn't seem to be any going back." Greg got up wearily. "I'd better hit the road. I'm not looking forward to the next week. Doug goes down. He'll make sure I go with him."

After he'd driven away Guy Briggs said curiously, "Will he, do you think? Go down, I mean."

"Yeah, seems likely."

"Do you think he *is* corrupt?"

"My gut feeling says Greg is straight. But they're going to say he's worked alongside Doug for ten years. How can he possibly say he didn't know what was going on? And if they get Greg then they'll probably snare Deane as well. Christ, what a mess! But I've just put my money on to say Greg is clean … and if I've got it wrong then I've wrecked things for the Hendrys." He sat back a moment. "But I can see why Eve never tried to pass on what was happening there. How could she trust any of us? What with the local coppers coming by for their bit of nookey every so often … and would we have believed her anyway even if she'd taken the risk?"

Guy couldn't help but look crestfallen. "So what do we do now?"

"Try to find this other Adam Rogers. Ring the Hendrys and ask them to come round—and can you pull up any halfway decent maps on this thing," he gestured towards the computer, "or do we need to get something from the library?"

Guy said, "I think I can."

*

It was a long evening. The Hendrys pointed out on the computer map all the places that their son and daughter had ever mentioned. They could provide the name and address of the mining company their Adam had worked for. They had the towns Eve had mentioned in her letters, the landscapes, the people.

Then there was the place where the train crash had occurred. And there was the station where Hendrik Bruloder was said to have fallen from the platform.

Mrs Rogers had brought piles of old letters and postcards, several photo albums, family documents, even Eve's last school report. She had also collected up clippings on the train disaster, some from the bigger Australian papers but several sent by the Australian Embassy in Pretoria.

Guy wasn't sure what they were looking for. It appeared an impossibly large area. But he pinpointed each place conscientiously on the map for them.

It was Dennis who said suddenly, "But surely this train was going in the wrong direction?"

"What d'you mean—wrong direction?" Daniel Rogers peered at the small spidery lines that indicated the railway.

"Well, here is where your son was based. Or the head office. And your daughter. But this train was coming from the border with Mozambique, apparently carrying workers to the mines here, I don't know how they worked that. I assume they got them on contract. So what were your two doing on this train? Had they gone to Mozambique for any reason and were coming back?"

"Not that they told us. I guess they could've popped across for a quick look, see what the place was like. A weekend. And they were coming back … "

"So if it was a train mainly of black mine workers who had all got on either across the border or at the border … then where did Adam and Eve get on and how did the South African police know they'd been on the train if neither their bodies nor their belongings were found."

Chris Rogers took out the letter they had received from the police in South Africa to send their condolences. It said "We have been informed that your son, Adam Damien Rogers, and your daughter, Evelyn Christina Rogers, were passengers on this train" but it didn't say how they knew or where they were supposed to have boarded the train. The Embassy had contacted the police and their letter of condolence was almost word for word that of the police.

"This gets stranger," Dennis Walsh said abruptly. "All the reports are vague on how many people died on that train which suggests they didn't have a reliable passenger list to work from … and yet they sound certain when it comes to your kids. And this Renamo which is s'posed to have planted the bomb … who are they and what were they aiming at?"

It was Peter Rogers who said, "They're a terrorist group, armed and trained by South Africa, trying to overthrow the government in Mozambique. Very vicious. They don't seem to care how many civilians they kill in the process. I guess it's possible someone on board was carrying a bomb to explode somewhere else and it went off. Adam might've been asked to investigate. He'd done a bomb disposal course … but I can't see him taking Evie along if he thought there was any danger."

"Okay. Let's discount the crash. As Eve was still alive up to last Friday night—then there's a good chance her brother also wasn't on that train. But the people who sent you the letter had to have known there was no chance of them popping up and saying 'here we are!' So was there a postmark on that envelope?"

Chris Rogers scrabbled round among her piles of paper and finally produced the envelope. But although they all looked closely and Dennis unearthed a magnifying glass they could not interpret the smudge.

"Okay, we'd better move on. Now the people they met there. Did they give you any names?"

"Some first names. Unfortunately I didn't keep every letter. I thought they would be coming home again." Mrs Rogers took a moment to compose her trembling lips. "We thought … but then Evie did tell us she had met a man. She said they'd gone with a group from Adam's office and she

had got chatting to a man who was parked nearby. He said he sometimes drove up or came on the train to see his family. I think she described him as 'seriously gorgeous'."

"Did she give a name or a description?"

"She didn't give a name but she said he was tall and very fit, a profile to die for, very … what was the word she used," Chris turned to her husband, "masterful, I think."

Dennis turned away to his files and pulled out the picture he'd got Guy to photocopy. "Like this maybe?"

Chris Rogers looked closely at the not very clear picture and finally said, "It would certainly fit her descriptions."

"She met him again?"

"Oh yes, she said she knew it wasn't going to go anywhere but she turned to putty at the sight of him."

"Is that him?" Daniel Rogers said in a puzzled way. "And how did you get the picture of a man whose name we don't even know?"

"No. This is Reinhard Heydrich. But Hendrik Bruloder was described as looking like him."

"I don't understand," Mrs Rogers said apologetically. "But how do you know the name of the man our daughter went out with?"

"I don't. Not for sure. Next to the Farm Stay place where your daughter lived is a big cattle feed lot run by something called Bruloder Incorporated. We have found that it was apparently named for a man named Hendrik Bruloder who was a high-ranking police officer in South Africa who either fell in front of a train … or was pushed. He appears to have been a seriously dangerous and sadistic man who didn't think twice about using torture or beating suspects to a pulp. But he also had some very loyal supporters who felt he was holding back the black hordes who were threatening to over-run the white community—"

"Which they are inevitably going to do very soon," Peter Rogers put in. "Majority rule."

"We've got a hint that Bruloder was going to see a woman when he died. I s'pose it's possible that woman was your daughter. And although a lot of people had reason to hate the man I'd reckon—the only person who might have good reason not to want Bruloder to get to see your daughter again—"

"Yes, Adam was always very protective of Evie. She got picked on a bit at school. Nothing really bad. But she was too clever and serious to really get on with most of the girls. He seemed to believe his mission in life was to watch over her."

"Did he mind her going out with men … other than this one."

"Not really. Sometimes he'd tell her so-and-so wasn't good enough for her. I remember he looked into the background of a man she liked and told her he was into drugs, maybe a bit of a psycho … and she just laughed and said it was like having her own private eye to find out things … but she did drop the guy." Peter didn't seem to see anything odd about his older brother's behaviour. But it looked a bit as though Adam was too fond of Eve for his own good. And vice versa?

"So if Bruloder died here … and died two months before your children were said to have died—then it suggests that someone in this area took them into custody just before the train crash. Someone who had authority. Someone who was linked to the same group as Bruloder. Someone who could ask them to help with enquiries and not arouse suspicion maybe."

"You don't believe in the dark car at the door?" Peter Rogers said curiously.

Dennis shrugged. The sustained effort of trying to put forward a workable idea was giving him a headache. And he hadn't had anything to eat since lunch except a cup of coffee. "It looks like fairly open farming country around there. Anything very out-of-the-ordinary might raise questions."

Daniel Rogers nodded cautiously. His wife was obviously beginning to lose heart. Peter Rogers had gone back to looking closely at the map.

"What sort of things did Eve do when she went to see this man? Did she mention any outings, any meetings with family or friends, picnics, drives to somewhere."

"She did say in one of her letters that he liked her to look very … I forget the word she used. Girlish, I think. And she sent us a photo of herself with a hat and bag, standing at her front gate. I'm not sure if I brought it. She was wearing pink shorts."

"Pink shorts! And was she wearing her hair in two ponytails?"

"I think she was."

"And she was going—where?"

"She didn't say."

It was like going fishing, Guy thought morosely; a bite, a moment of hope, then the broken line, the disappearing fish. Another bite. Another one that got away. The hope. The loss. And at the end of the day coming home with sunburn and an empty basket.

"Can we get on to Interpol," Peter Rogers said. "They do in books."

"If we can give them something to run with." He couldn't very well tell these nice ordinary people that the police here were so riddled with corruption and distrust it was hard to know who to ask to take such a request forward. "But the real question is—is your son being held as hostage for Eve—or vice versa. Did they want to punish one or both of your children or did they want something from one or both of them. I think your daughter would've left there—if she thought it wouldn't immediately lead to your son's … maybe death is too strong. I really don't know. But think back over everything they told you. And that photo she sent you—I'm sure it's significant. It's what she was wearing when she died. Pink shorts. Two ponytails."

Mrs Rogers got up and went to the door. She had ceased trying to look composed and serious. Now she blew her nose and wiped her face.

"Then there is only one thing left for us to do. And that is to go there and try to find out what really happened."

Her husband and her son both got up and went over to her. "Are you sure, Chrissy," Daniel Rogers said dubiously.

"I don't care. Even if we have to sell everything … now that I know there's even the smallest chance Adam is still alive. But we did believe—" She looked at Dennis Walsh almost defiantly; as though he had dared suggest they had given up too easily. "We did believe it was the end of the road for our children."

Her eyes brimmed over again.

*

Fiona was in the old kitchen when Dennis went home. He never ceased to find the idea remarkable; that he only had to step inside and instead of the old days with a cold silent room waiting it was full of cooking and welcome …

Did other men appreciate this kind of change or did they find the presence of someone else sometimes irksome? At times he thought he wouldn't even mind if she turned round and berated him for being late, grumpy, untidy, sweaty … almost anything … just to have this sense of recognition, of life waiting …

Although he shared some things and not others, this time he thought there was no point in trying to keep all this secret from Fiona. And she sometimes had useful ideas. In this case she only responded to his grim assessment that they had found three local coppers on film, and there might be more, and "that cocky little bastard seemed pleased that we'll now do the work of compromising the whole case and everyone on it without him having to lift a finger".

"What cocky little bastard?"

"That Adam Rogers."

"And you're not going to try and get him on passport fraud, identity theft, anything like that?"

"It's this fear of what the fall-out might be for the real Adam Rogers."

"But surely … they wouldn't go to such elaborate lengths unless the real man was too valuable to lose. And although you know he cared about Eve … how did she feel about him? Strongly enough to put up with everything? And you don't know anything about his political beliefs. He went to work for a white mining company, I assume … I don't think there are too many black ones anyway … so it's always possible that he was even sympathetic to them. Would you do

dangerous and delicate bomb work with someone holding a gun to your head … or even holding your sister hostage?"

"Are you suggesting I simply take these people to see their dead daughter and meet Adam Rogers?"

She was reluctant to rush to judgement on something she didn't fully understand. "You don't think word has already gone to South Africa that Eve is dead? That they are already re-thinking their ideas and deciding how to treat her brother? And what about the South African who lives in Buckton?"

He turned to stare at her. "You don't mean Eric Kramer?"

"Why not? Why shouldn't he help you? He obviously knows something of what is going on."

"You'd like me to beat any clues out of him, would you?"

"No, sweetheart, I wouldn't. But why shouldn't you appeal to him for help for those parents who have been through so much heartache?"

'He obviously knows something of what is going on'; yes, that was another unanswered question. Where did Eric Kramer come into the equation which included the real Eve Rogers and the impersonating Adam Rogers?

Case No. 5: Out of the Shadows

"Was the tree any help?" Constable Briggs said next morning. He was certain it was a fever tree by its strange untidy shape.

"Puts them in the right area. If only we could pick up a name, a sign, something definite from those photos. I wonder if Eve Rogers kept a diary or anything. Even just an appointment book. I didn't see one … which was odd. It is s'posed to be a business with guests coming and going." Dennis opened the safe and took out the one pack of compromising photographs he hadn't sent on to Winville. "Take these. Put them somewhere safe. Only touch them with gloves. They may end up being your insurance, not theirs."

Guy took the packet gingerly. He wasn't sure that anywhere in his flat was totally safe from the eyes of his landlady but he accepted that they were his responsibility now.

"I'm going round to the hotel to see the Hendrys. Chances are that they've decided by now they can't go away without seeing their daughter, Adam or no Adam, so I'd better go and handle that. Then maybe I'd better go round and see Eric Kramer."

He wasn't surprised to find that Danny and Christina 'Hendry' accepted that they couldn't put the putative fate of their son ahead of their need to say goodbye to their daughter; and he felt they clutched the idea of Adam being valuable to someone, sufficiently valuable to be kept alive, as a kind of bizarre reassurance. "Right then—do you want to come with me, or two cars, or I simply tell you where to go and who to see when you get there."

They chose to come with him; not least because of their hope that he might be able to answer some more of their questions. On their way out of town he pointed to Eric Kramer's church and home and said they might like to meet him later and see if he had any ideas to suggest.

They headed for the small poky morgue at Winville District Hospital only to be told that the body had been released to Adam Rogers and was now round at the funeral home of John Denning & Sons. They went around and found that Adam Rogers was already sitting with 'his wife's body' in the small private room made available to grieving relatives; so the suggestion to stay away from Winville obviously hadn't gone over too well. He probably saw this as a way of proving she meant 'something' to him …

"Is he now?" Dennis looked around the pastel-painted foyer with its big brass urns of grey foliage. He thought he might ask Fiona to make sure he never ended up in a place like this. If nothing else Godfrey Waddell at his little establishment in Buckton never slid into this kind of insincere and unctuous response. Maybe he was being unfair but the whole place gave him the

creeps. “Well, we might as well go on through then. He’ll want to meet Eve’s parents and her brother.”

“Not you though, Sergeant. Would you mind waiting out here.”

Walsh waved them past him and the pale green door closed on them. “Is there another entrance?”

“Only out to the delivery door.”

“Okay, I’d better keep an eye on it too. Don’t want our man making a break for it.” He seemed to find the idea amusing as he went over to the angle where he could watch both doors.

But it was one of the times in his life when he felt he would give almost anything to be able to overhear the conversation inside. When the family came out ten minutes later they looked mildly shell-shocked but tight-lipped.

“What’s he doing?” Walsh came over to them.

“Sitting beside her.”

“Okay. Where to now? You’ll want to talk to the police here?”

They seemed to confer in silence then Mrs Hendry said, “Yes. But I don’t know how we’re going to explain anything to anyone.”

“Explanations can wait.” He ushered them into the car again and went round to police headquarters a couple of blocks over and took them past Stephanie at reception. “Doug in?” he said casually.

“Of course.” She too was surprisingly uninformative.

He took them into the small interview room which smelled of smoke and coffee and invited them to take chairs. “I’ll go and get Detective Inspector Towner for you. He’s got the autopsy report and everything so he’ll be able to tell you anything you want to know.”

*

This was perhaps optimistic. DI Towner and DS Sullivan came in, both looking rather tired and rumpled. Dennis said with almost malicious enjoyment, “I’ve brought Mr and Mrs Rogers and their son Peter to meet you, Eve’s parents, Eve’s brother.”

Doug and Greg shook hands without enthusiasm and said they were sorry about Eve dying so unexpectedly.

“It is unexpected, when you think about,” Dennis Walsh said suddenly. “Since when did you hear of a healthy adult dying of hypothermia on the Darling Downs? There has to be more to it than cold and a few drinks.”

Doug didn’t respond to this red rag, merely saying coldly, “Nothing to do, eh buster?”

“Always things to do. I’ll go and get myself a cup of coffee.” He went to head through to the small canteen but Doug stopped him with an angry, “No, you don’t! Come back in an hour. Or, better still, get on home and we’ll run these people back.”

“Do you mind?” Dennis turned to the family who still looked vaguely shell-shocked. Mrs Hendry raised sad eyes to him. “No, we understand you’re busy.”

“Okay. So on your way back into Buckton stop off to see Pastor Kramer. He knew both your daughter and her … partner.”

But while he was on the long near-deserted road home Guy was having all the fun of a visit from a public health official who said he was here to check out the rumours about undiagnosed hepatitis in Buckton. Guy said nervously, “Come round to the hospital with me.” So there was no one in the office when Charles Mather looking his usual pursed-up self came by. He knocked. He considered his options. He said to himself ‘if they can’t even be bothered to man the place then I am not going to go out of my way’ and put an envelope back into his pocket. It was Janice Low coming out of the bank on an errand who saw him and said kindly, “Constable Briggs just went out with someone in a Health Department car. I expect they’ve gone round to the hospital or the surgery … unless it’s about checking food places.”

His first thought, to simply return to the office and forget about talking with any police about Ms Hewett and her last conversation, died a regretted death. If the Health people were in town then insurance might be worthwhile. He returned to his office, rang the police station, and left a message for them to call him ‘re Ms Hewett’. Then he returned to the vexed question of the dead woman’s

estate. He was fairly certain Ms Dare had been very thoroughly through her aunt's office. If Christine Hewett had ever jotted any notes about her ideas and intentions then there was nothing now in the abnormally tidy office. He sighed and felt there was nothing for it but to accept that Dennis Walsh might be right. Privately accepting was not, of course, the same as admitting publicly. But looked at with a sober eye—an estate to be shared with the Hamilton family would mean a lot more work for him. A quick sell out by Ms Dare and her departure for Brisbane would be of little long-term-benefit. And she might prefer to deal with a Brisbane solicitor anyway …

The health inspector was thorough. He spoke with everyone who had treated Ms Hewett after her admission. He went round to the surgery to speak with Dr Davis. He went through Ms Hewett's treatment record with a fine tooth comb. He asked Dr Davis and Matron Denby whether they had considered anything other than pneumonia.

Guy Briggs listened in with minimal interest. Maybe the doctor or the hospital had made a mistake but he wished he knew what was going on with Eve's parents and the men in Winville and the ways they might choose to worm their way out of any possible claims of misbehaviour and lying …

Dennis Walsh, though, on the road back to Buckton was profoundly thankful to leave the whole business of Eve Rogers behind. He accepted he had no realistic hope of finding Eve's brother. He accepted that the death would be put down as an accident. He felt certain Doug Towner would find a way to close down the whole investigation and Eve's husband, whoever he might actually be, would probably keep a low profile for a while and life would go on pretty much as normal. Instead he turned his thoughts to local issues mentally ticking off what might be possible in the way of investigation.

Dog-fighting? There was a good chance it was happening somewhere else and it wasn't his business at all … except that there *was* the small possibility it was happening at the feed lots …

Christine Hewett? He had put in motion some ideas. Now it was up to other people to decide if a mistake, or worse, had been made.

Wayne Booth? A day out driving in the low hills and open plains round Long Hitch began to seem curiously attractive. A picnic maybe and a few questions to people living in the area.

Karen Dalton? He slowed and then drew in to the verge. It was hard to decide how to deal with her. And did the problem lie with her or her step-children. And what did those step-children do in Winville? Play video-games? Or go to strange occult mumbo-jumbo? Except it was hard to associate Winville with such things …

He got out, feeling the crisp cool air of a late July morning on his face. The worst of the winter was over. The days were lengthening. He stood beside the car and looked around. The little area where the old pub had once stood was fenced off, just a square of dry grass and some pepper trees and the old windmill and a few piles of old rusting junk almost covered with earth and weeds. If the Daltons used the small paddock for anything then it wasn't obvious. They had no cattle or horses … and it would only feed a big animal for a few days anyway. But he opened the old metal gate and went in. It was weedy on the couple of small hummocks where rubbish left over from the demolition had obviously been scraped up into anonymous heaps. And around the heaps …

"I wonder … "

The Dalton boys might enjoy creating an ambience of the mysterious around their stepmother—but was that merely window-dressing and the real culprit was something much more down-to-earth?

He went to the car for a knife and a plastic bag and did a little careful amateur botanising. Then he put everything into the car and drove up the long rutted lane to the old farmhouse under its sheltering trees.

He was in luck. The whole family had come in to wash up for lunch. They all looked out the windows to watch the police car pull in and park and Dennis Walsh get out. There was something very calm and grim and deliberate about the way he put his keys in a pocket and took out a large plastic bag.

"Company," Oliver Dalton said without emphasis.

"I wonder if he's realised there are more things in life than bloodstains and tyremarks?" Timothy Dalton seemed to find the idea amusing.

"Go and let him in," Roland Dalton said sharply.

"Hullo, Mr Plod, do join us for lunch," Michael Dalton said cheekily. "Will I ask him if he eats anything beyond meat pies and beer?" he went on as he moved to the door.

Karen came through from the big kitchen and stood watching as her boys let the local sergeant in. He nodded at her, at her husband, then he held up his plastic bag and said, "Do any of you kids know what this is?"

"Kids, sergeant?" Timothy sounded faintly miffed.

"Whatever. Just answer my question."

"It doesn't look like a garden plant. But then we haven't got a garden. So I'll take a punt and say it might be a weed." Michael went over for a closer look.

"Of course it's a weed," their father said testily. "I told you to avoid them. But I don't see what it's got to do with us, Sergeant Walsh."

"And why did you tell your sons to avoid 'them', Mr Dalton?"

"Because they're poisonous."

"And?"

"And nothing. End of story. I don't see what you're getting at."

"Yeah. You do. Why does a man pack up his family and move a thousand miles? Why do you boys cheerfully accept a life that must make you pretty ratty? Why does Mrs Dalton suffer from tiredness and strange fancies?"

"Well, you tell us," Oliver said with a wink at his brothers.

"You don't need telling. You know what you're up to."

"You're speaking in riddles, sergeant. Is that normal for country cops or just your private joke?" Roland Dalton looked from Walsh to his three boys and back again.

"This," Dennis Walsh tapped the bag and the wilting bit of plant life inside it, "is datura. It can kill. But in smaller amounts it can give people some very strange symptoms, including hallucinations and breathlessness and lack of energy. Maybe you little shits can call up spirits with your boards and your mumbo-jumbo but nothing beats the occasional few crushed seeds of this in your mother's breakfast muesli to make her feel she's going off the rails."

"I don't understand—" Roland Dalton stared at the bag as though it came with a skull-and-crossbones on it.

"Don't you? Anything happens to your wife—your three little turds get to get very rich very quickly."

"Oh! That! But I don't see what any of this has to do with—"

"Then you're more of a booby than I thought. There you are sitting back, leaving them to convince your wife they can summon up spirits, and all the time the poor woman gets tireder, more worried, more convinced she's the one who's going round the bend. She's the one apologising for what she thinks is her crazy thoughts. How long would this go on before the poor bloody woman did something drastic because she couldn't handle it any more—the idea that she is mentally unhinged and imagining these so-called entities all around her, smothering her and choking her. You'd come in, I s'pose, from a peaceful day's ploughing and find she's taken matters into her own hands. Very sad. Crocodile tears all round."

"You don't have any proof, Sergeant," Roland Dalton said awkwardly.

"But you, Mr Dalton, are going to start protecting your wife from your sons. You're going to go through their bedrooms and get rid of all their mumbo-jumbo rubbish. You're going to start behaving like a father instead of a weak wimp who thinks his boys are clever because they've got the jargon all down pat. You're going to get out there and make sure every plant is rooted up and burnt or I'll be on to the Council and the DPI to tell them you've got notifiable weeds on your property … and telling them you come from Victoria won't wash … You, Mrs Dalton, are going to get straight on to a solicitor and get your will changed. I don't care who you leave your money to but you're a fool if you leave it to these greedy little gits. And you boys are going to try and grow up. I know it'll be hard. But the alternative is worse. Because if anything—and I mean anything—

happens to your stepmother I'll find a way to charge you. You may think mental cruelty is funny. I happen to think it stinks."

He stood there another minute waiting for any of them to remonstrate then turned and went out.

As he reached the gate Mr Dalton came out after him. Dennis Walsh opened the gate, went through, and turned to close the gate again. "That why you moved all the way up here, is it? You hoped to find a way to wean them off all this hocus-pocus and get them thinking about some decent healthy things."

Roland Dalton at last shook his head. "You may not believe, Sergeant Walsh, that there's anything more mysterious in the world than a beer at the pub but *we* all know there's more to life than the obvious."

"Then—if your wife's health and well-being doesn't obviously improve—you can try the advantages of a nice straightforward spell in court."

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Guy wasn't sure whether they might have a case against Prue Dare or not; she and her partner Dorcas Leroy ran the Centre and had had two hepatitis cases among their young children, neither serious, but a full-scale vaccination program was then carried out. Had Ms Dare inadvertently carried the infection to her aunt? She said there was absolutely no way she could've done so. But she did say, apologetically, when asked some days later that it did not occur to her to suggest to her aunt that she too be vaccinated or take a course of gamma-globulin.

When Dennis came into the station it was to find both Guy, conscientiously writing up his notes, and DC Ali Deane just back from leaving the 'Hendry' family at the Coolibah Hotel.

He went over and dropped into his chair. "I don't think I want to know. Adam Rogers is a long-lost family friend and couldn't be guilty of anything. And Prue Dare is a friend of the Premier and bankrolled the last Police Union dinner." He took off his cap and tossed it on top of the safe.

"No." Ali Deane came over and lent on the counter. "But Guy has just been told he's got the job as Council librarian and I'm thinking to resign from CIB work and go back to working in the regular division and Doug says you crawled out of a slimy pit and the Rogers look like they've seen a ghost. In fact they probably have. Dennis, when I'm back in uniform, can I come and work here?"

"No. You cannot. Nothing personal, Ali, but I've got to keep someone there that's halfway honest and sensible—otherwise that place will implode and we'll hear the blast all the way from here. Anyway, what's this business about ghosts."

Ali Deane looked mildly crestfallen. She had sometimes thought that working with Dennis would be a lot better than working with Doug Towner … but then no one worked *with* Doug. They meekly did as they were told and hoped he knew what he was doing.

"When they saw Adam Rogers—it was the man their daughter had gone out with in Sydney, the one their son Adam made sure he broke up the romance with. This guy went back to South Africa. He found out she had come there with Adam. He stalked her, I guess you could say, and managed to get her to go out with him occasionally when Adam wasn't round to know about it. And then she met Hendrik Bruloder and fell for him like a ton of bricks. This time it was this guy who decided to break up the romance. He pushed Bruloder in front of a train, it seems, and made sure the local police who were all Bruloder supporters blamed the Rogers."

"And then he stepped in and 'rescued' Eve?"

"It sounds like it. But if she'd ever cared for him she'd realised by now what a sadistic creep he really was. He was the last person she wanted anything to do with. The Bruloder group did the fake set-up with the train because they had realised just what a useful man Adam Rogers was—with his expertise with explosives. Then they carted him off somewhere, I don't know where."

"So who the heck is this guy masquerading as Adam Rogers?"

"This is where it gets really bizarre. He had his name changed to Adam Rogers by deed poll soon after he met Eve. She *was* married to him in South Africa. He told her if she refused then he would make sure her brother was killed. It seems that brother and sister were very close. She would do anything to keep her brother safe. And then he got himself in nice and tight with the Bruloder expats … who all believed Eve's brother had killed their hero."

"And then, knowing how much Eve loathed him," Guy said tentatively, "he set about torturing her. Mental torture, physical torture, abuse, humiliation. And so long as she thought her brother was still alive she was prepared to keep going with it. But if that's true—then what happened? Why did she give up?"

"Her brother, it seems, could not stomach blowing up innocent people in Mozambique any longer … or his knowledge being used indirectly to do that. He blew himself up, it seems."

"So why wouldn't Eve simply walk away from them?" Dennis was sitting listening intently.

"You might, Dennis, but this was a woman who was terrified of the Bruloder people. She was a drug addict. She knew there were dozens of films around showing her in ways she couldn't live with. You're worried about cops getting corrupted—but how do you think *she* felt? If she ever managed to put a life together, find someone she liked, even maybe have a family—then this filth would probably start coming out of the woodwork."

Dennis nodded slowly. "I think you're right. I thought she looked … sort of peaceful. Her body in the pool, I mean. I s'pose Hendrik Bruloder liked dogs."

"I'm not sure liked is the right word. But he enjoyed setting his dogs on to … black men."

"How do you know all this?"

"I don't. Some of it is still guesswork. But Mr Rogers is singing like a canary to Doug. You take me down, I'll take you down, that kind of thing. Mr Rogers hates Eve—if that's the right word for his bizarre attitude towards her. Doug hates all women but especially Eve now. The two of them were getting very pally when Doug told me to bring her parents back here. And there won't be any charges, Dennis, so you're going to have to grin and bear it. But at least her parents don't know about the sex and the dogs. And I stopped off at Eric Kramer's on my way in to town for them to ask him what he knew about their daughter and he told them he was counseling her to help her get off amphetamines and he'd had high hopes of success … "

"I think Doug and this Adam Rogers were already very pally. I think that's why Eve accepted there was no point in going to the police, not when she was expected to give Doug anything he wanted … "

And high hopes. That hypocritical bastard! After Guy and Ali went out to get something to eat Dennis made himself a cup of tea. The desire to eat had faded away and left him feeling tired and empty. So many unanswered questions still. So many evil people walking free. The thought of charging that counterfeit Adam Rogers had been a secret energiser.

But after sitting for several minutes with his eyes closed he sat up again and opened his top drawer. Fiona smiled up at him from his favourite photograph of her and her smile said all the things that seemed to matter most …

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Notes:

DATURA. Several varieties grow in southern Queensland and all have an unpleasant smell. Sometimes called Thornapple. The leaves, fruit, and seeds are all poisonous. In small quantities they can cause a range of health problems.

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Country Casebook: Book Twelve

Case No. 1: Unfinished Business

The small Queensland town of Buckton was not entirely immune to the joys of spring. Blossom appeared on peach and apricot trees in various backyards. Grass pollen was borne on the wind. Magpies defended their nests by divebombing hapless schoolchildren—and the primary school head, Nelson L'Estrange, complained to everyone who would listen that the nests should be destroyed. He probably regretted complaining to the police because local sergeant, Dennis Walsh, said simply, "And what's wrong with getting the kids to wear a hat?" When that didn't find immediate favour, he added, "Or you can stand out there and wave a stick." Nelson had a high view of the dignity which should befit a school principal. He also wasn't fussed on being told how to do his job. So there the matter seemed to end.

But a week later a sign blossomed at the school gate: Forgot Your Hat? Go Home and Get It.

Dennis Walsh treated that small victory with a sigh of relief. He shouldn't need to be telling people the obvious. And he had more important problems to worry about—beginning with the resignation of his constable, Guy Briggs, who had gained the position of Council Librarian and was looking forward to his new job.

It also pleased Guy's girlfriend, Joanne McNally, and Joanne's son, Jason. Jason liked Guy but he hadn't really wanted to have a stepfather who was in the police. He already got some teasing over it at Buckton High School; along the lines of 'yeah, watch the little wimp run off and complain to his new copper daddy', that kind of thing.

Joanne was very fond of Guy but she wasn't in love with him and she often found herself weighing the pros and cons of marriage. Would they grow into a happy threesome? Or would she always have the vague feeling that she had married Guy to get a father for Jason? Of course that wasn't to be sneezed at. But the idea of a truly exciting and loving relationship still beckoned faintly. If she accepted second-best then they might all come to have regrets. And what if one or both of them met someone else later who truly did set a pulse racing?

She wished there was a simple answer to her dilemma. She often went into Rae's Boutique in her lunch hour. The supermarket sold a few small items of clothing, the Co-op sold workwear and some jeans, but Raelene Perry's little shop was the only place for women with any longing for style and excitement to go—unless they were prepared to drive to Winville. And Rae herself made women feel good about themselves. If she didn't have what someone had their heart set on she kept a good selection of fashion magazines and patterns on hand to create ideas. Some local women sewed their own clothes. Others went to people like Ailsa Grant to have things made up. It was that sense of mattering. Nothing ever seemed too much trouble to Rae. She was nearly always cheerful. She knew nearly all her customers by name.

For a moment Joanne toyed with the idea of asking Rae what she thought: 'should I marry Guy?' And then the absurdity of it struck her. No one else could make up her mind for her.

There were several girls from the Commonwealth Bank going through the new tie-dyed scarves Rae had just got in. And the big floppy straw hats they could be worn with. But Rae and Fiona were up the back of the shop talking quietly. Rae's assistant Cassie hovered round the girls sometimes joining in with their chat. Joanne walked over to the skirts on the far side of the shop. She knew she didn't have a great deal of style or fashion sense. Sometimes she had the vague feeling that this was a symptom of her own secret inferiorities. To marry Guy would be to marry

into a sophisticated family who knew important people and thought nothing of going traveling overseas and staying in five-star-hotels. Maybe she always kept a firm hold on her emotions because she didn't really believe Guy's feelings for her would last. She was just an ordinary country girl.

Fiona and Rae were looking at patterns and talking about 'expanding waistlines'; without obviously listening in she thought it probably meant Fiona was expecting a baby and she found herself quite unexpectedly thinking that she really would like another baby. She loved Jason but she sometimes thought she'd had him in the faint hope it might tie Rob to her—and instead she had found herself bringing a baby up on her own.

She held several of the cotton skirts up without being able to decide. Maybe she should do what Fiona did and instead buy a neat tailored suit for work—because Dr Davis, now that his wife appeared to be staying in Winville permanently and things had cooled between him and Susan Denby at the hospital, had invited her out several times for a drink. She had gone the first time. And then she had discovered that his intentions also included her sleeping with him but in a determinedly no-strings relationship. Sex, he seemed to think, was much like her other office duties. A bit like filing and taking phone calls. A very businesslike style might help get the message across. Work was work.

Rae came across to her with a smile. "Hi, Jo, how's things?"

"I wish—" Jo conjured up a smile, "I wish I could look like Fiona. I always seem to look like someone coming apart at the seams."

Rae laughed. "Join the club! No one here can touch Fiona. She always looks just … right. But the dark green would suit you with your colouring."

"I was wondering about buying a suit. I think I need to look more businesslike."

Rae nodded. It wasn't hard to guess why. "If you don't see anything you really like come and have a look at some patterns. Fee is going to go to Mrs Grant to get a couple of things made up. We were just wondering about materials." Joanne didn't really want to be bothered with getting anything made especially but she came over to the counter to join them.

Of course she had friends, relatives, old school mates, people she had known all her life here, yet in a confusing way she felt as though she was outgrowing most of them. She was afraid that marrying Guy might draw her back into a younger less-sophisticated group of people—but she also had the opposite fear that she wasn't sophisticated enough to deal with him and his interests. Now she felt the secret longing for Rae and Fiona to somehow take her into their friendship, under their collective wing, not just as someone who turned up to group get-togethers with her sister Pauline and others but as a real friend. Then she accepted that she didn't really belong with them either …

"A suit for Jo? Fee, what do you think?"

Fiona smiled at the doctor's receptionist and gave the question some careful thought. She had not been feeling very well lately but it wasn't something to discuss with Rae who would probably say, "You want your very own little Dinny so you've got to put up with all the other things." She had tried the various tips offered to her by people like Mavis Barnard; castor oil, pureed apple, black tea and dry biscuits … and nothing seemed much help.

"You've been through it, haven't you, Jo? Morning sickness. Except with me it seems to be all-day-sickness. I can't wait for it to wear off." Jo nodded cautiously. "Yeah, it really is the pits but I started to feel fine by the fourth month." Fiona smiled slightly. "Nearly there then. But for a suit … I think dark green would look nice … but I would be inclined to go for charcoal … and you can wear it with a gold chain or a scarf. You've got lovely natural colour so you don't have to worry about looking washed out if you wear a sober colour … "

"So," Rae put in cheerfully, "are you happy about Guy getting the library job, Jo?"

"He's over the moon. I think he's someone who wouldn't mind where he ended up so long as there were shelves and shelves of books. I just wish I was more of a reader. He'll probably end up thinking I'm a moron."

"It's strange, isn't it? I love books. But Dennis hardly ever reads a book unless it's to look something up. It doesn't seem possible to find the perfect match in that regard … but maybe differences are good too. It never gets to be 'more of the same'. We're going to drive up to Long

Hitch on Saturday, as it's Guy's last day to mind the station … and I'm sure Dennis will love being out in the country … whereas I'll be worrying about flies and cow pats and getting lost and everything."

Joanne smiled cautiously. "I've got a cousin who lives up that way. You could go and see her if you like. She lives with her dad so she always likes to get some company. She makes lovely little dogs out of pipe-cleaners and wool."

Fiona wasn't sure if she really wanted to visit someone whose chief interest in life might be making dogs out of pipe-cleaners but she was too kind to say so. "Let me have her name and address and if you think she wouldn't mind two strangers calling by—"

That evening, when she shared this with Dennis, he immediately said, "Good! Just what we need. A bit of local gossip."

"She might want us to buy the dogs she makes out of pipe-cleaners."

"Won't hurt us. I hear they're going to turn the old florist shop into a church op-shop. Maybe they can sell them for her. On commission or something."

To that she only offered a rather tired smile. But she did ask if he'd had news yet on Guy's replacement.

"Yep. Someone called Yusuf Hussein. I can't wait," he added drily, "but if he wants to know which way Mecca is he'll have to do his own homework."

"And he'll need to pray five times a day and keep his prayer mat in your store room."

He didn't look wildly happy at the idea. "Still, at least it's like starting with a clean slate. There was some talk of giving me someone from Winville two days a week. I don't want one of that iffy lot. I want to keep the good ones there to clean things up and I want the bad eggs to go to … don't know, but somewhere well away from here."

"I thought they'd got everything sorted out."

"You're joking! They've still got that lot at Japana. They still don't know where those drugs were made. I still haven't found where those fighting dogs came from. But I don't want to even think about them. I'd rather talk about nice things with you. Like … maybe … names for a baby."

She had had her dismayed moments of thinking that maybe racing into a baby when so much about Dennis was still difficult or deeply mysterious wasn't a brilliant idea. And then he found ways to disarm her fears and doubts.

"Did you know that Tara Morton called her little baby boy Dennis?"

"I wasn't sure whether to take the gossip seriously or not. I s'pose she's hoping her mum will refuse to let it in the house. Which might be a relief. I was hoping she'd go to Winville, not stay here … " Instead Tara had moved in with the father of her baby and was currently playing the proud mum …

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That afternoon he'd had a visit at the station by Prue Dare who looked likely to inherit her aunt's lovely farm out past Burleigh. She was unhappy with all the gossip and rumour round Buckton and she said very firmly, "I did not do anything to my aunt. I loved her. Why would I do anything to hurt her? If I infected her then I will never cease to regret that. But it is really horrible to have people looking at me like I'm some sort of monster."

"So you want me to go out there and tell everyone there is absolutely no evidence to suggest you helped to kill your aunt?"

"The whole thing is absurd. Of course I didn't do anything to my aunt. She was very special. I wanted her to get better, to go on with life—"

"If you want people to believe that then you're going the wrong way to convince them."

"Why? Because the farm will come to me? Why should I give up the family farm—just because people are gossiping."

"Look—your aunt loved that farm. Ask any of the older people round the district and they will tell you she preferred to give up the chance of marriage to a nice man because she loved the farm more. She had discussions not only with Garth, but with his parents and with her solicitor to try to arrange a way so she knew her farm would always be in good hands. So what do you do? Come in, grab the farm, and plan to sell it. The exact opposite of what your aunt wanted. And then you turn

round and bleat about loving her and understanding her … and all that baloney. If you want people here to believe you did nothing to hurt your aunt—then how about showing some sympathy towards her wishes?"

It wasn't up to him. The decision would be made by the bureaucrats who dealt with the estates of the intestate. But Charles Mather had unearthed the notes he had made at Christine Hewett's last visit to him before her death. His impression had clearly been that she wished to arrange for Garth Hamilton to have the farm and for Prue Dare to receive financial 'compensation' in installments. It seemed a wise idea. The one person who cared passionately for that farm was surely young Garth Hamilton.

"I feel like people are ganging up on me. *I* am the one who came out to care for my aunt. *I* am the one who was her flesh and blood. *I* am the one who will have the huge job of sorting out all her belongings, all the family stuff, and trying to decide what best to do with it—"

"If she had lived the few extra weeks and made a will—you would still be packing up furniture and heirlooms—and I'm told they are worth a few bob—so don't pretend that there's nothing in it for you. People here know you never came to see her before she got sick. You can't blame them for being suspicious."

"You don't know what decision she would've made. She might've come to her senses and seen Garth for the greedy little kid he really is. He's the one who's sucked up to her all these years—"

"No, Ms Dare. He is the one who was always available to help her whenever she needed something done. It may've been self-interest. But he got straight on his motorbike and went over whenever she needed him. If she wanted to see him as the son she never had that was her business. It didn't take anything away from you. I assume your parents gave you a good start in life. You don't have an automatic right to anything which belonged to your aunt."

"You may not believe in families—but my aunt did. I had dozens of conversations with her. I *know* she wanted me to have everything."

"That isn't what she told Charles Mather."

"But he's one of you lot. He'll say anything you want. I can see you're all banding together—just because I'm an outsider. But believe me—I am going to fight to get what is mine and I am going to win."

The idea of Charles Mather, who looked down sourly on most of Buckton, being 'one of you lot' was almost laughable but she obviously saw all Bucktonites as belonging in the same corner while she stood defiantly alone in the other corner.

"Then you're going to have to wear the gossip that says you deliberately infected your aunt with hepatitis, knowing it would probably be fatal to someone who was struggling with liver cancer."

"You know something—you and everyone here can gossip all you like. It won't get you anywhere."

"So you don't mind if your aunt's body is exhumed and checked?"

"It won't do you any good. The virus wouldn't show up all these months later—"

"That isn't what I've been told. It's quite a long-lived virus, I believe."

"Anyway you can't do that without my permission—"

"On the contrary. I can set it in motion straight away, this afternoon. It might help your case. Or it might prove that all the gossip is right. Not my call. But I like to get things sorted out."

His first impressions—that Prue Dare simply didn't understand how her aunt had felt about the farm and didn't understand how easy it was for rumours to start, not least because the hospital had not done the tests which might've resolved the situation when Ms Hewett's severe jaundice raised questions over the diagnosis of pneumonia—had faded. The Health Department had given the hospital a clean bill—but the question of tests had never been fully resolved. Prue Dare might not understand how people here felt. But she made no attempt to be conciliatory either. For the first time he found himself wondering whether it wasn't simple greed. Maybe Prue Dare had already committed herself to something which needed the backing of big money.

"You would just go out there and dig up my poor aunt—just to prove a point?" She managed to put on a look of astonishment.

"That's what all this seems to be about. Proving things one way or the other. It would, of course, slow everything down. No ruling could be made on the estate while the cause of death was up in the air—"

She was businesslike enough not to show any sense of dismay. Because he was right; even things like furniture and pictures could not be removed. But he felt his idea begin to take form. Prue Dare had risked everything on the roll of this dice. But why did she need a big injection of funds?

He did what he usually did and asked her straight out. She stood up angrily. "I thought you might want to help me, in the interests of justice, if nothing else. But you're like everyone else here. You hate me because I'm an outsider. I've heard of places like this. But I thought you'd try to keep an open mind."

"Just answer the question, Ms Dare. You need money urgently. What for? And how much?"

In her anger she had begun to shake. She picked up her handbag with fingers that weren't steady. "You think you're so smart, don't you! Always twisting things round so I always look to be in the wrong—"

"Just sit down. Stop getting carried away. And answer my question."

But it was a waste of breath. Prue Dare turned and went out with angry footsteps. A minute later he heard her car drive away. The idea, though, stayed with him. Did she need funds for her business, for her home, something to do with her own health … maybe she was a compulsive gambler …

But, resolution or not, he didn't want to dig up Christine Hewett. She was a very private person. He felt she would probably prefer that the farm went to her niece than that people should ever gaze upon her stinking decaying corpse. And Ms Hewett had been conscious after coming in to the hospital—but she had not tried to convey any suspicions to anyone.

And Garth? He wasn't wild about people inheriting something so easily, it wasn't good for their development, but he felt certain that Ms Hewett would not have floated the idea and got his hopes up if she wasn't serious. So what to do now? He sat back for several minutes and thought through the time it would take to resolve the issues with the estate and sell the property. Ms Dare might be rich by Christmas. But if she had massive gambling debts, payments due on a mortgage, a need for some special treatment—then Christmas was still months away. If she needed money quickly—would she have asked her aunt for help?

It seemed likely. Had Ms Hewett knocked her back—or said she would think about it—or said she would need to sell something; furniture, shares, pictures? Had Prue Dare been angry at her aunt's apparent lack of concern?

If she was innocent of any wrongdoing, just massively lacking in tact or sympathy, then had she found herself in a situation where she was stymied on every front? Because she couldn't even sell the kitchen table or a garden hose until the business of no will was resolved. People had come out to put a value on the farm and its contents. So Prue Dare had to be very careful if she thought of helping herself to anything.

About an hour later he had a ring from George Johnson at the Coolibah Hotel. "Dennis, what's with this Dare dame, do you know? She's practically legless. She's been drinking non-stop with Bill. They'll both be on the floor soon. Bill said something about her having a hard time. I'll give 'em both a hard time—if it's ruddy well left to me."

He didn't particularly want to go round. And how on earth was the stupid woman planning to drive out to the farm if she was drowning her 'sorrows' in mid-afternoon at the pub. Was the real problem not gambling but alcohol? But at last he left a note for Guy Briggs and went out.

Neither Bill Borrie, the licensee, nor Prue Dare were as seriously inebriated as George had suggested. But they were sitting at a table in the far corner and the table had several kinds of glasses on it; as though Bill had been urging her to try different mixtures.

"And what do you fools think you're up to?" He went over and sat down.

The belligerent woman he had seen in the station had drifted away into this sad rather slurred person. Bill said, “You were too hard on her, Dennis, I told her you were usually a good bloke but she didn’t believe me.”

“Are you planning to drive home in this state, Ms Dare?”

“I guess so. You want to stop me?”

“I’d better. Hand over your keys. George’ll keep them safe till you sober up. Bill, you’d better go and make some strong coffee.”

Bill hiccupped twice but got up and staggered away obediently.

“Okay. Now, how about telling me the truth about what’s really going on.” She probably did find an old softie like Bill an easier person to confide in. But he wanted to get some sort of resolution to the whole sad business of Christine Hewett’s death.

“Why? So you can accuse me of something else?”

“Oh, for crying out loud! Just get on with the business! You asked your aunt for a loan, for some money, didn’t you? So what did she say?”

There was a long silence while Prue Dare seemed to struggle to weigh things up. Then she said with difficulty, “I did. She offered me her antique sideboard. She said I could have all the money from its sale … because she was planning to leave it to me anyway. She said if it wasn’t enough she would see what else she could let go. I didn’t want to sell it. It is a beautiful piece. But then I couldn’t sell it anyway because she died without a will. I just hoped everything would go through quickly and I could sell up.”

“So why do you need big money? For your business?”

“No. For my partner. She isn’t well. They say she’ll never be well. But there’s a small chance that if I can get her to the United States there is an operation that might help.”

“Your business partner?”

“She’s more than that. I love Dorcas. I’ve always loved her. I think life won’t be worth living if she doesn’t survive.” She had thought there was no way she could mention that to anyone here, least of all this blunt uncompromising man, and now with the help of alcohol and a growing sense of despair she simply let it all dribble out.

“What sort of money are you looking at?”

“Around a quarter of a million dollars.”

“I see. You didn’t mind to sell the farm she loved—but you were less keen to sell her beautiful furniture and things.”

“They were only paddocks.”

“Give me strength! You brainless woman! She loved her paddocks more than she loved some old sticks of furniture. But there’s nothing you can do till the estate comes to you as I assume it will.” Because even digging up Ms Hewett and looking for a still flourishing virus would not resolve the question of whether she had been deliberately or accidentally infected. “I’d say the best thing would be for you to go round and talk to someone at the bank and see about getting a bridging loan.”

“I’m … we are still paying on our house and the centre … I’m not sure that they would be willing to loan us more.”

“I don’t understand you people. One minute you’re talking about love. Next minute you’re trying to hang on to all your assets. What’s wrong with selling your house to save your friend’s life?”

“And if she doesn’t come through I would be left with nothing. I’m thirty-six, Sergeant, it’s hard to start over when you’re that age.”

“You’re still going to get something when the farm thing is resolved.”

“Not with you going all out to give everything to that Garth kid.”

“The arrangement your aunt appears to have wanted was for him to have the farm, for you to have the contents of the house which are worth a pretty penny by all accounts and for him to make regular payments on the farm to you. So stop carrying on like you’re some poor old pensioner that doesn’t know where her next meal is coming from.”

“And what help will that be when Dorcas might be dead by Christmas?”

"Okay. Go straight round to the Bank down the road there and talk to the assistant manager, Fiona Greehan. You can tell her I sent you. Explain the whole thing clearly and see if an intestate estate can still be used as collateral for a loan. I assume you are her next-of-kin."

She nodded. "And you'd better get some of that coffee into you first." He got up and went out.

He mentioned it to Noel and Mavis at the service station later. "Beats me. If I thought someone I cared about wasn't going to survive without an expensive operation overseas I'd be having a big sell off straight away. I'd rather live in a bloody tent than have to be worrying about it all … "

"But that's you, Dennis, you're not one of these folk that's got to have it all. And maybe she was spinning you a line?"

"Maybe. But I think that part was genuine. The thing that interested me was this business of the 'nice man' Christine Hewett is s'posed to have turned down. You wouldn't happen to know who he was, would you?"

"Oh, everyone knows there were men after her, thirty, forty, years ago. She was said to be a real looker, and money there, and a nice person to boot. What more could you want? But don't go spreading it round … seeing the one she was most serious about married someone else later."

"Well, spit it out, mate. I won't get out my loud-hailer."

"It was Martin Applegarth."

*

Not a loud-hailer. But he did mention it to Fiona in the late evening. Although she had chatted quite cheerfully through the evening he wasn't sure that she was in good health. She looked rather pale and tired and clammy these days. She'd said one evening, "The only time I can forget the nausea is when I'm asleep. Alistair asked if I'd like a prescription for something to ease it but I didn't want to take the risk. I remember there was a little thalilomide boy down the street when I was young, he had little flippers instead of arms, I don't think I could bear it if I caused that sort of damage."

She said she had spoken with Prue Dare but she couldn't say more than that. Her days at the bank seemed to have become exhausting; not least because the manager Hilton Browne was not pulling any weight, though he still demanded all due respect and deference, and she was effectively doing two jobs.

The phone rang at about nine. It was one of the Parsons' sisters. Someone had crept in and stolen one of their two beehives out beyond the hayshed. So now they seemed to expect him to leap straight into the car and come racing out, lights and siren blaring.

"Now you tell me! If you think I'm going to go running after your bloody bees with a torch you've got another think coming."

Fiona couldn't resist a wan smile. Ellie and Faye Parsons were two doughty old farmers with rigid ideas about behaviour, a belief that the world was going to pot, and a deeply ingrained dislike of 'bad language'. They wouldn't take kindly to Dennis's testy response. But she knew perfectly well that he *would* go. Even if he could only get a rough idea of the problem at night he seemed to believe that was better than lying in bed and wondering how to tackle it tomorrow morning.

"You go to bed. A good night's sleep … I shouldn't be long."

"Dennis, you do realise that Prue Dare is a lesbian, don't you?"

"I did finally twig when she started raving on about this Dorcas character. But I still don't see why they don't sell the house. If you got sick and needed special treatment you know I'd sell everything if I had to." She nodded. She was sure he would. But she said quietly, "I think maybe her parents refused to help her, she's had to do it all on her own and she's feeling very vulnerable. They are probably still urging her to find a 'nice man'."

"So are you suggesting that her aunt did know, didn't know, only found out later, maybe rang her parents … and if her parents are still alive then why wouldn't the farm come to them … surely they'd be next-of-kin?"

"I don't know. But her mother must be Christine's sister surely … if there was a brother then surely he would've inherited the farm? And a sister *would* be closer kin than a niece."

"So if her mother died—it would more likely come to Prue rather than to her father who is only a relative by marriage? Maybe. But I better get going—"

She was glad he had gone. He was a hard person to cope with these days. And it seemed such a dreadful thing that they had only been married three months and already she didn't want him to make love to her, she didn't want him to sleep in the same bed because it broke her sleep … in fact the only thing she wanted to do most of the time was sleep. The thought of the long drive to Long Hitch was dreary. Its only advantage the fact that there were plenty of long deserted country roads whenever she needed to get out and retch …

And Dennis if he got nowhere with the problem would probably be upset or glum when he came home. And if he'd been successful he would be energised and hyped up …

'Tomorrow night I am going to stay at Rae's. At least that way I can get a good night's sleep. Even if Rae does make digs about me having regrets already.'

She was asleep when Dennis came back. He meant to come in quietly but then he could not hide his relief; the beehive was back on its stand, now heavily bolted down, and the Parsons, for once in their life, were all sweetness and light. She came up to consciousness, said something sleepily about 'what time is it?' then closed her eyes again. He lay down beside her and took her in both arms.

She tried to tell herself that women did all sorts of things they didn't particularly want to do; from cooking and cleaning when they felt nauseous to making love. But the need to be able to drift back into forgetfulness pressed in on her. "It's not that I don't love you, my darling, but that … " And then she didn't know how to end it without going off into vague convoluted excuses.

There were moments when he had felt the sudden pang: what if this is the forerunner to a miscarriage? How will we deal with it if things don't work out? And then the natural resilience and strength which marked him always won through. Of course things would come right. Of course Fiona would come through this period and feel better. Of course there would be a healthy baby at the end of it all.

"Everything will be fine … just sleep now." She felt his hand move up to stroke her hair softly and slowly and then she let go and slept again.

A few days later she realised that was the turning point; that she slowly started to feel better; more energy, more appetite, more interest in everything again. Within a week she found the idea absurd that she had dreaded a night with him. And yet it had brought home to her very clearly that though two might make a baby, and they might enjoy a deep sense of 'togetherness' at times, there was still a long and sometimes difficult road she essentially had to travel alone.

*

The low hills round Long Hitch were covered in long dry white grass and light straggling timber. It wasn't hard to find the actual property. A big sign said LONG HITCH PASTORAL COMPANY and underneath in smaller letters 'Don and Sonia King' and 'Quality Brangus Breeders'. Dennis Walsh drew the old station wagon into the dusty verge and looked around. It was a view of perfect country peace. Long strips of bark rattled faintly in the breeze. Large cumulus plumped up beyond the line of hills.

It was hard to associate this place with any wrongdoing.

Fiona took her grey cardigan off, tying it loosely over her pink blouse, and said, "What are Brangus? Some kind of cow?'

He nodded. "Cross between Brahman and Aberdeen Angus cattle." He took out his notebook and jotted down the name of the place and its owners. "I wonder if they're local people."

"Do we go in?" It was a natural question but he finally shook his head. "I think we'll go on and meet these rellies of Joanne's, see if they've lived here long enough to know everyone."

Judy Chilcott and her father Stan lived on another cattle property several kilometres back into the hills. They seemed delighted to get visitors. Judy was the sort of tanned and booted countrywoman Fiona expected to meet; and the sort she sometimes wondered if Dennis regretted she wasn't. He would not need to explain a Brangus to this woman.

They sat down to tea and rock cakes and explained that they were having a day out but also a bit curious to know whether there had ever been any problems with stock going missing. The

nearest police station was in Garramindi but Dennis made his enquiry seem natural, given that stock from here occasionally came through the saleyards in Buckton.

"Now and then." Stan didn't seem troubled by either the question or its implications. "But then some of the fences round here wouldn't hold a quiet pony—let alone some of the stock that comes in from further west. It's a funny thing but a fella that's spent a small fortune to build himself a better house never seems to be able to find enough for his fences. The only decent ones round here are on Long Hitch itself. So I'd reckon if they've got more stock than they counted through last time then it's all one way. Open a gate when they see something wandering and in it goes."

"Mind you," Judy said kindly, "I don't really think they're nabbing other people's stock. They seem pretty decent people."

"So if stock was disappearing who do you think might be doing the work?"

"Hard to say. There's a couple of places have sold in the last coupla years. Not too many family places left. Even Long Hitch is a company now, the Kings are only there to run it, I'd say."

"And if cattle were going walkabout—where do you reckon they'd head with them?"

"In the old days they'd go to the small meatworks there behind Long Hitch but they closed down a while ago. They reckoned they couldn't cover all the things these days, insurance, hygiene, workers compo, that sort of thing. And the big supermarkets don't want to buy from small country abattoirs anyway. Pity really. Doesn't make much sense to send the poor animals all the way to Brisbane then turn round and send the meat back to the country supermarkets. No wonder it's not much to write home about when you buy those little bits with the plastic over them."

"But you'd still kill your own?"

"We do. We offered to do it for a couple of other folk round about. Makes more sense to share a beast. But it seems you can't do that now. Not for anyone that's the public, not unless you've got some special arrangement. I always give some of it to Billy the Lad because he comes over to give us a hand. But beyond that—" Stan shrugged as though to convey the foolishness of rules and regulations. "Though there have been rumours that someone is hoping to get permission to re-open the place. Good luck to 'em, I'd say."

"So how would I find the place? And who is Billy the Lad? Bit of a larrikin, is he?"

"No. Billy Smith. He just never sort of … grew up."

They admired the dogs Judy made, or Dennis did. Fiona found herself having to brave the old bush dunny down the back with its cobwebs and deep and silent depths. She had a secret horror that the baby might somehow 'fall out' unexpectedly and disappear down into the unpleasant pit below her. Although Judy saw it as a hobby rather than a money-spinner Dennis ended up buying a fox terrier, an Old English Sheepdog, and a Schnauzer. Fiona might not want them along their mantelpiece … in which case he would set them up over at the station along the counter; it might even bring Judy in some new commissions.

At Stan's suggestion they took the road round the south of the Chilcott place, crossing the little dip where a spring let water flow across in flush years, then turned in the side gate and carried their picnic things through the paddock to sit along the close-cropped banks of a small lagoon. Fiona had hoped that fresh air and solitude would help but in the end she could only manage a cup of tea from the Thermos and half-an-apple. He didn't try to persuade her to try more but he left half the sandwiches 'in case you'd like them later'. Then he said, "I remember how I felt when Cherry got at me. That nice dinner Mavis had waiting that night we went round—and then I only wanted to get home to heave it up again. Last thing I felt like doing, being social, but I was glad you all talked about my tankwater and things. That's how you've been feeling these last weeks, isn't it, wishing I'd disappear and leave you in peace?"

"Sometimes, yes. And then I felt worse for thinking like that."

"Don't feel bad. I think it makes sense. You see an animal feeling sick, first off they look for a way to get away and have some peace and quiet. It must be natural. Not all this business of trying to pretend you're not too bad and don't mind visitors."

She smiled at that. It was oddly soothing to find that he did understand her feelings over the past few weeks. It wasn't intuition so much as his kind of belief that everything connected up in unexpected ways … that he could draw lessons from the natural world …

"So shall we go and visit Billy the Lad?"

She wasn't sure that she really did want to meet someone who had never grown up. He might prove to be another Artie Kees. Even so, she agreed. She could always stay sitting in the car.

But Billy Smith was a very different kind of person to Artie. His old weatherboard shack with a tin stovepipe sticking up and smoking gently in the spring day was almost surrounded by the evidence of Billy's trade. What had possibly started out as a small wood heap decades ago had gradually spread to provide most of his near view. Bark, chips, uncut logs, piles of sawn timber. An old saw-bench, a rusting crosscut-saw up against a stump. An axe waiting for him. And Billy was a beautifully tanned and muscled man in his forties. But his grey-green eyes and his wide smile suggested someone totally lacking in adult complexities.

Afterwards Fiona thought it was a chicken-and-egg question: had his lifestyle made him the man he was or had he chosen his lifestyle because it was all he could handle? Dennis put the question of missing stock to him. He came over and leaned on a pile of logs and looked around. He had a few cattle across the lower slope and a few vegetables round his rainwater tank. But he showed no sign of being knowledgeable beyond this little space that was probably the sum total of his life.

Nevertheless when Dennis asked him if he'd heard any rumours about the old meatworks starting up again he said simply, "They never closed."

*

When he couldn't be moved from this simple statement Dennis also had a simple response, "In that case I'd better take a look."

Fiona after thinking she might prefer to keep her distance from Billy Smith now found herself feeling rather sad at the thought of simply turning round and driving away. Billy was one of the truly innocent of the human race, untouched, uncorrupted, unmarked by modern life. She was sorry they couldn't buy some of his wood in the way that they had bought Judy Chilcott's dogs.

She asked him if their remaining sandwiches would be of any use to him. He smiled and came over and accepted the last of their food. Then he saw the newspaper lying on the back seat of the car and asked if they had finished reading it. Dennis handed it over and said, "Thanks for telling us about the meatworks. We'll have a look." But he too stood a minute looking out over the old hut and the land beyond it as though he regretted the need to rejoin the big wide world outside.

They found the entrance to the meatworks some ten minutes later. The front gate was wired up and a sign said 'Not Open to the Public'. There wouldn't be much traffic along this side road. But Dennis parked in the shade of a she-oak and said, "Anyone comes along I've just gone to take a piss, nothing more—because I think our Billy the Lad might be right."

After he had climbed through the barbed-wire fence some way along and headed in a diagonal route for the cluster of sheds and buildings and yards she thought she was the one who might need to get out and find a quiet spot …

No one came by. Dennis was gone at least twenty minutes. Fiona put her head back a little and closed her eyes. Perhaps he was right. To seek such a moment of solitude made sense.

His small excursion seemed to have re-stoked him. That daunting energy, that zest, that unflagging zeal to throw the murky depths open to the healing power of bright sun; Fiona opened her eyes and said, "I *know* you've found something."

"Billy's right. Animals are still being slaughtered there. I'd say when it closed Long Hitch got permission to continue to use it for some of their own stock. They've probably broadened their view of 'own stock' to include the neighbours. But even if they've got twenty kids—I think more animals are going through than one family could claim for their own private needs. I'd need to get a search warrant. But it's not my patch. I'll have to go back and bother George Stadler. He won't like that."

She was tempted to say: "Does it really matter?" but that was the question which had brought down Dennis's ire when she first met him in Buckton. Instead she was silent for a while before saying, "Dennis, have you thought it through? Everyone round here must know what is going on, even nice people like the Chilcotts and Billy the Lad."

"And you think that's a good enough reason to do nothing?"

"No, I guess not. But it's a bit like us being the Campbells falling on the MacDonalds in Glencoe after accepting their hospitality."

"Don't worry. I'll talk it over with George. If there's no real sign of stock theft then it's up to him whether he gets on to the Health Department and those bods who might want to dig out whatever agreement they originally had with the owners."

"So where does Wayne Booth come into it … if he comes into it?"

"I think he's holding stock for someone. You couldn't keep animals in these yards without someone noticing. I'd say he's got a nice little sideline in contraband beef. If he's got another property round here he could take either stolen cattle back to Buckton and brand them there and fatten them; or he's doing it the other way around. Helping himself to the occasional beast round Buckton and slipping it through here. I'd say he brought his own brand over here to do some young animals. Maybe he forgot it. So he got out an old iron back there … might've been his dad's but more likely one he got somewhere, a clearing sale or something, or even dumped. He didn't think anyone would notice. After all his cattle are only going for slaughter—it's not like a racehorse or something. But someone with sharp eyes got suspicious and got on to me."

"So it would help to look at land titles round here. If he owns a property in his own name."

"It would. But again it's really up to George."

"But you won't be happy with just handing it over and hoping something happens. Own up now."

"Maybe. But we'll call round through Garramindi and see George. Can you bear to revisit the place?"

Fiona agreed though without enthusiasm. But it wasn't her memories of Garramindi which seemed so pressing and hurtful now. Rather it was the sight of the unsold bank building, the fading sign, the broken windows, and with its demise it seemed to have taken something with it; a part, maybe, of the town's spirit. Maybe Garramindi, like Dinawadding, was going to die now by inches. And not even the advent of the film crew from Brisbane could do much to stave off the inevitable.

'I didn't realise,' she thought with unexpected sadness, 'that I needed to fight harder to keep the bank in town.' It was a relief to drive out of town again and turn on to the long flat road towards Buckton.

*

As Guy Briggs was still living in Betty Cronk's little granny flat Sergeant Walsh had suggested to his new constable that he go round and get a room at the hotel when he arrived, if he had no objection to living on licensed premises, and he could then look around for accommodation at his own leisure. Bill had no objection. It was a room used. But whether there would be any local resistance to a young man who was presumably from a Middle Eastern background was another matter.

Constable Hussein was already waiting on the station doorstep when Dennis Walsh came over to unlock on Monday morning. "Score Ten for keenness," he said to his new constable.

"Yes, sir, it's what they tell us. Start out the way you mean to go on." He certainly sounded Australian if a little more pedantic and precise than most young men in the force. Although he was regulation height there was something over-slender and youthful about him. Dennis Walsh had the disconcerting feeling that though he might be a hit with some of Buckton's women he probably would have to struggle to be accepted by its male component.

"Okay, come on in and we'll get your paperwork done and I'll show you around." It sounded perfectly straightforward but Constable Hussein had the nervous thought: the horror stories people had enjoyed relaying about Dinny Walsh were probably all true. Someone had taken malicious pleasure in throwing him to a very large and powerful lion.

"So now, do you get called Yusuf or something else? And is it true that you are a Muslim?" Although he hadn't let on to Fiona he had found her suggestion about a prayer mat a bit unsettling.

"No. My parents were Kurds who fled to Jordan and then we all came to Australia ten years ago. We belong to the Syrian Orthodox Church. I usually get called Sam."

"So which do you want? People here will probably prefer Sam but if you prefer your own name we'll soon get 'em trained."

"Sam is fine by me."

"Fair enough. But I don't know where the heck you're going to find that kind of church out here. Anyway, we'd better get cracking."

By lunchtime Dennis Walsh had come to the conclusion that his new constable was bright and willing to learn. But although some of the people he had introduced Sam to had been friendly and welcoming others had been reluctant to shake hands and a couple of others had made cracks about 'any relation to that mad bastard in Iraq?'; it was probably his surname young Sam needed to change in the wake of the invasion of Kuwait …

For Constable Hussein coming into Buckton with the very recent and very raw hurt of another country town he was only too aware that some of the responses to him were more than the usual caution many people displayed towards a man in uniform. From being initially daunted by Dennis Walsh he was beginning to feel he was the bulwark who might shelter him from the worst of any storms here—so long as he managed to stay on his right side. This was an understandable decision. But it led to him gradually falling into a rather sycophantic 'yes sir, immediately sir' pattern with his new boss. Walsh did not want cheek from his constables but neither did he want someone who needed constant direction and 'push'. He wanted to see initiative which was sensible, well thought through, and practical.

Sam Hussein went round to the bakery to buy himself some lunch then went in to see John Goodrick who although not a real estate or letting agent knew most of the places for sale or rent in the district; mainly because he was always on the lookout to buy cheap and sell dear. He suggested, though without much interest, two possible flats and wrote down the people to contact. The young man did not look like someone with money to invest so John Goodrick was not going to waste much time on him.

"If you get really struck—go round to the caravan park. There's two on-site vans there. One of 'em might be vacant."

Hussein thanked him. He would go round these places this evening. In a way he was sorry he couldn't afford to stay on at the pub, Bill and George and Bob and Emma and Jolie had all been nice to him, but it would be too expensive—and his parents might not regard it as a suitable environment.

He had decided to try for the police rather than something more academic when he saw a police poster to recruit more 'ethnic' young men and, in the beginning, he'd felt they really did seem to want him. But he'd had three postings now and he felt as though his welcome had grown very thin. There were the racial taunts; sometimes veiled, but quite often completely open and 'in his face'. And his parents were dismayed by some aspects of police culture—not least the heavy drinking, the constant swearing, and what he could only summarise as an attitude of 'we're cops—we can do what we like'. But he couldn't very well go home and tell his family and friends that some of the people he worked with were as foul-mouthed and dishonest as some of the people they nicked for theft and using offensive language …

It might be seen as an indication of failure on his part but he had made the decision before arriving in Buckton: if this posting was like his previous ones then he was going to resign and see if he could qualify for a university course.

*

It was Mr Applegarth who had been on Sergeant Walsh's mind, and that curious question of Christine Hewett's possible sister even though no one locally seemed to have any memory of a sister (or a brother for that matter), but it was Mrs Applegarth who came into the police station on Monday afternoon and asked if he could spare her a few minutes.

"Sure. Take a pew. How's John getting along these days?"

"Very well." She took a chair in the tiny waiting area and seemed to be trying to sort her thoughts into some sort of neat order for presentation. "He hopes to make sergeant next year." John Applegarth had been his constable when he first arrived in Buckton. "But that isn't why I popped in. I really don't know if there's anything you can do but I felt the need of some advice."

She took a determined breath. "It's about my old aunt, I call her Aunt Bee, but she was Bea Lockwood … well, she still is. When she felt it was time to give up her house here I talked her into

going into the Parrvilla Home in Winville. We went and had a good look around and it looked very nice and she was able to get one of the new units they've just finished building there. She's still completely independent, not in the nursing home section, and if she's going senile then I haven't noticed it."

"But she's not happy there? The food or the care isn't up to scratch?"

She seemed to be having difficulty getting to the point but his attempt to hurry her along didn't produce anything immediately.

"No, it's not that, the facilities and the care do seem to be good. The thing is … her unit backs on to another one which has an entrance on to the back lane there … and she is convinced that the people in it are not elderly. I thought they might rent out spare units at times to younger working people but that isn't what she's saying. She said she could hear three men in there talking … and they seemed to be planning a crime. I feel sure she must be mistaken, that she was overhearing the television or possibly a radio play or something, but she is adamant. They were real people and she won't accept that she might be mistaken. My husband says we can either ignore her, inform the management there in case an empty unit is being mis-used, or tell her to go to the police in Winville. But I think they will think the same as we think—that she must've got something confused."

Probably.

"When you say—planning a crime—what kind of crime is she talking about?"

"Something to do with drugs. She thought at first that they were simply talking about pills and things you get at the chemist … but then they said something about 'revving the boys up' and making a lot of quick money at so much per pill, and they did a lot of swearing … and she is convinced that reputable chemists don't swear. I know it all sounds very silly. But I promised her I would get some serious advice. I didn't want her going to the management there with some weird story that might get her an unfortunate reputation … "

"So when did she hear this? And when did she tell you?"

"I went to see her yesterday afternoon. She seems to have heard the most recent conversation on Saturday night. They have a sort of impromptu concert for the residents some weekends, or maybe someone from outside comes in to give a talk or entertain. She wasn't feeling very well and she left early and went back to her unit."

"Was there anything about the men that gave her any clues? Did they sound very young, very old, foreign, anything she noticed?"

"Yes. I'm afraid this is the part where I started to doubt the whole thing. She is convinced they are really Russian spies and that they are here to … undermine our youth … and bring down the government. That is why I've been reluctant to come and talk to you. I cannot really believe in Russians of any kind in Winville."

"Do you think she might've mistaken a Russian for a South African?"

"I really don't know. I'm sure she's never even met a Russian in her life. Do you mean the people they say have bought the feed lots?"

"Could be. They seem to be a pretty odd bod sort of crew."

"Then—is there any chance *you* could speak with her. I think she just wants someone to take her seriously and then she'll be able to drop the matter—if she thinks it's in good hands."

The whole thing seemed pretty far-fetched. Why come to a nursing home to discuss your plans? On the other hand, he tossed the thought around briefly, a nursing home might be respectable cover. And although it probably had arrangements to stop the old folk wandering off it was unlikely to have much in the way of security except in the main office and anywhere they stored money or valuables …

"I'm going to Winville tomorrow evening. Can she see people of an evening—or are there any restrictions—or does she go to bed early?"

"She goes to bed about nine-thirty. I'm sure she would be happy to have a visitor. She doesn't know very many people in Winville, other than the other residents there."

He said he would call in on the old lady but he couldn't promise to do more than listen to her claims. But after Mrs Applegarth had gone out and before Constable Hussein came back from the

Pound he rang George Hickman, the editor of the small local broadsheet. George knew most local people. "George, do you happen to know a Bee Lockwood and has she got all her marbles?"

"Oh, I'd say so. She's quite a character. She used to teach at Buckton Primary years ago. I've heard she was very good. Quite strict. But really knew her stuff. So far as I know she is still very much with it."

"Okay. And another thing to do with the Applegarths—do you happen to know if there was anything serious between Martin and Christine Hewett many years ago?"

"I've heard that. But I don't really believe it. Martin was a distant cousin—second, third, second cousin once removed, one of those things. They could've married. But the story I heard, and this was from Christine herself, one time when I was doing something on pioneers … not that they went right the way back … but she said her father wanted her to marry Martin because that way the farm would be sure to stay in the family. I don't think Christine particularly wanted to marry anyone. Just a feeling, Dennis, but there was just something about her. If she was a man I'd call her a loner. Very self-sufficient. I think she was very relieved when he married Bronwen later on."

"So was she an only child?"

"Yeah. She was. That's what I don't understand about this woman who says Christine was her aunt. I thought maybe her father had been married twice but I never heard that. Maybe they're using aunt and niece in a casual way. I remember I always called a close friend of my mum's Aunty Jane."

"But if they're doing anything like that—then Prue Dare *can't* be her next-of-kin—"

"Well now, that's a facer and a half! I never thought of that."

"So if not a niece—then who the heck is she?" But as he put the phone down an idea came to him. For a minute he doodled on some scrap paper. Then he said aloud, "I think I need to bring all the interested parties together and try to get some sense out of someone. Because if Prue Dare isn't kin—then she must have something else. She couldn't hope to get away with saying she always called Christine 'aunt' and therefore … " And then he wondered if Bea Lockwood might be able to throw any light on the business.

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He left Fiona at the doctor's surgery after her sympathetic "Don't hurry through—if she's like some old ladies it might be a struggle to get away from her" and drove round to the nursing home. Mrs Applegarth had hinted at a dark back lane where people might come and go unnoticed, the mysterious strangers of a thriller, but in reality it turned out to be open and easily visible with a small car park off the side road and some flower beds brightening the scene. The old part of the home had been built in the 1880s as one of the first houses in Winville. Now that part was converted to offices and special care facilities. Dotted through the large grounds were small blocks of four conjoined units. They each had a front patio with big windows. But the units did have the drawback that they only had windows on two sides; the back and inner side walls were blank for greater privacy.

Miss Lockwood came out to greet him. "Ah, now that *is* service, Sergeant Walsh, or did Bron browbeat you into coming?" She gave him a head-to-toe survey then said, "No, I don't think anyone ever browbeat you into anything."

She invited him in and sat him down to elegant china at a small table. Her whole apartment was set up in the old-fashioned rather prissy way she had probably always lived. But he didn't doubt that both George Hickman and Bron Applegarth were correct when they said this old lady had all her wits about her. She kept a walking stick on a nearby chair but it seemed to be insurance rather than necessity. She had the rather decisive manner he also associated with Mrs Applegarth. If Bee Lockwood decided to believe something then there might be no moving her.

He drank her tea, which came as a thin golden stream rather than the black stew he was in the habit of making for himself, and ate her carraway seed cake. "Now, I know you will want to know *exactly* what was said and when—so I've written it all down for you." She handed over a sheet with both sides covered in a rather spidery hand-writing.

He ate absently as he went down her lines. They might not be Russian spies but he didn't doubt now that she had overheard a conversation and transcribed it quite capably. "Did you write it down as you heard it?"

"I tried to. I heard the door bang and them come in and make themselves a drink or maybe it was just water from the sink. They did some complaining about the place and at first I thought they were potential lessees. I rather hoped they weren't as I didn't approve at all of their language. Then one of them said 'we didn't come here to look round the place, we just want a safe place to store it' and that was when I started to get suspicious so I found a writing pad and a pencil and started to jot down what they were saying. I didn't get it all." She pointed rather apologetically to the paper she'd handed him. "But I hope there is enough there to give you the gist of their conversation."

"And how long do you think they were in there?"

"I'd say about half-an-hour. I heard them going round opening and closing cupboards and drawers. I don't know if they were putting things in or just checking what space there might be."

"And has that unit ever been occupied while you've been here?"

"No, it hasn't. I find that rather strange. Other places that have become empty—and they do know their tenants will die and vacate the premises—are filled almost immediately. Just not that one. I wondered if the management likes to keep one in reserve, emergency care, people in town for treatment at the hospital, something like that, but so far as I know it has never been occupied even on a temporary basis."

"Mmmm … and this Martha they refer to? Might that be anyone here?"

"I thought it was quite likely they meant Martha Harding. She is the assistant manager here. But tell me, do you think I'm a silly old woman imagining things?"

"Well, I don't think they're Russian spies—"

"Oh! I don't think they are either. I just said that to give Bron a bit of excitement. I think they are very unpleasant sordid people who are planning a common-and-garden sort of crime—and I would like to stop them if I can."

"I think … that the people who have bought the feed lots over at Dinawadding also have some connection to manufacturing illegal drugs. If they have a business or personal connection here this might be a useful place in which to store some stuff. They run a risk keeping it all together in one place."

"So what would you like me to do?"

"It would be quite handy to see into that other unit. But I really don't want you to do anything. These are seriously unpleasant people, I think, and it might be best if your name is kept right out of everything. But I'll be in touch."

She looked a little wistful at this apparent brush-off; as though she had waited eighty-two years for some excitement to enter her life and now she was being told to remain on the sidelines.

He understood her regret and said, "One thing I would like to know is who owns this place."

"It's called the Parrvilla Trust. They put 'Excellence in Aged Care' on their brochures. But what the trust is exactly and whether it is owned by something else as most things these days seem to be, a subsidiary of a subsidiary perhaps—now there you have me but I might be able to do some quiet asking around."

"Very quiet. Very casual."

The walls of these units obviously weren't soundproof; her next-door person in the other front-facing flat came in and turned on a TV and a kettle. "Another thing while I'm here," he went over to the door, "do you happen to remember Christine Hewett?"

"Yes. Though I never taught her. There was a small school in Burleigh in those days. I remember she went out with Martin, my nephew-in-law, but it never appeared to be very serious. Their grandmothers were sisters so they were second cousins. But she did have a very close friend when her father sent her to boarding school in Toowoomba later on. She used to bring her home every holidays … and this other girl *was* keen on Martin, I mean when they'd all finished school. I am not one for gossip but I think Christine liked this other young lady too much for her own good. Christine didn't want her to marry Martin but it wasn't because she wanted Martin herself. I think she had this image of this other woman and herself living together and running the farm, a bit like

Ellie and Faye Parsons perhaps." She sighed. "Dear me, how easy it is for misunderstandings to get in the way of things. This other girl married someone else. I've heard it is her daughter who is going to inherit Christine's farm. A strange kind of … I'm not sure what I might call it. Not recompense. But the wheel turns, you might say."

"But it would surely be Martin who was Christine's next-of-kin? Or are there any other relatives?"

"Not that I ever knew of. You always think of farm families as being big—but Nigel Hewett only had the one child and he was an only child. I don't remember his wife very clearly. She died when Christine was quite young. Nigel used to berate her for not being a son. As if it was her fault! And I think it had the unfortunate side effect that she did try to be more son than daughter. And then—after spending twenty years telling her to behave like a boy he turned round and tried to push her into being girl enough to marry Martin. I really don't blame her for digging her toes in." She hesitated as though reluctant to express her opinion on the current situation. "It isn't up to me … but I think it would be good if the farm did go to Martin. He doesn't want the farm, of course, but I think he did care enough for Christine to want to do what she would've wanted."

She came over to her doorway to see him out and said unexpectedly, "I've been told you have a very beautiful wife, Sergeant Walsh."

"I do." It was odd to think she had probably heard this from her niece—because he had never felt that Bron Applegarth had much time for him. He was the ogre who had made life hard for her dear little Johnny … "I left her round at the doctor's. I'd better go and pick her up."

"She's not ill, is she?"

"No. Expecting a baby."

"How nice." She turned back into her flat. "Just a moment." She took a little figurine off one of the small tables which he hoped she would give up as she grew more frail and dependent on her stick. "I'd like her to have this. And perhaps you could bring her to see me some day. I do get so tired of only seeing wrinkled old prunes like me … "

Although there was a fine line between accepting gifts and accepting bribes he didn't see this as compromising anything and he was touched by her thought. Fiona might not be wild about pipe-cleaner dogs but he thought she would like this. It was the alabaster figure of a woman, vaguely Greek in her garments, reaching back for the hand of a child, whether girl or boy wasn't clear as it too had curly hair and a sort of mid-thigh tunic. The two figures were negotiating what appeared to be a rocky beach made of cast-iron so the piece was quite heavy. Old Miss Lockwood picked up an embroidered doily and wrapped the piece. "Bron keeps telling me to start giving up things before I fall over them—but I do want them all to go to good homes."

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Susan Denby had been inveigled into offering the space and setting up the chairs for this small conclave. There were many Bucktonites who believed implicitly that if they didn't do what Dinny Walsh wanted them to do he would look over-closely at their vehicles, their driving, their drinking, and their noise levels any time they invited friends around. Susan Denby, though, was gradually coming round to the idea that he got people to do what he wanted by sheer force of personality. It never seemed to occur to him that people would not, sooner or later, fall in with his wishes.

He had brought together the Hamilton family, Charles Mather, Prue Dare, Sr Martin, and Martin Applegarth. His new constable sat nervously next to Ms Denby but a little back from the circle.

"Won't take long," Walsh said without preamble. "We've got two problems. Did Ms Hewett die from hepatitis and how did she catch it and is anyone else at risk. And the problem of her estate. We can't resolve the second one but we can try to clear the air a bit. What is said in this room is off the record. Unless there is clear evidence of something which needs to be followed up—either by police or by the health bods."

No one queried this. Although the presence of Constable Hussein and his notebook made several people wary of believing too implicitly in 'off the record'.

"You might like to start, Ms Dare. Tell us about Ms Hewett and why you feel her farm should come to you."

It was the last thing Prue Dare felt like saying in front of the Hamiltons but the presence of Martin Applegarth was oddly reassuring.

"My mother and Christine were best friends. I have a letter Christine wrote to her when Nigel Hewett died. You may know that my mum hoped to marry Mr Applegarth but she went and married someone else later and then the marriage broke up. But by then she had cooled towards Christine and she said she couldn't move back to the country—and she said if Christine was lonely she could have me. I was grown up by then. I wasn't someone to be handed round like a parcel. But my mum was very angry with me because I had moved in with Dorcas and we were planning to start a business together. Mum said she'd had enough of this women wanting women business and she wasn't going to have anything more to do with me if I stayed on with Dorcas."

She looked down at her feet as though to find inspiration. "Christine was my godmother but my mother had never brought me out to see her. She always sent me something at Christmas, that sort of thing, but I decided I would come out to see her. I thought, if nothing else, she might understand how I felt about Dorcas." She rummaged in her handbag and took out a small handkerchief and balled it in her fist. "It was lovely. It really was. She was so kind and thoughtful. But I knew I couldn't take on the farm. I knew nothing about farming. I know she was disappointed but she said she understood and she would still like me to have it and make the decisions she hadn't made. She showed me a list of family things she wanted Martin to have. And she told me she would like me to consider selling the farm to Garth on installments. She said she knew he had always wanted it but that he would care for it … so that mattered more than any personal feelings."

"What do you mean by personal feelings?" Dennis Walsh appeared relaxed and only moderately interested.

"Garth told her she shouldn't give the farm to me because I was some sort of creepy dyke and only out for what I could get."

"Is this correct, Garth?" Dennis turned to him. "I didn't know you knew anything about dykes."

"Well, she is!" the young man suddenly burst out. "I hated to see them kissing, it was … unnatural … It was her who did it … not Christine … "

"Is this true, Ms Dare?"

"Yes. As soon as I started coming there I could see she was starved for that kind of love and affection. She had lived all her life without being able to be true to herself. She didn't want sex … she just wanted someone she could touch and kiss and say little endearments to … like the silly little names that lovers use. She knew about Dorcas. She wasn't asking me to give her up. And when Dorcas was told she would never get better I told her and she said she would help."

"So if you were infected with hepatitis it was very likely you would've given it to her?"

For a moment Prue Dare simply stared at him. "I didn't have any infection. I *know* I didn't have anything. There were other people in her life. Garth. The contractors. People who treated her. If I did catch something from the two children we had who were infected—then I would not have been infectious all those months later."

Sister Martin had looked at the times Sergeant Walsh had given her. The children were sick soon after Christmas. If Prue had caught anything from them then she would have ceased to be infectious when she went to stay with her aunt in May. But had she been up earlier in the year? The answer was yes. But she had spent most of her time minding the farm while her aunt was in Winville hospital in February. She had come in several times to see her but it was unlikely she could have spread the infection. She had been asked to wear a mask and gloves while her aunt was in such a parlous state. And if her aunt had been infected then it would've shown up before June. Now she looked at Dennis and nodded.

"Okay, so we need to follow up and check the health of other people who were in close contact with her." Susan Denby nodded. If only Les Davis had been less willing to jump to conclusions, and less confident of his conclusions, she would've ordered a blood test then and they would not now be mired in this speculation. He was a clever man but she had gradually come to see that it was a slick superficial cleverness and he avoided any hard questions by pointing the finger at everyone else.

"I don't think there is anything more I can do on the health side of things. So it's over to you, Mr Applegarth, you appear to be next-of-kin so it's likely the farm will come to you. But it would be a pity to let the farm get run-down and neglected in the meantime."

Although Martin Applegarth was a pillar of the local community and currently organising the official opening of the Burleigh Dam with a member of cabinet as his star attraction he was not a forceful man and he was uncomfortable at being put in this situation.

"Prue has only touched on it. But Christine *did* want to adopt her formally. I know it seems a bit silly for a grown-up person to be adopted but it is apparently legal if both sides agree. The problem was that Prue's mother claimed she would challenge it if Christine tried to do anything in a formal way. A challenge would not have succeeded. Prue is not a child. But it would slow things down. Christine told me she wrote to Prue's mother and she was waiting to hear back before she made her will." If so, then Prue Dare had every reason to want to keep Ms Hewett alive …

"As your client is not here to tell us anything, Mr Mather, perhaps you would tell us if she discussed this with you." Walsh sounded rather dry.

Charles Mather had hoped this issue would quietly die. The discussion on the will was sensible and straightforward. But he had regarded the idea of adoption as a silly whim. At last he said rather sourly, "She did. I advised against it. I thought she should leave the property to Martin and leave these other two right out of it. If he wanted to give them anything later that was his business."

"We mustn't forget that this property belonged to Christine Hewett and she had put in seven days a week on it all her life. It isn't what seems easiest or most sensible. She clearly wanted family things to go to Martin Applegarth, the farm to go to Prue Dare, and for an arrangement to be made with the Hamilton family for them to buy it over a period of time. It doesn't matter what anyone feels about her ideas or her attitudes. It was her property to dispose of as she wished and I would like to see that happen as soon as possible. As she had clearly written that she wanted to help get Dorcas Leroy to America for an operation then I think that also needs to be factored in. I would suggest that Ms Dare, Mr Applegarth, and Mr Mather hold their own discussions on how to achieve that." He looked around the room and said, "Any questions?"

It was Garth Hamilton who beat back his natural diffidence to say, "What about me? She wanted me to have it! They'll never give me anything! I know they won't!"

Then he subsided, embarrassed by his own fervency. Dennis Walsh turned and gave him a long considering look. Then he got heavily to his feet. "Right then. We'll be on our way." Constable Hussein also leaped to his feet. It seemed an oddly inconclusive way to leave the discussion.

But as both men left the room they heard Martin Applegarth say rather tiredly, "Don't worry, Garth. You won't miss out. But I always thought you cared for Christine for her own sake—not for what might come to you. I'm sorry to discover that was never the case." He, too, got up and went out on to the hospital verandah. For a fleeting moment he felt the resurgence of an old regret. If he and Christine had married their own children might now be there on the farm. But he had made his choices and he didn't really think he had made wrong ones. Just that vague sense that Christine would've understood … some things … better than Bron ever could.

Case No. 2: Solitude

The difficulty, Dennis Walsh felt with the material from old Miss Lockwood, was that his relations with Winville's personnel were at an all-time-low. Even people he had got on with quite well, like Greg Sullivan and Neil Midgley, now avoided him. The only person there who was still thoroughly in his corner was DC Ali Deane. And, given that she already struggled under the double handicap of being a woman and Aboriginal in a raucous white male environment, he had no intention of making life any more difficult for her. If things needed to be done round his patch then he probably had to find ways to get them done himself, not hope for assistance.

This worked reasonably well for Buckton problems. But it put him in a bind when it came to the information the old lady had given him. The Parrvilla Home and the Parrvilla Trust were very obviously not on his patch.

He was still musing on this as he closed the station on Friday evening and went home to eat and put his feet up. Sam Hussein had gone round to look at several flats without success. He had gone to see about a caravan. But although the caravans were very obviously empty he had been told by Dick Kearney who lived in the old cottage behind the caravan park that they were both booked for the next few weeks.

It might be true. September school holidays and that kind of thing. But Sam Hussein had the miserable thought that everything was starting over again. Buckton wasn't going to be different to his last place. They might as well come out and hang banners over the streets to say 'Go Home! We Don't Want the Likes of You!' Dennis had sent him round to the library to meet Guy Briggs, just in case Guy was thinking of moving in with Joanne and leaving the flat free. Although Guy hoped that might be possible Joanne still kept him at arm's length, as though he still had to finish a probationary period to prove he was suitable to be taken seriously by both Joanne and Jason, and he had the gloomy feeling that Betty Cronk would not take kindly to Hussein in her flat. She already mouthed off, now and then, about Asians and wogs and darkies taking over the country. He wasn't sure how to say this to his replacement so it was easier to take refuge in something indefinite like, "I'm hoping to move but I just don't know when. I'll let you know when it happens." Then he had softened the blow, if it was a blow, by sharing some of his enthusiasm for the library and signing Sam up as a borrower.

On Saturday morning Walsh sent Constable Hussein out to tell the Conways, for the umpteenth time, that they mustn't let their stock wander along the roads without supervision; then he sent him to deal with the theft of two bags of blood-and-bone meal from the Co-op warehouse. But all the time the question of accommodation seemed to hang fire.

It was Kieran Dobbs who called by nearing lunchtime and offered a solution. "It's a reprieve, Dennis—"

"What from?"

"From Jenny Roberts."

"Good! She's sold the bloody place, has she?" She had hung on to her house next door to the police house for long months in the hope of getting the unrealistically high price she'd placed on it. In the interim she had made a number of complaints about people trying to damage and vandalise it as it stood empty and she commuted most weekends from her home in Toowoomba.

"She has. Fee and I are buying it. She'll be the sleeping partner. I haven't decided yet whether I want to move into it myself or just use the house and sheds for my overflow." Kieran as a DPI extension officer collected all sorts of old agricultural machinery, equipment, old containers, posters, anything that pertained to farming and farm life of a bye-gone era. It was a fascinating collection and he was always short of room to store things.

"So you finally got Jenny Roberts to drop her price?"

"We did. But we promised her we wouldn't make her final price public. She's very touchy about the idea she had to climb down. And we've also agreed to let her come and stay in it if she still wants to. I think she'll find, now that's she finally made that big decision, that she'll be able to let go. So we need a tenant while we do it up and decide what to do next. Would your new constable like to rent it from us? We won't ask much while we're still doing some renovations."

"You're not going to ask Fiona to climb stepladders and paint ceilings, are you?"

Kieran laughed. "No. When I said sleeping I did mean … if not sleeping, then resting. If I decide to live in it eventually I'll buy back her share. But this young fellow you've got now—if he fancies doing a bit of sanding and varnishing—I won't say no. It's hard to find the time to do everything."

"So how long before Jenny Roberts hands it over? I don't imagine she wants him in there with her."

"Say two weeks … a bit more if there are any hiccups."

"Okay, I'll send him round to talk to you later. He can stay in the pub a bit longer. He doesn't seem to be having much luck with finding a place to live."

"People think they don't want someone who does strange things—"

"Such as?"

"Hard to say. Cutting the throats of sheep in the back yard maybe."

"Well, for starters, he says he's a Christian. And for seconds, no one goes round cutting the throats of sheep in any back yards while I'm around to stop them." Kieran smiled at that but said more seriously, "Good oh, I'll see him this evening then."

"Before you go—do you ever go over Long Hitch way?"

"Out of my area. But I can ask Tony Rowlands if you've got a query."

"Just put it to him very quietly. The old meatworks there. They're sort of closed down but apparently the Long Hitch folk still use the premises. I don't know but I think they just might be whizzing a few stolen beasts through as well. I'd like to know who owns the various properties round Long Hitch itself … also any gossip about the Kings. It might all be above board but I don't think it is. So just play it close to your chest. I don't want 'em getting wind of it."

The trouble with this was, Kieran thought, it was probably all around the district that Dennis Walsh had come by. He wasn't the sort of person who could do things and go unnoticed.

"And you think it has something to do with Wayne Booth?"

"I do. But I don't want him turning virtuous. Well, I do. But I'd like to nab him first."

*

Fiona went out to see Mrs Grant on Saturday afternoon. Ailsa Grant was making her up a couple of maternity outfits and, being Fiona, she still wanted to look as neat and stylish as possible, not like someone slopping round in something between a housecoat and a badly-made caftan.

This Saturday was slightly different to the other times she had come out to the Grants' farm. Their granddaughter Megan had moved back in with them. Megan had been abducted and raped early in the year but she had proved surprisingly resilient. It seemed to hurt her much more to know that her parents spent more time arguing than they did fussing over her and making her feel loved and special.

"Poor pet," Mrs Grant said with a sigh. "We're happy to have her back but we worry about her safety and whether this place will give her bad memories."

"Perhaps she needs a new hobby. Something to take her mind off everything?"

Megan was a rather large rather pudgy girl with little claim to beauty. This probably explained why she liked to sit around while Fiona discussed clothes with her grandmother. She seemed to look on Fiona as a kind of promised land she could never hope to enter. Fiona had very little to do with adolescent girls and she always felt slightly awkward. Did girls now still share the likes and dislikes of girls of her era? She really didn't know. Yet she was unfailingly kind and tactful and it never occurred to either Mrs Grant or Megan that she might feel herself at a distinct disadvantage here.

When she asked Megan if she liked sewing too Megan only looked a bit embarrassed and said "Not really". But to the question of what she would really like to do she sighed and said, "I would love to be a ballet dancer. But everyone just laughs and says 'An elephant like you!' Even my teacher laughed."

Later she took Fiona into her bedroom, now turned from a casual sleepout into a place with locks and keys, and showed her the little scrapbook she kept with pictures cut from magazines and booklets to show some famous ballerinas. "I think I like to look at them," she said with unexpected insight, "because they are what I can never be."

"Who says you can never be?" Fiona said firmly. "Ballet is very hard work. But you can do it—if it's what you want more than anything else in the world."

"They would laugh at me. I would look … " She couldn't decide what word to use but she pointed to a picture of girls lined up in their leotards at the barre, all slim, all graceful.

"Well, first things first. We need to start a gentle program of exercises to help you get fitter. And you need a couple of lessons to see if you actually like doing it. You might find it isn't really what you want to do."

"I don't want anyone to *laugh* at me," Megan said seriously. "Not there."

"Then you must start doing your fitness exercises very quietly and gently here—so none of your friends know about them. If you go down to the gate to pick up the mail instead of walking slowly you could walk fast or skip or jog. Every night before bed you could do a few little exercises, like touching your toes and—" Fiona stood up and did several simple slow exercises in bending and flexing. "Don't do too much the first day. Just start quietly and build up. Have you got a video player here?"

Megan shook her head. "Then, next time your granny and granddad are coming into Buckton of a weekend you could come round to see me and I'll show you a video and give you a couple of books with simple exercises in them. Do you have any friends who might also be interested?"

"Lots."

Later it seemed odd to Fiona that Megan should have lots of friends when she so obviously didn't have much confidence or self-esteem now. But Mrs Grant provided the simple answer to that puzzle. "She plays the fool. The more they laugh at her the more she plays this big hippo thing. Look at me. Aren't I the big funny lug. You might understand children better than I do." Fiona was inclined to doubt that. "And the more she makes herself a butt of their fun the more she feels they must like her and that she must be popular. I don't like it much. But I don't really know what to do about it." Fiona thought this was quite likely the answer but she only said, "I think she'll feel better about herself if she can get a bit fitter. And I did ballet myself as a girl so I'd be happy to show her the simplest movements."

She didn't know, that sleepy warm afternoon with the spring pollen in the air and her pretty new smock and expandable slacks in her carrybag, that she was starting something which would soon take on its own momentum. When she told Dennis of this conversation he said, "You will take care though, won't you—"

"If you mean will I be showing Megan how to do the splits or put my leg above my head—then the answer is no. Anyway, I am very rusty and out of practice myself."

She had watched the videos that Kath O'Brien had lent her and she religiously did the gentle movements and breathing exercises demonstrated. The second video was much more graphic. Dennis, after watching some unknown woman pant her way through childbirth, including an episiotomy, not to mention cracked nipples and a few other unpleasant possibilities, had said soberly, "Maybe I should've got the same operation they give the poor bloody animals—would've saved you a lot of worry."

"Yes, Dennis." And then she had felt the overwhelming desire to roll around laughing. "I'm sure Vince Bromby would be only too happy to oblige."

"I've never worked out why the little git seems to hate me. I know he calls me a turd behind my back."

"Don't you? But you know things about his private life he wishes you didn't know. And he envies you."

This was a facer. "Why the heck should he envy me?"

"Because … " but then she found she had difficulty in answering this. On the surface Vince had a lot going for him; he was a good-looking well-regarded professional man. He appeared to be fit and healthy. He had a virtual monopoly on Buckton's animals. He was quite comfortably off. Although he wasn't particularly sociable he had friends and most people, if put on a spot, would have no difficulty in saying they liked Vince Bromby. "I think … it's because … he doesn't know who he is … " But that seemed as ridiculous as all her other attempts to privately answer this question.

"Come again? You mean he's adopted or something?"

"No, I don't mean that. You may not have a strong religious belief guiding you—but you believe passionately in justice, in fairness, in people making the effort to do the right thing. But Vince is at the mercy of every stray breeze. He's like a weathervane which won't stay still. He wants to be liked and popular so he goes along with what seems to be the consensus view. He enjoys putting people down if he thinks it will make him feel stronger and more confident about himself … and instead he just ends up feeling a bit of a bastard. And the worse he feels about

himself—the more he tries to dump it on to other people. And you're number one in his sights because you know why his wife left him."

"I don't actually know why. Just that she did."

"That's probably enough. Other people commiserate with him. But he knows the truth. And he knows you know the truth. And now he's going out with Pauline—who also enjoys getting the knife out."

"Well, let's forget about them. But I'm not sure I can bear to watch that video again … "

*

When DI Doug Towner came barging into the Buckton Police Station on Monday morning Walsh's first thought was that he knew about the nursing home visit and had come to complain about such intrusions. But Doug, it soon appeared, had just come from the Caritas Farm Stay centre. He said, "I should've got you moved before you went blundering in there with your bloody size twenty boots and drove that poor bloody little bitch to take her own life."

"So you've decided it was suicide after all, eh Doug?"

"Not my take. But it looks like it. We've stayed with accident for the sake of the family."

"And so there's no problem with any insurance policies? Very wise."

Doug Towner opened his mouth to refute this then closed it again. "So what's this about you going out to Long Hitch?" He came over and lent on the counter, a simmering anger in every line of his posture.

"What the hell is going on around here? Can't a guy even go for a Saturday drive without everyone getting suspicious. Nice spots out round the hills there."

"Baloney! There's nothing nice about it. And now we've got that Stadler moron wanting to know what he should be doing about title deeds!"

Dennis felt like hitting his head in sorrow if not in anger. Why on earth had George Stadler got on to Winville instead of doing some quiet digging? "So what about them—the title deeds?"

"Wouldn't you like to know, you bloody nosyparker, always sticking your nose in where you aren't wanted. So get this, and get it loud and clear—Long Hitch is *not* your patch and if you don't stay off it I'll make sure you get sent to bloody Dirranbandi. Got that? And don't think I'm not serious—"

"But you're not—so you might as well save your breath, Doug."

"It's 'sir' to you, you slimy bastard." Constable Hussein had stood open-mouthed through this exchange, unaware it was about par for the course. Now Towner turned on him with something close to a snarl. "And as for you, you little woggy wimp, when I see what the force is coming too—and don't stand there smirking—or you'll go with him—"

Smirking was about the last thing on Constable Hussein's mind. He wasn't sure whether to apologise or somehow get out of the firing line.

"And what sort of name is that? Hussein! Sending us some relative of that bugger that burns oil wells—the sooner you get on your way the better—"

"Calm down, Doug. I know you've got to compensate for the lack of meat where it matters—but leave my constable alone or I'll have you up before those anti-discrimination bods—"

"You're out of your tiny mind! You and this little cow-eyed dago—"

"Oh, I think you know what I'm referring to, Doug, so just calm down and listen to me. I want to get that Japana place cleaned out. But if you want to play the dummy then I'll do it myself. And if I hear you've been letting people round Long Hitch know about George's investigation I'll take you down, even if I have to go down with you. Believe me. I've had about all I can take from you."

Sam Hussein, deeply imbued with the idea that sergeants did not talk to detective inspectors like this, waited humbly for instant dismissal and the end of a not-very-glorious career.

"You think you can blackmail me—but don't get cocky. Because I'll get you—if it's the last thing I ever do. Even if I have to come out of retirement to see you go down the drain." Then Towner turned round and walked out.

Dennis Walsh went over calmly and put the electric jug on. "That bit of excrement, in case you're wondering, is one of the most incompetent and corrupt men you will ever come across. I've got him by the short and curlies at the moment because he knows I've seen a photo of him cavorting

naked with the woman who committed suicide. But he'll find a way to make life hard for me—starting with this non-cooperation stuff. Don't let him bother you. You don't answer to him. And now, we'd better give some thought to this Long Hitch business before he totally wrecks any chance we might ever have of stopping people like Wayne Booth."

"I wasn't smirking. I was just … gob-smacked." He hesitated. "And what did you mean about cleaning out Japana? That's the cattle place, isn't it?"

The phone rang and Dennis said he would send his constable around. "It's on the Winville turn-off. No one hurt apparently but there's hay all over the road. Do your best to handle it. But if it looks more serious call in."

He watched the young man leave. This morning might be pretty much like other spats with Doug (and far from seeing Dirranbandi as some kind of penance he thought he might enjoy the place) but there was a difference; he knew now, for nearly certain, that he couldn't let things just dribble on. He had to find a way to get Doug Towner out of Winville. Greg Sullivan might say 'better the devil you know' but all the people who depended on police cooperation and honesty to deliver safety, justice, reasonable results, were being short-changed with this apparent non-cooperation policy. At first he had seen it as their usual lack of helpfulness but he had gradually convinced himself it was more than that. Though he still wasn't sure if Doug had set it out in clear letters or was just hassling anyone who might still look sympathetically towards Buckton …

He might be able to get Doug on some of his most racist comments but that would drag young Sam into the firing line. But how to get back into Japana and find if it really was the source of those amphetamines—

He took out Miss Lockwood's notes and re-read them again. He had no intention of putting her into danger but she impressed him as a high-minded old lady who would not count the cost of her safety if it came to stopping some form of crime. He just needed to think of a simple way to get into that unit and look around and the trouble was—if the management were party to its use then they would not offer a viewing to any potential tenants …

He continued to ponder on this as he got on with some routine work. Sam Hussein was also pondering; and his ponderings were even more gloomy. Dennis Walsh with his experience and confidence and seniority might be able to treat DI Towner with such cavalier rudeness. But it wasn't much help to him. If Towner chose to put in an adverse report on him then it would carry weight.

Insurbordination. It didn't even have to be proved beyond reasonable doubt.

The accident turned out to be between a farm truck and a car. The truck had been carrying a load of hay bales and some of them were now strewn across the road. The car's driver was obviously a clergyman. He was now in a fairly acrimonious argument with the elderly farmer. Hussein looked at the position of the two vehicles and it wasn't very hard to make an educated guess about the sequence of events.

But the car's driver was demanding an apology and money to repair the scrape on his vehicle. Constable Hussein cautiously inserted himself into the situation and asked what had happened. Ray Werner could not say that he exactly liked or admired Eric Kramer but he had been brought up to respect men of the cloth. He was half-inclined to be apologetic. The thing that held him back had little to do with the pastor: if he admitted to causing the accident then he might find his driving, his eye-sight, his reflexes, his control of a vehicle put under too close scrutiny. A farmer who lost his licence effectively lost his ability to farm.

Although Ray Werner might not have wanted his son to marry an Aboriginal girl he had lived by an easygoing live-and-let-live philosophy for his nearly eighty years. If this new constable with his olive skin and black eyes and curly black hair could resolve this situation he wasn't going to hold that against him. But he, and the young constable, were totally unprepared for the torrent of abuse that Eric Kramer turned on him. He had come to Buckton to get away from the sort of people who were poised to take over his beloved homeland. Now he was seeing the same thing happen here. If he had stopped there Mr Werner might have felt the reasonable sympathy of an old man who doesn't really want to see his known world undermined or changed or turned inside out. But the minister's vitriolic abuse was finally more than the old man could take.

"Look, I know you might not like … people," he said lamely, "but this young fella's just doing his job."

"Then charge this old duffer and make sure he pays for my repairs and then I can get on my way." Kramer turned to Constable Hussein with a kind of offhand contempt. "That's your job. So just do it."

"No, sir. My job is to find out what happened. Then I will see if charges are warranted. I will need to photograph the scene and take a statement from both of you."

"Photograph the scene! What on earth are you? Some sort of ridiculous namby-pamby—"

"No, sir. Just regulations." This was easier said than done. His fingers shook on the camera and he was sure the pictures would be a complete mess. First DI Towner abusing him; now a clergyman. And a minister would have more clout than a rather shabby old farmer. And there was still the hay across the road to be removed. He felt the yearning temptation to call his boss out. But he had been told to deal with it and he didn't want to give in too easily. If it wasn't for Kramer's abuse then it would be a very small problem.

But Eric Kramer pre-empted his agonising reflections. "I don't have all day to waste while you mess around with ridiculous regulations. Mr Werner can contact me when I've got a quote to repair my car." He went to get back in his car. Constable Hussein fought down the temptation to let him go. After all it was hardly a serious accident and half-an-hour would see the hay re-loaded. There were several cars waiting to squeeze by as soon as he gave the go-ahead and he imagined them all wondering what all the fuss was about.

He gulped down his dismay and said in a voice which wasn't quite his own: "I'm sorry, sir, but leaving the scene of an accident is an offence."

"You charge me, you little kaffir, and you'll soon find that Dennis Walsh doesn't matter one iota in this town. The magistrate will toss it out in two minutes flat—"

"That part of it is out of my hands. I just want a clear statement from both of you on the course of events." He had thought to handle it in a few minutes but now he knew there was no simple quick resolution. He went over and waved the first car through. In a couple of minutes the road was clear and he could concentrate on the accident. It was small comfort.

But he knew, as he listened to the two men give their versions, that Eric Kramer was clearly at fault. The accident could not have happened in the way he suggested, not unless the vehicles were now placed differently and the scrape on the car was a different kind of scrape …

At last he said nervously, "You know it didn't happen like that, sir, so Mr Werner is not at fault and is not under any obligation to pay for your repairs. Now, if you will excuse me I will see about getting this hay back on board."

If he thought his previous place in the firing line was hot this was almost incandescent. But he had made his decision and now he could only defend it. He felt like a wrung-out rag when he finally got back to the station and did his best to justify his actions and responses.

"Just write it up," Walsh said without asking for chapter and verse. "And don't worry. Eric Kramer won't come round to complain."

"Are you sure, sir? A clergyman and everything."

"D'you know something? I sometimes wonder if he *is* a clergyman. I wouldn't be surprised to find he forged his papers to get into Australia. He'd put anyone off going to church. Don't go worrying about him."

This was easier said than done. And Eric Kramer, though he only appealed to a small section of Bucktonites, had his own avid followers.

*

Sam Hussein had gone through a lot of back material to get an idea of who did what, or sometimes didn't do, but the complexities of Japana were beyond the scope of notes and records. Dennis Walsh, in trying to give a decent overview of the situation, went back to the shooting death of Frank Obidini at the feed lots and worked forward. But was that the beginning? Was the setting up of the complex puzzle boxes of companies by the Hoysted family really the beginning?

It was Greg Sullivan who had told him that the first Mrs Hoysted was a wealthy woman from South Africa. So was she the first … contact? Or was it her money which her husband had taken

and used to set up his maze of business holdings—and she as a person was largely irrelevant? But if she was a key source of money—then where had her money come from? And the situation was complex enough without adding her into the material he set out for his constable. Nevertheless, as he tried to put it all into some sort of chronological order he doodled little boxes and where people seemed to connect up …

At the end of it Constable Hussein said simply, "It's hard to believe in."

"Yeah, I often wake up and wish I could find it was just a bad dream. And I don't have the resources or the evidence to finally get to the bottom of it all."

He sat back in silence and his junior also seemed to be trying to work things through. He could try for another search warrant for Japana. He could try for a search warrant for that unit at Parrvilla but if they were only looking at the unit as a possibility it might be innocent of any useful evidence. And there was a good chance that if they had ever been cooking up pills at Japana that too might've been moved to another site. The only good thing about it was that all seemed to have gone quiet on the dog-fighting front. George Hickman had run a good picture of that unwanted dog he had taken into 'custody' and asked anyone with any evidence to ring in. It might be enough to keep things damped down.

But as he looked down at his jottings it suddenly hit him.

"Strewth! They've signed their death warrants, those two! These folk have already killed, directly or indirectly, at least four people. So what's two more?"

"What two?" Sam Hussein found the whole thing hard to make much sense of; but he, like his predecessors, didn't like to admit to total blankness.

"I wondered why that Adam Rogers went round and sang like a little canary to Doug and the others. It struck me as pretty out-of-character. But of course with all of us sniffing round after Eve's death … and with her parents coming on the scene he was right to get scared. Someone sooner or later might twig that he also had a good reason to want to get rid of Hendrik Bruloder. It might not be your handy ANC terrorist, after all. He thought he was buying himself some protection. He knew Doug was buddy-buddy with Sam Hoysted and all the Bruloder crowd. I wonder what he offered Doug in return? And the poor booby probably didn't realise that Doug would always stick with the really big money. Nothing Rogers could offer him would compare with Hoysted money."

He picked up his pen to do some more doodling. "But if Doug is weighing up his options and coming down on the Bruloder side then I wonder if Rogers has really got himself enough insurance with those few photos of Dougie in the all-together … "

"I'm sorry, sir, but I really don't follow all this."

"Don't worry. Neither do I. But I think it's about time I got serious on it all. Again." He looked at his list of things still to be done. "You'd better take young Kerry Thomas out for her driving test. And just because you like her sister isn't a good enough reason to go easy on her. I've got enough buggers out there that shouldn't be in charge of a skateboard … And old Mr Pounder will come in later. Tell him I'm sorry but there's no way he can keep driving. Tell him he's eligible for a taxi voucher. It should be valid for him to use with the Charter bods but he'll need to check that. If it isn't—help him to put in a complaint."

Gavin Kearney, as well as being half-owner of the small caravan park, ran a hire firm called Buckton Charter. He rented out all sorts of agricultural machinery, backhoes, posthole diggers, horsefloats, trailers, even ride-on lawnmowers, as well as being an agency for a car hire firm. Several years ago he had added an old taxi to his list but as he was still registered as a hire firm there was always the possibility that someone would quibble …

As soon as Kerry and her examiner had gone out, Walsh lifted the phone and asked for DS Greg Sullivan in Winville. Sullivan said cautiously, "Sorry, Dennis, but I'm flat out. I can't talk to you."

"Oh yes, you bloody well can. I want you and Deane out here pronto. This evening wouldn't be too soon. If you don't come there's a good chance you'll have another death on your patch … or worse—on mine. And bring anything you ever managed to dig up on Sam Hoysted's first wife and his kids and bring the lab results for those pills we sent you."

"And if I don't?" Greg Sullivan wasn't sure what image might be most appropriate; he only knew they all stank to high heaven.

"Simple, Greg. I come to you."

*

Dennis Walsh had gone over and over Bee Lockwood's notes. He had shown them to Fiona. He had jotted a few more queries for the old lady. He had asked Sam Hussein to get on to the computer and see if he could find anything about Parrvilla. The old lady had identified three different voices and she had tentatively put in which one had said what. At the bottom of her notes she had written '1. A smoker, sounded to be in charge. 2. Used the most foul language. 3. Sounded younger.'

Her notes read:

3. I'm not sure this is a good idea. All these old bats around with nothing better to do than stickybeak.

2. It's got to go somewhere. Since they f… up the other place and I don't trust the sheds, the f… cretins. It's only for a month.

1. Look, stop whingeing. It's Randy's idea so he can wear it if … (couldn't hear). He says he's got it all set up to go like a dream.

3. But what if Martha jacks up. She's the one got to slip it in at night. And I don't trust her. She's got too much of a thing for old Ververd (?) Doesn't make sense but she says … (mumbled)

2. What the f… ? Once it's shipped out we can get back to normal. I'm sick of carting the f… stuff here and there, and back again … if it wasn't for that f… (might be something starting with H … Helen? Holland? Hyland?) we'd be clear.

1. Then get on with it now. We need non-obvious places.

(Noise of cupboards and drawers being opened.)

3. What happens if we put it next to the hot-water system? Does it work?

1. We won't risk it. Cool and dark. Not much point in sending damaged goods. He's saying he can get five bucks per pill. But he won't get it if the stuff's melted … (couldn't hear as they'd moved away into the kitchen/laundry area. They said something about 'in the cleaning cupboard'.)

2. Then tell the f… dame to put it somewhere cool and dark and let's get out of here. Better to have her prints on it than ours.

3. So when do you get the stuff?

1. Fortnight. Goes down big before exams. World's your oyster, worried kids sitting up late … (something about getting it in by a certain date. No idea where 'in' is or the date.)

I wondered, Miss Lockwood wrote, if they were planning to sell some kind of pep pill to students. I always used to tell my nephews and nieces that a good night's sleep before a big exam would do them more good than any amount of black coffee or pepper-upper.

And clearly Miss Lockwood didn't believe in sullying her page with the f… word.

But as Dennis Walsh put it aside yet again he thought he had four people to home in on, if only he could identify them: Martha Harding (unless there was another Martha in the equation), Randy (whoever he might be), the H-person (and he was inclined to think this just might be the RSPCA inspector Jim Holland which would suggest they'd moved all their production out of the Japana feed lots when he came to look at sick cats there), and Ververd. He couldn't make a guess at Ververd. Sam Hussein had come up with the idea that it might be something like the Vervoids on a Dr Who show. But he was certain it must be a person. It was Fiona who had wondered if this might be a name like Verwoerd, the South African prime minister in the early sixties.

"What did he look like?"

"Sweetheart, I am *not* a walking encyclopaedia. Ask Guy to hunt out a picture. But for all I know it is a common name … "

Instead he had given George Hickman a ring in case it was a name which had come up via his Bruloder research. George said, no, but Verwoerd had had a lot of support from the far right for his tough stance on apartheid.

"So is the man still alive? And what would he look like now?"

"Well, if Bruloder looked like Reinhard Heydrich then Verwoerd probably looks like a white-haired version of Hermann Goering. But I have an idea he was assassinated. And I wish you wouldn't keep asking me about this weird mob, Dennis. I'm sure there are lots and lots of lovely people in South Africa but I've rather gone off the ones who've decided to grace us with their presence."

"Hear! Hear!" Dennis said drily. "But stick with it, George, and I'll find a way to get rid of the whole bang lot of 'em. You wouldn't happen to know a Martha Harding, would you?"

"Not personally, no. There are some Hardings over Dinawadding way. She might be one of them. They aren't people you'd want to invite round for dinner, I wouldn't think."

"How so?"

"Old Abe Harding's son, Saul I think, tried to set up a local branch of the National Front. This was a while ago. Eight years … could be more. He got quite a lot of local support. But then he had a falling out with that bloke that runs it … the Front, I mean … Robert Cameron or might be Richard. Things went quiet for a fair while. But I heard a rumour last year that he wanted to start a branch of the Confederate Action Party out here … then I heard he was going to start his own group, that he was sick to death of these other ones that promised and didn't deliver."

Someone had letterboxed round the area last year; Walsh couldn't remember if it was this party or something similar. He had read through their aims on their flyers which included bringing back the death penalty. From what he had seen of police cock-ups he thought that was one of their barmier ideas. He had probably filed the leaflet just for reference. But he might not have bothered. They hadn't seemed to rouse much interest in Buckton; perhaps not least because few Bucktonites felt they were in much danger of being 'swamped' by black or yellow immigrants. A couple of people had said vaguely "I s'pose it's different in Brisbane"—the implication being that Brisbanites could do their own rallying and organising if they didn't fancy the new arrivals.

George Hickman was a moderate in most things. He had no idea of Walsh's politics but he had the curious idea that Dennis was probably also his kind of moderate; not least because it was often the people out on the far edges who gave the most trouble. Most parties gave lip service to the idea of the 'fair go' but he had lived long enough to realise that they usually meant a 'fair go' for their chosen portion of the population. Whereas Dennis, he was inclined to think, was one of the more truly impartial people in this unfair world.

People had recently accused Dennis of 'picking' on Dan Goodrick for stealing the Parsons' beehive; at least, some people came out as partisans of Dan while others had nothing but criticism for the old man and his light fingers. Dennis, when he asked him, had simply said, "No, I wasn't picking on Dan. But seeing he'd left his calling card I thought I'd best drop round and say hullo."

"Calling card?"

"He dropped a letter from the department about his pension. Must've fallen out of his pocket. Saved me a lot of work."

Now Walsh said, "If you hear any more on this, George, keep me posted. Someone seems to have money to burn and I hate to think which way they might next chuck a bit of it."

*

If DS Greg Sullivan came into Buckton station in the early evening looking like the prisoner under sentence to hang then DC Ali Deane was surprisingly cheerful and buoyant. Coming here was always interesting and she had heard Doug Towner mouthing off about Dennis and his new 'nancy boy wog', whatever that might be assumed to mean, so she was curious to meet the new constable herself.

"You shouldn't ring me." Greg sat down gloomily after Dennis had introduced them both to Sam Hussein. "If you thought Doug was difficult before he's gone completely paranoid now."

"I don't blame him," Dennis said cheerfully, "I would be too if I thought I had the Bruloder gang watching me. You realise it's only a matter of time before they make sure Adam Rogers has a little … accident. And if Doug hasn't persuaded them he's in their corner then he might find himself … a little unwell. So it all depends on how Doug feels about those porno pictures of him and Eve."

"I don't think he cares. I gave him the packet after I got them copied. He had a look and said 'so what?' He may not mean it. But it's not like he's got a wife and kids. And I'll bet worse stuff does the rounds when some of the guys get together."

"In that case … bye bye, Mr Rogers, it hasn't been very nice knowing you." Walsh sounded grim. "Do we try to get the man who says he killed Hendrik Bruloder either deported to South Africa to stand trial … or into some sort of safe house … witness protection … that sort of thing? I don't know if he'd qualify for anything."

"You better talk to him," Greg said with a faintly snide undertone. "This whole thing is your baby—"

"If it really was my baby I'd have the little tyke whipped into shape by now instead of blundering along making more misery for everyone. Anyway, let's see what you've got. And you can have a look at this." He handed over a copy of Miss Lockwood's hand-written sheet, now neatly typed up, and with his queries added.

The copy of the lab report he set aside. He had nothing else to compare it with. But he read the bit on the first Mrs Hoysted with interest. Her maiden name had been Neumann. She and Sam Hoysted had married eighteen years ago. Their two children were Neumann and Randall, aged seventeen and fifteen-and-a-half. Both boys attended a prestigious boys' school in Brisbane.

Dennis put the papers down and said, "Randy? Is that short for Randall?"

"You're not suggesting—" Greg, the father of teenagers, looked slightly shocked. "Come off it, Dennis, these are kids who've lost their mother and their stepmother."

"So?"

Greg felt himself floundering. "Well, are you suggesting … that they set up this whole operation? Or that someone is using them … in some way?"

"Don't know, Greg." Dennis sat back in his chair and it creaked. "But that's the point. We've never been able to get to the bottom of anything. We go in blind. Frank Obidini. Sandra Hoysted. Bit of cannabis. Sick cats. Eve Rogers. Sick pics. Break-in at George Hickman's place. People sweet-talking Guy's landlady into letting them enter and ransack his flat. It just keeps dribbling on and on. More drugs. Something else in the wind. I can't get to the bottom of it without help and I'm getting bugger all from you lot."

Greg gave out a long sigh. "Maybe. But Doug is still our boss."

"Yeah. And Doug's got a good nose for where the real power and money is. So why not try and work out just where that fucking nose of his is pointing."

Greg was tempted to say, "You try it." But instead he sat and ruminated before saying carefully, "I was told that the real owner of Japana isn't Bruloder but a thing called the Neurand Trust. It's the trust Sam Hoysted and his first wife set up for the two boys."

"So—have you got the details?"

"No. It's a private thing."

"Doesn't matter. A trust isn't as private as your bank account—and that's none too private these days."

"Dennis, they haven't done anything wrong. We can't subpoena records—"

"Greg, we don't even know if they have an *office!* First things first. Let's get an idea on how and where and who runs the thing. Or do two schoolboys run a multi-million dollar operation out of a school dormitory?"

"The way things are going you'll have me believing that soon. Okay, we'll see what we can do. But you'd better try and get Adam Rogers to move house if you really think he's in danger."

Dennis and Sam walked out to the car with the detectives; if anything Greg Sullivan now looked even more hangdog. Dennis Walsh clapped him on the back. "Don't look so worried, Greg, we'll get there somehow. Go round and have a snack at the pub. Get to know Sam a bit." Sullivan showed no desire to get to know Sam Hussein but he said, "Yeah, hitting the bottle's about all I'm good for these days. I'm planning to put in for a transfer. Narelle and the kids will just have to go with the flow. I don't think I can take any more." But he turned to Sam and said, "Okay, hop in, and we'll have a quick beer."

Dennis watched the car leave then he went back and locked up and went home and said to Fiona who was cooking a curry: "Would you like a run in the country? I can go myself but some company would be nice."

"Before or after we eat?"

"I think—before. Is it okay to turn it off? I can wait … "

*

The Farm Stay place drowsed in the twilight but, curiously, there was no sign of lights coming on nor of management or guests. Nor of any animals. "That *is* odd." Dennis went round the back, shouted out, went into sheds, knocked on the doors of units. Then he went back to the house. The side door to the office was locked. A little note said 'We regret any inconvenience to our guests. We hope to return tomorrow. Urgent family matters have intervened.'

Dennis returned to the car and got out his big torch. Then he went carefully round the big house shining the torch along the verandahs, peering in windows, carefully trying all the doors with a handkerchief wound round his hand. But it was the side steps which seemed to interest him most.

Eventually he came back to the car, got out his mobile phone and rang the Coolibah Hotel. A voice answered cautiously, "Bill here."

"Bill, it's Dennis. Is Greg Sullivan still there, or Sam?"

"Yeah, they all are."

"Get Greg for me, would you."

Greg came to the phone and said gloomily, "I don't want to know about it."

"Doesn't matter. Bring the others. I'm out at Caritas. The place is deserted and there's what looks like human blood and human hair on the side steps. Either Adam Rogers has laid a clever red herring or we're too late and they've got him. I need help to search the place."

But as he went back to Fiona and the red in the western sky faded, leaving the one car in the small car park, a dark green Volvo, in greyness, he realised he needed to be able to send Fiona back to Buckton. They might be here for hours—unless they struck lucky and found that Rogers had just had a fall or a bump. But that wouldn't explain the sign on the door. And why did the sign say 'we' if Adam was now running the place on his own?

"So much for my brilliant ideas … but at least we probably won't get interrupted for the next twenty minutes." He reached out for a kiss and a cuddle. It was strange how the really bad guys in history always seemed to have someone willing to stand up and say they loved their wives, their girlfriends, their children, their dear old mums … because he saw very clearly that a life profoundly out of kilter in one area could not deliver true human love and warmth in another. He might've described it in a slightly different way. But even his passing contacts with the people here left him unwilling to bring anything of them home to Fiona. "It's almost like this place needs disinfecting … not with Handy Andy or something but with … I don't know … kindness, maybe."

"Love and hope." She looked away to the dark shapes of the buildings and the trees. "It's strange. They've obviously spent a lot of money on it but it didn't welcome me in any way when we drove in. Not tacky exactly. Whereas … when we went into Billy the Lad's place I was reluctant to leave. A kind of natural goodness … "

"I often feel that—when I come home and find you there."

She was about to respond to this when headlights turned in the gate and caught them in the full glare. Dennis said, "Seems the cavalry has arrived. Would you like me or Sam to run you home and come back or would you like to stay on for a little while."

"Would it be possible for me to go in the house and go to the toilet?" If it wasn't one thing, she was finding, it seemed to be another.

"Probably. We'll have to jimmy a door—just in case he's unconscious somewhere inside."

But although they searched the house and outbuildings thoroughly there was no sign of anyone. Adam Rogers might be somewhere out on the property or gone away, as the note said, for a short time. But Greg marked out the blood spots and the place where some brown hair was caught in the wooden steps.

"I think you're right. It looks human. But did he just fall on the steps, hit his head, or was he dragged down them. And did both things get there at the same time?"

"Your call, Greg. But you're going to have to get Doug on to it. Rogers just might've contacted him. Anyway, I'll leave you to it. I can drop Sam home unless you need back-up."

"No, I'm going home too. I'll get the blood and hair tested. Might give us a line. But I'm not going out on any limbs for some bod who's gone away for a few days at the coast."

Dennis handed the keys over to Sam Hussein to drive them home and got in the back with Fiona. "Might as well feel vice-regal when the chance comes along." He sat back and closed his eyes.

Fiona smiled at the image of them being chauffeured home. Then she said lightly, "Dennis, who were the 'wild Clancarty earls'? I never got around to asking your father."

"The McCarthys. But don't ask me more than that because I don't know. My grandmother was Ellen McCarthy, her dad was Cormac, that's all I know. If you wouldn't mind—don't talk to me for a few minutes. There's just something about that blood and hair on the steps that doesn't ring true. It might come to me."

Both Sam and Fiona obediently fell silent. But it was Sam who eventually said, "I see what you mean, sir. The blood seems to have dropped from a height. But the hair suggests someone falling or tripping or being dragged."

Dennis continued to loll in his corner as though half-asleep. But he finally said, "Yep. And the blood's in the wrong place if it got there when someone fell and a tuft of hair got caught in the wood." Then he dropped back into silence while both men pondered on this and Fiona hoped her curry hadn't suffered in her absence.

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Dead silence reigned in the direction of Winville, possibly they were stymied by the scraps of evidence but it seemed more likely Doug Towner had put a damper on any investigation (if a swallow does not a spring make—then a spot of blood does not a crime scene make may have been the gist of his summing up) but Martin Applegarth came into the station a few days later. Dennis had just sent his constable home and was about to put the phone through.

"I won't keep you, Dennis, but I thought you'd like to know that Christine's estate will definitely come to me. I appreciated the way you got everything out into the open. Because I was sorry she hadn't managed to put her plans through so it would come to Prue. I really didn't want to be the meat in that sandwich. Angus Hamilton's quite a good friend but I knew Chris wanted Prue to get most of the benefit."

"So what are you going to do now?"

"Well, I thought, after that meeting we held, that no one actually knows anything about this Dorcas woman, how she feels about it all, whether she wants to spend the rest of her life paying off a debt … So I rang the childcare place in Brisbane and had a chat with her. She said her brother had managed to raise most of the money, along with what Prue had put aside, but they're still fifty thousand short. I spent this morning sorting out the non-heirloom furniture and things to go to auction. If there's still a shortfall I can probably make it up myself. I've told Garth I'll put him on as manager for the time being. And Prue can have the best of the furniture and what Chris had in some shares."

Dennis nodded. "Sounds sensible."

"You know, I didn't like Prue when she first started coming out to stay with Chris. I was sure she was on the make. But I've got to like her more as we go along. She did care about Chris. And Chris did want to think of her as her daughter. If not real flesh and blood then the next best thing."

"So why did Prue keep calling her 'aunt'?"

"Because they both thought it would sound silly for Prue to call her 'mum'. I know Prue likes to think that Chris was the same as her … about women I mean … but I'm sure that's not true. If it hadn't been for her father trying to run our lives I think we would've married and probably been happy."

Dennis nodded again. "I'd say so. But you ended up with a good woman."

It was Martin Applegarth's turn to nod. "But you know—Chris and me, we would've just pottered quietly along. Bron pushed me to be something more. I sometimes think she should be the

one welcoming these pollies at the ceremony out at Burleigh this Saturday. I s'pose you'll be there for the … fun."

"No. I'm sending Constable Hussein. Keep an eye on him, will you? Make sure he gets in some of the official photographs."

Martin Applegarth started to say something about shouldn't it be the other way around then he thought he understood; there had been talk of a brawl with two of the younger men from the butter factory and the young constable ending up with a bleeding nose … His own son had been constable here and although he had faced problems—not least with some of his old schoolmates who expected him to go easy on them, and he'd had the uncompromising figure of Dennis Walsh breathing down his neck—he had never faced the sorts of taunts and jibes the new constable had to cop.

It wasn't his business but he felt some sympathy. "Is it just a few of the usual louts who've got it in for him?"

"There's that lot. I've charged Todd Price and Brendan Cooney. But I think someone's stirring behind the scenes. I didn't like the way they responded—like they thought they were some kind of heroes. And I've heard they've both got lawyers. Usually, it's like putting cattle through a race when I send 'em to Winville. But now we've got to waste time and effort to put it through."

After Mr Applegarth had gone out again, Dennis changed his mind about going straight home and instead rang Charles Mather. Mather often stayed late, mainly because he didn't have much to go home to. A very nice house, yes, but no wife or family. Was he, by any chance, appearing for Price and Cooney?

"No."

"Would they be eligible for Legal Aid?"

"Depends if they make enough there. But I heard on the grapevine they've got a lawyer in Winville. Gavin Whittaker."

"Now that *is* interesting. Thanks." He hung up, leaving Charles Mather to wonder why he should say that with sudden intensity.

Gavin Whittaker was the lawyer Walsh and Sullivan had found in photographs taken from the Farm Stay centre. Gavin Whittaker had been having very lively sex with the now-dead Eve Rogers. Of course this might be mere coincidence. Whittaker was a well-known lawyer. But he probably wasn't the sort of man to take on any cut-rate, let alone *pro bono* work for men accused of assaulting a police officer. So either the butter factory paid higher wages than he had ever realised. Or someone else was footing the bill …

If so, who had money to waste?

No obvious answer popped up.

Case No. 3: Down and Out

"I think our Mr Rogers has done a runner." Dennis had gone back to the Farm Stay centre the next day and widened the search. There was no sign of anyone or anything, except some cattle in the bottom paddocks.

The place, deserted, and with a scum of leaves and blown grass collecting in the swimming pool, suddenly looked rather tired and drab, as though the concept of a nice quiet oasis for R and R for Bruloder men had never really belonged in this landscape.

But the question was: if not in his own car how had Adam Rogers left the place? The office yielded up a set of car keys. But although Walsh went carefully through the house there was no hint of a fight, a struggle, a hurried packing. But then, he thought, Adam Rogers might always have known he was living on borrowed time and a packed suitcase was a good idea …

Nor could he find any documents or notes to suggest a place where the missing man might head for. Adam Rogers had met Evelyn in Sydney. It was possible he had returned there. In the end he put police tape across all doors. It wouldn't stop the truly determined but it might give the idly

curious pause. Then he drove on to the Japana office. The man who came to the office door as he drove in introduced himself as John Kessler-Smythe and sounded Australian and agreed that, yes, he was the office manager. No, he hadn't seen Adam Rogers in more than a month. Some of the men went round there to swim in summer but he had last been there to have dinner with two other men and Adam about a month ago.

"Did he say anything about giving up the place, selling out, putting on a manager, anything at all?"

"No. But he was only a manager himself. He liked to talk of it as though he owned it but he just ran it."

"So who owns it?"

"We do."

"Bruloder?"

"Yep."

"And did it make money for you?"

Kessler-Smythe opened his mouth as though to answer then seemed to think better of it. "I'm not the person to give you a right answer on that."

"So who is the right person?"

"I'm not sure. I assume the same people who do our books. But I am only guessing."

"Then see if you can find out and let me know. I don't know how long Rogers has been gone for but quite a few days, I'd say. I don't know if he's managed to get his hands on any assets or he just got fed up with living there after his wife died and so he took off … but if there's the slightest chance of anything funny going on I'd like to know. And give me the names of the other men who went to dinner there with you."

Kessler-Smythe didn't look very pleased about this but he finally jotted two names on a pad and tore a page off. Dennis Walsh had assumed they would be other company employees but one was a businessman from Winville and the other, curiously, was Saul Harding.

"Do either of them have a connection to Japana?"

"Yep. We get some of our local fodder from Harding. David McCree handles some of our transport. If Gresham's is booked out. I asked them if they'd like to join us for drinks and a barbecue."

"And you advised Adam Rogers it might be a good idea to think about making himself scarce while you were there?"

"Of course not! It was just a social occasion." But Walsh had the faint suspicion that the question had rattled Kessler-Smythe. He had the bland throw-me-more-questions aspect of a good front man but that was one he didn't want.

Dennis took the slip and walked to the office door. "You put that sign up on the Farm Stay door, didn't you? Well, my advice to you, if you can be linked to Adam Rogers, is to watch your back."

"Here, come on, that's going it a bit strong, isn't it?"

"No. There have now been at least four deaths linked to Bruloder … so don't believe in their niceness."

Kessler-Smythe might be urbane and comfortable in his role—but when put to the test he was a minnow in the shark's pool. All that 'we' business when Adam Rogers only thought of 'I'. And then he wrote down the names without a moment's thought, that neat precise printing with just the hint of a flourish …

*

Dennis Walsh passed this on to Greg Sullivan. When it generated no response he said to Sam Hussein, "In that case … I think I might come into Winville with you on Monday."

His constable wasn't sure whether he wanted his boss at the magistrates' court when he gave his evidence, or not. It might make him look a bit wimpy. But Dennis only said casually, "If there's the slightest hint someone put them up to something I'd like to get on to it straight away. And if that lot don't see Adam Rogers and that Kessler-Smythe bloke as 'persons of interest' we might as well hand over our cases to 'Madam Vera—Psychic to the Stars'. We'd probably get more cooperation."

Put like that Sam Hussein was willing to accept that someone with more local knowledge might pick up on something. He'd had to give evidence in court before now and he always found it a nervewracking experience. But this time was worse. He wasn't the referee. He was the one they'd turned round and accused of provoking the fight.

But Dennis had another thought in mind. He rang Miss Lockwood. Had she heard any more conversations in the other flat. She said no—but that Martha Harding had come around ostensibly to give the unit an airing and a bit of a dust and polish. She had gone round and enquired as innocently as she could if she could help with anything. Martha had said a rather abrupt no and then tried to soften it by saying she certainly didn't expect guests to do housework. She had said to this, "But I am a resident and I was never one to mind a bit of housework." It didn't make any difference. But she had been able to have a bit of a peer inside and the place was fully furnished, carpeted, curtained, even a television. She had asked about someone moving in and Martha had said, yes, they had a 'nibble'. Martha had then closed the door and been inside for about half-an-hour.

"Did she appear to take anything inside?"

"She had one of those big cleaning carts with a big bag attached for rubbish. I wouldn't like to be didactic but it did seem to me that the bag looked fuller when she went in than when she came out."

"Now that is very interesting. You wouldn't happen to know if Martha is related to the Hardings over near Dinawadding?"

"Yes, I think she's Saul Harding's sister."

"And that Ververd you had down on your sheet. Several people suggested various things but someone asked if it might refer to the South African prime minister of a while back. Did you have any thoughts on it yourself?"

"Now that is an idea! But I don't think I've ever met a South African … except for that minister … the one in Buckton. I believe he takes services here occasionally."

"You mean you have church services actually at Parrvilla?"

"Some of the residents find it too difficult to go to church so they take turns in sharing the little hall here. A short service. Tea and biscuits. A chance for residents with a problem to have a chat."

"And do you ever go along?"

"I am quite capable of getting to church of a Sunday morning, Sergeant."

"I'm sure you are. But if there's any chance of Eric Kramer coming there to take a service would you find it too painful to go along? I'd like to know more about what he's saying."

"Haranguing, more likely, at least from what I've heard. I like to hear a good clear sermon … but I've heard that he rants and raves. I don't think that is religion. I think that is politics." But she said she was quite willing to go along in the interests of information-gathering.

*

DC Ali Deane was hesitant when Walsh rang to see if she and Greg could get a search warrant for Unit 14 at the Parrvilla Home. "I don't think Greg will agree, Dennis, he blows hot and cold all the time, trying to decide who to run with—the fox or the hound. He's going to have a breakdown if this keeps on. Look, what say I get someone like Neil Midgley to come round with me. If they won't let us in then I'll have a stronger hand for getting a warrant."

"Okay. Take care."

"Do we mention your name?"

"If you want to." She accepted that Dennis did make a useful stalking horse; people were often so riled up at the idea of him interfering yet again they overlooked the content of the request. Neil Midgley said a gloomy, "This better be good." But when they went round they found Martha Harding was away and Janine Gruber was holding the fort. She was puzzled but unsuspicious. "I've never felt very comfortable keeping a unit spare when we've got a waiting list. But Martha says they're planning to put in a couple early next month."

She took the unit's key and came round to let them in. Then she stood, a large rather untidy woman with graying hair, in the doorway while they went in. "I'm quite quite sure there's nothing

in here, not unless a stray animal has got in." She looked round the neat space then said without much interest, "Someone's left a box of cleaning things in the kitchen. I'd better take that back."

"I'd rather you didn't touch anything, Mrs Gruber." Ali Deane went over to the cardboard box apparently containing cleaning and polishing products. She lifted a bag of Ezi-Wipes and looked down at a big plastic container of red and black pills. It was Neil Midgley who found a large orange plastic bag in the bottom of a bedroom cupboard. A couple of blankets and spare pillows were piled on top so that at first he thought it was a bean bag.

There was something simple and artless about the way the mysterious pills had been inserted into the empty unit. A casual visitor would probably not have noticed.

DC Deane left Midgley to mind the scene while she went round to ask Sullivan and Towner to accompany her. There was an irony, she supposed, in that Martha Harding's cleverness now meant she could not claim that someone had been unlawfully using the premises to store things.

Towner was out but Greg Sullivan came round with her and stood there looking over their find. Mrs Gruber asked several times for information only to be told they didn't yet know what they were looking at. "You mean—one of our staff is using the unit to hide these … whatever they are. They look the kind of things my mum takes for her bowel spasms."

Sullivan dredged up a mirthless smile. "We don't know. But it is unlikely anyone would buy an over-the-counter treatment in such quantities. We'll have to get them all tested." He could pretend not to notice four pills from Buckton. He couldn't very well pretend he hadn't seen kilos of the damn things …

"Do we know how they got in here?"

"Not for absolute certain, no." Deane didn't know who had passed on the tip to Dennis. And if Martha Harding had been wearing cleaning gloves there probably wouldn't be any fingerprints. "But you wouldn't produce this quantity unless you had a sophisticated distribution network."

"I don't know. Maybe they hoped to dribble them very quietly on to the market. What would they be worth?" Greg, having lived a very conventional and blameless life, always found himself at a disadvantage in situations like this. He was always genuinely shocked and upset when he was confronted by the more twisted aspects of life. He could not even draw on some youthful wild living as a way to understand other people's actions and attitudes.

"Several hundred thousand dollars at least," Midgley said, "at a guess. If they all are banned stuff."

"So what do we do now?" Greg then realised he shouldn't be asking them. He was supposed to be the senior here. "Get them tested, I s'pose," he answered his own question. But it was only staving off the hard decisions. Doug would trumpet another triumphant operation and then turn round and find a way to close it down via lost evidence, contaminated interviews—or, in this case, probably some minion thrown to the wolves. Martha Harding would most likely say she was approached by several men who asked if they could make use of the empty flat for a week or two. She, looking innocent and benignly helpful, would say she agreed out of the kindness of her heart without a moment's suspicion that they weren't simply some visitors from out of town who needed accommodation. She would offer up three names which had not the remotest connection to any living person and say they had handed her fifty dollars which she had put in the kitty to go towards the residents' next treat …

But they had to go through the motions. He sent Deane to get their kit and some back-up. Then he rang Doug on his mobile and said blandly, "I think you might want to get round here as soon as you can make it."

*

While Constable Hussein went to find out the time and place of his case on the day's list Dennis Walsh stood around as though standing around the drab waiting area at court was a wonderful way to spend a day. He saw Gavin Whittaker come in with several files and look around for his two clients. It was easy to go over and say, "Mr Whittaker, how nice to see you dressed again. Very raunchy those pics of you and Eve Rogers. I hear on the grapevine that Towner gets off on them every night. Sad, when you think about it."

Whittaker shot him a sour look and said, “I haven’t got time to stand round chatting, Sergeant Walsh, so if you’ll excuse me—”

Whittaker though in his forties was said to have a very attractive young wife and two attractive children; why he would need the seductive delights of a day at the Farm Stay centre was a mystery. The curious thing, Walsh thought, was that he showed no sign of being upset. Had someone already informed him that some photos of him had surfaced? Maybe even Towner himself?

What should’ve been a routine case, in Magistrate Hull’s opinion, had been made unnecessarily complicated. But he made no comment as Whittaker came forward and sat down with Price and Cooney. Everyone had a right to legal representation. But the case as presented did not make sense. Both men overtopped Constable Hussein by several inches and a fair bit of extra weight.

After listening to Hussein’s version, then the defendants’ versions, he turned to the young police officer and said, “Were you armed, Constable?”

“No, sir.”

“Are you a black belt in karate or judo?”

“No, sir.”

“You have a death wish then?”

“No, sir. Just doing my job.”

The job in this case had required him to ask the two men to go home quietly and sober up. Instead he had been punched in the face, falling to the ground with a bleeding nose and some gravel rash on his hands.

“Were there any witnesses?”

“Yes, sir. People had come out of the hotel. But it was fairly dark.”

The magistrate made a note and turned to Gavin Whittaker. “You clearly saw something more to this case than the usual punch up outside a pub in Buckton. You might like to refresh my memory.”

Whittaker did so at some length. Hull nodded but still wore a slightly disbelieving expression. The two men had been before him previously. Their list of priors would make very dull reading. But the interesting thing was that they had never before sought legal help. It was usually a matter of coming in, copping a fine, and going home again.

“I don’t usually bother to call for extra help in such a small case but as Sergeant Walsh is here—and as he did the actual charging when Constable Hussein was incapacitated—”

Walsh made his way to the table and sat down between Hussein and the other group. He said he had been called round to the hotel by the licensee. He had seen Hussein on the ground being helped to his feet by two patrons and Mr Borrie. He had gone after the two men and had charged them with assaulting Constable Hussein. He said, “They were having a good laugh about it. I later spoke to four people who had been at the hotel and got their version of events. They had not seen the first part of the altercation but they had all seen Mr Price punch Constable Hussein in the face.”

It was not evidence that Hussein had not said or done something to provoke the two men. But Sam Hussein felt the magistrate did believe his version of events. Hull ended up sentencing both men to twenty hours of community service and to be of good behaviour for six months. It was hard to see what the point of Gavin Whittaker’s presence had been.

Hull put this question to him at a civic reception a few days later. Whittaker only smiled slightly and said, “They pays their money and they gets their defence. It’s the name of the game.”

“And since when did those two thugs have any money? Or did you give them an opening special in the hope of more business down the track?”

“I don’t ask where money comes from, just that it gets paid on the dot.”

“There’s no chance they’re connected to this drugs’ haul Doug is crowing about, is there?” All of Winville, not just Mr Hull, were now speculating.

“I wouldn’t think so. But the thing that puzzled me was why Dinny Walsh bothered to come along for the case. Doesn’t he trust his new constable to do the job?”

"Possibly the same reason you went along. He thought it was more than two drunken louts throwing a few punches."

"And was it, do you think?"

"I think someone has got their knife into Hussein—but whether it's because he's browner than you or me—or because they don't happen to like his name—or something more personal, he's got off with a lady friend of one of them … maybe … I expect your guess is as good as mine."

But as he went home later he found himself wondering if it was a one-off event, every pub threw up the occasional affray, or the start of a concerted campaign against the young man …

*

It didn't take long for this private question to get some very public answers. Sam Hussein had delighted in the chance to move into the old house and had been willing to offer Kieran Dobbs help to do some repairs and painting in his spare time. From living in small flats he suddenly had a superfluity of rooms. He hoped he would meet someone he would want to share it with quite soon. There was Ali Deane. He had found a chance to invite her out to dinner. But she obviously could not live in Buckton and commute to Winville … even if she was keener on him than her behaviour indicated. And she was at least five years older than him …

Just before midnight a car turned with a screech into the little side road past the station house and his new home. There was an almighty crash then the car sped away, doing a turn into Creek Road on two wheels. It woke both Walsh and Hussein. A rock had been thrown through a front window.

Dennis put on trousers and singlet and came around and looked at the damage. "Well, either he had a catapult or he's got brawn, this useless git. I'll park my car in front of your fence for the time being. At least that way they can't run up on to the footpath."

He walked down to the end of the street and looked at the marks of burnt rubber. Someone with big fat radials by the look of it. That would narrow the field considerably. He finally sent Sam back to bed and went home himself. Kieran and Fiona might find that having Sam as their tenant was a tough call. But he couldn't see either of them asking him to move out to save their property.

The event on Saturday night was much more serious. Sam with the job of keeping the peace received a call to the butter factory; someone, the caller said, appeared to be trying to break into the store room round the back of the factory. He asked for the caller's ID only to have them hang up. He could ask his boss what to do. He could simply drive round and have a look. It might be a hoax. The caller sounded young.

The factory except for a light in front of the office door was in darkness. He drove on to the parking apron in front and got out, taking his torch with him. But although he proceeded cautiously and quietly along the side of the building and round to the medley of sheds and store rooms behind the factory without hearing or seeing anyone he was no match for the figures who came out of the many shadowy corners and set upon him. He struggled to get his phone out before he fell under the rain of blows.

Boots sounded on the concrete. A car along the road started up. He might've lain there all night if it hadn't been for the family who lived across the back lane and behind the motel. They came back from visiting family in Winville and were about to go indoors when they heard what seemed to be someone groaning. They kept very much to themselves here but it might be someone who had fallen, had an accident off a bike, gone messing round behind the factory … And the police car was standing out the front, empty …

They called the ambulance who in turn told Dennis Walsh they were taking his constable directly to Winville. He appeared to have a broken skull. Dennis, who had been enjoying a quiet night at home, went out to the factory to investigate. Fiona had always told herself that he wasn't at risk, or no more than anyone else, but now she wondered if she had been living in a fool's paradise.

He was too late to see Sam depart but it wasn't hard to see where he had been knocked down. There was blood on the concrete. But he thought he just might be in some sort of luck. The back area had been hosed down earlier in the day and a pool of water had collected in the slight unevenness in the parking and loading area. The men's boots still showed here and there as a wet footmark. Both the Castley family and the ambulance men had imposed their prints over the

muddle. But it wasn't too hard to see where the assailants had split off in various directions like people involved in a well-organised military manouevre.

He went over the area minutely. One of the men had been careless enough to smoke a cigarette while waiting for Hussein to turn up and he bagged it swiftly. They had also dropped a chisel. Possibly a crude attempt to implicate Artie Kees. But the thing which gave him most pause was a poster someone had stuck up on the back wall of the factory not far from the bank of windows.

And whoever had pasted it up hadn't realised it might be a good idea to use gloves. He lifted several prints where they had pressed it down for a few minutes while the glue dried.

The poster was advertising a get-together of The National Front for a Loyal Australia. "New one on me." But he jotted down date and time whilst leaving the poster in situ. The manager, David Grumm, if he didn't know about it might like to check it out. It wasn't likely to be the name of a new country and western band starting up …

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The hospital in Winville rang Buckton Police next morning. Yes, Constable Hussein would be incapacitated for several weeks. Yes, they were sure he would make a full recovery. Yes, he did want to try and make some sort of statement. Yes, they had notified his parents who were hoping to arrive later in the day.

"What a mess!" Dennis said wearily. "What a bloody mess!" It was something Fiona had noticed over and over again. He seemed to fall down into a disheartened moment, a sense that the job wasn't worth the time and effort, wasn't worth all that it seemed to take out of him … and then, sooner or later, something seemed to kick in again. "Those bastards! I'll get the whole lot of 'em if it's the last thing I do." He drained his mug of tea. "Sweetheart, I'll just collect up my evidence, go round and get some clearer photos of the site, then go to Winville. Would you like to come?"

"What else is on the agenda, apart from Sam?"

"I'd better go and talk to them all. This was a well-organised attack. Not someone just throwing an unconsidered punch. I do like to have your company. But I know it gets pretty dull for you."

"That's all right. I'll take my book for the next reading group session."

It was only when they were in the car half-an-hour later that he said, "What is the book?"

"It's John Mortimer's *Clinging to the Wreckage*. We're each reading a Mortimer. I suppose it's a bit the way you feel sometimes."

"Sam being the wreckage? Yeah. But I've got a fair line on numbers. There were at least six there. Have you ever heard of a group called The National Front for a Loyal Australia?"

"No. National Front sounds a bit ominous. But Loyal Australia sounds more like a keep-our-flag group. Are they a political party?"

"Could be. They're having a meeting next week. I saw a poster."

"Where at?" She pictured them flooding into the RSL hall with their little paper flags on sticks.

"That is the odd thing. It didn't say."

"I suppose they forgot to put it on. People do. Dennis, was Sam working on anything that might've upset people?"

"He got me a bit on Verwoerd from the library. Seems he was assassinated back in 1966 … by a man from Mozambique. The architect of apartheid, that sort of thing. But I don't see how it fits any of the men Martha Harding knows who might be 'her Verwoerd' … not if he's seriously dead."

"Maybe it's like Elvis … they refuse to believe he's dead?"

He considered the idea in silence.

"And if a Mozambican killed Verwoerd … and the South Africans shot down the president of Mozambique … but I don't see how that sort of tit-for-tat could be playing out in Buckton. Do you?"

"No. I'm the dunce in the corner. I just hope someone will stuff up seriously. But I did send Sam to the Council while he was round there. I wanted to know how Bruloder actually pays the Council. Bruloder is supposed to be an incorporated body but it pays all its day-to-day expenses

through Gresham's Transport which was Sam Hoysted's company or one of them before he went to prison for the murder of his second wife."

"So who now owns Gresham's?"

"I don't know. Nothing to stop him holding on to it, I s'pose."

He dropped back into a long silence and she was reluctant to break it. Although he was very solidly *there*—in a curious way he wasn't. Even before the attack on Sam she had felt most evenings that he was miles away. He was quite good at putting work aside but lately she felt he was literally drowning in the complexities of everything.

Ten minutes out from Winville he said suddenly, "Do you know anything about trusts?"

"Yes. Why?"

"So if you had to go to prison and you wanted your children to be—sort of quarantined—how would you set up a trust for them?"

"A normal family trust probably … except that you probably wouldn't be allowed to be a trustee. If your children were under age you would probably invite a close family friend, maybe a relative, to run it. Or you might simply ask your solicitor to do it all for you."

"And is there any way you could keep such a trust private? So people don't know how it's been set-up or how much money it controls, that sort o' thing?"

"Up to a point. I'm sure you'd still have to have a formal Deed of Trust drawn up and the trustees would all have to sign it. It would not be on public record the way a company is. There's no central register of trusts. But you'd have to pay stamp duty and you wouldn't be able to hide it from the tax office. And if it was set up via a will the will itself would be on record. Trustees don't have to go through any kind of police or character check. They don't need to provide references. A criminal record would not prevent you becoming a trustee. If you wanted to use it to hide something really shonky I imagine you could even get away with signing and witnessing under a false name. I'm sure organised crime figures have the routine down pat when they want to set aside funds to look squeaky-clean for their children. But as you would still most likely go to a solicitor to have it drawn up you would need to have someone in your pocket—or at least someone who didn't look too closely or ask too many questions."

He nodded. Finding shonky solicitors was probably no more difficult than finding shonky police … if you had real money to wave around.

But if the Hoysted boys were rolling in money why on earth did they want to try and manufacture illicit drugs out here? They were hardly in need of pocket money. Or had their trustees taken and wasted the money they were supposed to be minding …

"But," Fiona said carefully, "I don't think you could set it up *after* you'd been charged with a serious crime. I think you would need to set it up as a trust to benefit your children before. I would need to check that. If it was a crime of passion rather than a crime for financial benefit it might be seen differently … trusts aren't regulated and there is no oversight body … but in such a case the court itself might want to look at the assets you were squirreling away before you went to prison and whether the trust deed gave you any control."

"Sandra Hoysted's death was seen as a passion thing … but I wonder if she was threatening to go public with something … " And if so, he mused in silence, with what?

Martha Harding said she had met three very nice men at church and they had told her they wanted a nice quiet place for a business meeting and could she suggest anywhere. She had simply told them there was a unit currently empty at Parrvilla and if they didn't mind being very quiet and not bothering the elderly residents she was sure it would be all right for them to spend a little time in there. She said, virtue personified, that if she had known they were discussing drugs she would not have made the flat available …

The difficulty was that she could not be confronted by old Bee Lockwood and her damning evidence because he was reluctant to put an eighty-two-year-old woman at risk. Several people had noticed Martha pushing the trolley but they hadn't really taken much notice of the date or time … and some of them were too vague to make good witnesses.

But Miss Lockwood herself had gone to the police and simply said she had noticed Martha cleaning the flat. She could give the day and time almost down to the minute. Miss Lockwood could not say that she had seen any pills. Nor did she find it easy to associate Martha with serious crime.

"I think someone knew I went round cleaning whenever we're short-handed and simply took advantage of that fact to make me look guilty." Martha came over quite well. She was a brisk capable woman. And Miss Lockwood's statement that that was the first time she'd ever seen Martha actually cleaning anything sounded a bit pettish; almost as though she wanted to get Ms Harding into trouble.

One of the three men had given Martha his card. It said 'Kessler-Smythe Hospitality Services' and a mobile phone number. She said she had never tried to contact anyone. John Kessler-Smythe, when asked by Greg Sullivan, said he had never had any cards printed and he was not involved in any form of hospitality. He lived in one of the rooms at Bruloder and except for an occasional night out was not particularly hospitable. Nor was that his phone number. In fact, it didn't seem to be anybody's number.

Although several people had suggested contacting the Hoysted children, or at least their school, Doug Towner had countered with a blunt "Why?" and there was no easy answer to that. The suggestion that two teenage boys were a party to it had no evidence and not a lot of common sense to back it up. Put like that Greg Sullivan had backed away from the idea. Saying "they're all South Africans" was hardly indisputable evidence of any wrongdoing.

*

Sam Hussein was conscious but swathed in bandages with only a bit of his face showing. Dennis and Fiona came in and sat down beside him. "You look like a mummy out of a film," Dennis said as though to cheer him up. "I s'pose I should've said—avoid dark alleys, but Buckton hasn't got that many."

Fiona said something conventionally kind and sat down to let the two men talk; or Dennis to say what he had found and just ask for confirmation. As the fairly one-sided conversation went on a nurse came in to the intensive care ward with a professionally wrapped basket of fruit, the whole thing done up in cellophane.

"You can't eat it as it is, but we can stew it and mash it for you to eat, maybe tomorrow," she said kindly. "I thought you would just like to know people are thinking of you."

"Who's it from?" Dennis Walsh said curiously. If the blunt instrument didn't do the job maybe a poisoned banana would.

The nurse found a card and extricated it from the wrapping. "It's from Michael Hull."

Dennis took the card from her. It looked like the magistrate's decisive backward slanting hand. "That is curious." There was nothing effusive about the message, just a simple "All the best", but he didn't think the magistrate was in the habit of sending condolences to very junior police officers. After the young woman had gone out again he said, "It seems he read more into the court appearance than anyone else did."

"In what way?" Hussein managed to whisper.

"I think he may've thought Whittaker was there to add to the sense of intimidation. I'm only guessing."

More to the moment was Hussein's agreement that there were probably six men, maybe five, maybe seven.

"Did they say anything to you?"

"No. It was … nearly silent."

"Did you recognise any of them?"

"I don't think so."

He closed his eyes in his swollen face. Dennis got up again. "Don't go worrying about the business. With luck I'll have 'em all under lock and key before you get home to Buckton."

"I'm not going to come back. I'm going to resign." His voice drifted away.

"Don't rush into anything," Dennis said in an effort to bolster his spirits. It didn't sound very convincing.

As they went down in the lift and out into the car park again he took Fiona's hand. "It's such a waste. But I can't say I blame him. I don't know if they intended to incapacitate him, scare him, or kill the poor sod."

"It seems very strange he didn't hear them say anything."

"Well, either he simply doesn't remember that bit—or they didn't speak because there was something about their voices … " When she'd settled herself in the car he too got in but he didn't drive away immediately. "I half-expected someone to come round and blow me up after that drug haul … but this looks like the usual tedious cowardly vicious bit of racist 'fun' quote unquote from men who know they're about the scrapings of the barrel … "

"Could the two things be connected?"

"Easily. Let's go round and visit the boys-in-blue. Would you like to come in or go and have a cup of tea?"

"They would probably tell you more without me there—"

"Doubt it. They always try to leave me out of the loop. Not that there'll be many there today, being Sunday. Doug plays golf with his pals. Greg plays with his family. Don't know what Ali plays."

She accepted the invitation and came in with him. Only Neil Midgley and another man were there. "What is it this time, Dennis?" Neil usually sounded friendly but vaguely harassed.

"Just curious. You've heard about them beating up Hussein?"

"Yeah. But I think that's boys having a bit of … I won't call it fun."

"Could've killed him. And very odd fun. Apparently they never spoke to him. A sort of silent vendetta. Or they were afraid he might hear their accents. Another thing—have you heard about a thing called The National Front for a Loyal Australia?"

"Yeah, some sort of whacko political party. End Asian immigration. Make Aussie women have five kids a-piece. That sort of thing. I hear Saul Harding is behind it."

"And Saul is Martha Harding's brother."

"Is he now? I hadn't made the connection. But how does a political party connect up to drugs?"

"C'mon, Neil, you can do better than that. There's a good chance the men who assaulted my constable belong to it. And what a handy way to finance your grab at power. I'm just surprised they're flogging pills to nice white kids. But maybe that was Eve Rogers' fault and this lot is destined for Chinese students in Brisbane or a Murri hostel … "

"So what are you looking for?"

"Do you know which church Martha Harding attends?"

"No. But I guess I can find out."

"Let me know, would you."

Before he took her to lunch, Dennis said, "Let's just drive around and have a look at the Hoysted place. I've been wondering who looks after it while the kids are in Brisbane?"

The beautiful house with its tailored gardens was obviously still cared for even in the absence of the family. Other people's lawns might struggle against the limitations of water restrictions and dry soil, the depredations of children and pets and bouncing balls and lack of care. But a velvet sward set off the white porticoes of Hoysted House beautifully. "They say Mrs Hoysted, the first one I mean, was very rich. I wonder why she consented to live out here. I don't know how many other properties they own. But I'll bet she had more choices than most people."

"Maybe she was asthmatic or something. The dry air out here. And what about the second Mrs Hoysted?"

"She was a company secretary."

"And?"

"That's how he met her. I guess she was pretty enough. I've only seen photos. People said he wanted a mother for his boys but seeing they were adolescents—I doubt they particularly wanted a new mum."

"So why is the company secretary part so significant?"

He had always vaguely assumed that Sam Hoysted wanted a second wife to be useful if she wasn't going to bring money to the marriage. But now he found himself re-thinking this. Sam could afford secretaries, accountants, lawyers, anything he wanted. Except that … "Do you know, that's maybe a question someone should've asked. Sam collected companies the way other people collect souvenir spoons. But from what I've seen none of 'em were particularly profitable. I think he enjoyed the *owning* part maybe. Does that make sense?"

"Oh yes. I see it happen. It makes men feel important. They get invited to join the Chamber of Commerce and Rotary and the Masons and the local Progress Association. And I get the impression he seems to have enjoyed the intricate way he set them up. It didn't make them more profitable but it might've made him feel he was the spider sitting in the middle of his web and no one could unravel it all—except him."

"Greg reckons it was the cattle that were important, that 'last of the great cattle barons' idea. But even with his first wife's money he wasn't really rich. I think too much of it was falling down the cracks. I think that might explain him growing cannabis. It improved the balance sheet for his core business."

"But this is only speculation—or did any of this come out in his trial?"

"Not as far as I know."

"Is it possible the trust was set up before his first wife died? That she was worried about him squandering her sons' inheritance. What was her name?"

"Olivia Neumann. People speak well of her. But I really know bugger-all … I don't know how he came to meet her … or if she's got relatives here."

He took a last long look at the house, "I wonder what it's like inside?", then they drove quietly away to find a café open on a Sunday afternoon.

*

Noel Barnard was the local expert on tyres. They called in on their way home from Winville. Noel considered the question before saying, "Well, there's a few, not a lot. They're pricey so not a lot of the youngsters can afford them. I noticed a couple of the bods from Japana have them but they might earn more than kids like Josh Binnie and Russell Tripp. I could probably name you about six round Buckton."

"Jot 'em down, would you? Ask Mavis. She's got a good eye. I'd like to get the sods who heaved a rock through the window."

"Yeah, give 'em an inch and they take a mile. Kids." He winked at Fiona. "You two better come round for a bite one evening. How was your young lad? That was a nasty business last night, I hear." Dennis gave a quick run-down. "Yeah, well, you tell him from me," Noel said, "that Ray Werner is going round singing his praises. That Kramer gave him a really hard time but Ray reckons he stuck to his guns and got the problem sorted. Ray was in North Africa with the Bradys, or maybe not *with* them, I think he was a driver, and he reckons he never went much on those 'gippos' and what-have-you. But he said to me, 'looks like they've pulled their socks up since we were there'."

"Sam isn't Egyptian. He says he's a Kurd—"

"Same difference," Noel said cheerfully. "A wop's a wop to an old sod like Ray. But he said to me, and Mavis heard him too, 'that kid'll go far'. So you tell him that next time you see him."

Dennis dropped Fiona off then drove out to have another look round the factory. Then he went over to have another chat with the Castley family who said cautiously they couldn't tell him anything more. When he asked if they'd been suffering any nastiness lately they reluctantly said someone had smashed out both taillights in their car three days ago. They were the only Murri family in town (though there were a couple of people out on farms and a small community in Winville) and they kept a very low profile. Dennis Walsh was inclined to think this was partly from shyness; the whole family was almost pathologically shy and retiring. But whether that was because of their life experiences …

"Anything happens—no matter how small—let me know straight away. I want to know if these louts are local or coming in from the feed lots."

Then he called in on the factory manager at home. David Grumm and his wife were sitting over a cup of tea and the Sunday papers. He said he hadn't seen the poster. But when he put his shoes back on and came up with Dennis it was to find the poster gone. It wasn't hard to see something had been there. But whether some disapproving employee had pulled it down or someone had got worried when Walsh came round or the wind had caught it …

Walsh took out his notebook and read out the details. Grumm only said, "Yeah, some of the blokes said something about a new party starting up. I didn't take them very seriously."

"Apparently it's Saul Harding's idea. Is he one of your suppliers?"

"Yeah, they've got a big herd over there still. I have to treat my suppliers like the Crown Jewels these days. I don't want to risk losing any more of 'em. Even when I get worried about hygiene and all the rest."

"Is Saul one of the careless bods in that regard?"

David Grumm looked like a witness asked the one question he hoped would stay unasked. "I can call in the health people if I get really concerned. But mostly I just like to play it quietly. I go round myself, just have a chat and a look around—and we notify people if their bacteria count is up."

"Okay, next time you're heading over to check on farms Dinna way let me know, I'd like to come along for the ride." The prospect didn't seem to cheer the manager but he said he'd be in touch.

"And it might be an idea to get a couple of lights installed round the back here. I can't afford to lose any more constables—"

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry about that."

John Goodrick, when Walsh called round to the motel to see if anyone there had seen or heard anyone, also managed to conjure up some not-very-convincing sympathy. He and Andrea Low were in the office doing some paperwork.

"Didn't hear a peep. Except a car did take off pretty fast. I went out to see if it was one of our guests thinking to take off in a hurry. But I reckon it was some bugger parked further along the road here. Then we heard the ambulance a while later and we went out again. Something going on over near the factory."

Andrea got up and went out of the office, leaving her boss to chat; a few minutes later they could hear her rattling cups and boiling water but no tea turned up. "So what exactly went down last night," Goodrick said curiously.

"About six thugs lured young Hussein over there and set on him. He's in Winville with a cracked skull."

Goodrick made all the conventional noises and said he wondered what Buckton was coming to. It was a question Walsh had been asking himself. Although he wouldn't trust any Goodrick with any *thing* their violence was of the occasional few-drinks-under-the-belt kind of punch-up. He had always wondered if they would go beyond that and didn't really want to find out.

Possibly John Goodrick was thinking the same thing because he said unexpectedly, "Y'know, I think I might have the answer to where old Bernie got his gut-load of arsenic."

"Where?" That was an unsolved puzzle. Bernie had sometimes left the retirement Annexe and wandered into town. But there was no obvious source either end. And if something had got into something then no one else had ever shown any likely symptoms. No more suspicious deaths.

"You know the old cottage down behind the caravans? We were going to knock it down. Then we thought it'd be simpler to spruce it up and use it for an office and Dick Kearney could live there for a while, till we see how the place goes, moneywise. We cleaned the house and sheds out and there were a few rats around. There was old stuff there, weedkiller, DDT, Ratsak, that sorta stuff, so Dick said he'd put a bit around. I was down there one day and Bernie had wandered down and was just sitting there on an old drum, just watching things go on. And Dick'd got a packet of plain bikkies and doused 'em with something from the shed and put them out about the place. Know what I reckon?"

"Yeah. Bernie got peckish and said 'here's a bikkie sitting round doing nothing'. Yeah, could be. How often did he come down?"

"Wouldn't have a clue. That's the only time I saw him there. But Dick said he'd been hanging round a couple o' times. The place wasn't locked. So I s'pose he might've come round when no one was there."

"You never thought of warning the old sod?"

"Never occurred to me. I won't say I was sorry to hear he'd kicked the bucket. This place gets by but it's not a cash cow."

"But you did shop your son, didn't you? You weighed things up and decided you didn't mind if Brett went down."

John Goodrick sat back and gazed at the face of the law and his own expression was unreadable. Then he said unexpectedly, "You know why?"

To his own surprise Dennis Walsh realised he probably did know; maybe loving Fiona had made him a scrap better able to read other people's emotions. "It was for Miriam's sake, wasn't it?"

The other man nodded. There were many things that might be said in this pregnant pause. But neither man tried to put them into words.

*

With no one to help him through the routine work Monday was a full-on day; all the week got to be busy. But in his occasional moments of calm Dennis Walsh went back to pondering on other issues. And on Wednesday evening he took time out to go through to Dinawadding, have a good look round the hamlet, shop in the small store, ask people what they knew of this movement Saul Harding had set up.

One young man said cheerfully, "He's bonkers, if you ask me. All this flag-waving stuff. He wants to bring caning back if kids aren't word perfect on the national anthem, that sort of stuff. I'd like to give *him* a quiz, just see how much he really knows. I bet he'd fail."

"Do you think he's the prime mover?"

"I doubt it. I mean the man's a bloody fascist. Always has been, I reckon. But he never had the money to do much. Now he seems to be rolling. I heard they're going to start up a newspaper, even a TV show … They've got their own web-site now."

"Do you know how to get on to it?" He didn't know the young man but thought he was a teacher at the primary school here.

"Yep. I checked it out. Never again!" Then he said, "Give me your notebook and I'll write it down for you."

Other people seemed to be more sympathetic. "Well, you can't say those people at the feed lots when they had all those Ities there were much use to the town." But when put on the spot with 'how much do the South Africans spend here?' they had to admit things hadn't improved.

He looked round the railway siding and found people had been using the increasingly scarred and damaged premises. The door to the freight office was now propped open. He went very carefully over the untidy space with its old sets of shelves and a scarred wooden desk. Some consignment forms yellowed in a pigeon-hole. A couple of canvas bags were bundled into a cardboard carton. He lifted them out carefully and found a small Ziplock bag of red pills underneath. He took the bag and went knocking up and down the hamlet's few streets. No one would admit to knowing anything about the bag.

The post office was closed so he went into the general store again and asked if they had a Brisbane phone book. "Sorry, only local." He said it didn't matter and looked for the nearest office for Queensland Railways. This turned out to be in Winville. He asked to use the store phone and said to the answering machine: "The siding at Dinawadding is being used to store illegal drugs. You'd better get out here first thing tomorrow and make sure the place is locked up tight or I'll charge you with being a party to the distribution of a banned substance."

By nightfall it was all over Dinawadding that Dinny Walsh had threatened to charge the Railways; it gave people a happy buzz. Their own lives seemed to be at the mercy of forces too powerful to be resisted. But Buckton's crusading sergeant was a reminder that the powerful sometimes sit down on a stray burr.

He wasn't happy with the situation; he'd counted another ten of the posters round the place. But the feed lots took his mind off that particular issue when he called in. The man minding the

office and eating a plate of steak and chips said John Kessler-Smythe had left without a word on Monday and hadn't been seen or heard from since.

"Did he take all his stuff?"

"Don't know."

"Then can you unlock his room so we can check if he's done a runner or plans to come back."

The man didn't sound enthusiastic but he found a key in a safe and came over to the room where Kessler-Smythe had lived for the last eight months. They found a few clothes, some paperbacks, a pair of boots, a few toiletries, but anything more personal had disappeared.

"What sort of car did he drive?"

"That's his car there. That's why we didn't know what to think."

The car, a blue Holden ute, stood unremarkably in a row of other vehicles. Its tyres were also unremarkable but one of the other vehicles had wider tyres; a big shiny-black ute bursting with added chrome and big bullbars.

He looked in the driver's window to the Holden and said, "That's odd. He's locked his keys in by the look of it." The other man came over and peered in but didn't volunteer any ideas. "So who owns the black car?"

"Daniel. Danny Harris."

Walsh jotted the make and number down. "Okay. Kessler-Smythe turns up, let me know. We've now got him and Adam Rogers missing."

"I think Adam must've come back and got his things. I saw his car was missing when I came by yesterday."

"Or Kessler-Smythe took it. Or some local kids took it … " Dennis went round to the Caritas Farm Stay centre for another look. The place was still deserted. But his tape over the side door had been removed. It would take someone from Japana about twenty minutes to walk across the paddocks to the farmhouse. He did another scout around the house and villas and outbuildings.

As he turned on to the darkening road home he added another question to his long list: "I need to know how Caritas connected … just another property owned by Bruloder owned by … God knows … or a more elaborate arrangement … " In the case of old bones he could get in an expert. In the case of masses of probably stolen property stored in Lenny Low's shed he could get in a different kind of expert. But in this case …

He left Buckton in the early morning the following day and took the bag of red pills through to Winville to get them tested. He wasn't met with smiles and goodwill. But Greg Sullivan, parking and coming in yawning, said morosely, "I think there's a bloody leprechaun on the loose. Maybe if we take our eyes off him the little bugger will disappear."

"You've got to do some digging first, you lazy sod," Dennis said. "Have you found out anything about that Neurand Trust yet?"

"No. Not our pigeon. And we've been warned off. Well, not warned exactly. Doug apparently received a letter to say it's a private family trust and if we can't provide evidence of any financial wrongdoing then we have to back off."

"How come?"

"You can't blacken people's names … not when they're innocent minors."

"Codswallop! Did Doug show you this letter?"

"No."

"Who wrote it?"

"I don't know. Look, just go away, Dennis. I can't answer your questions so there's no point in asking them."

"Okay. This business about Martha Harding. Did Neil find out which church she goes to?"

"The Church of Christ here."

"Not the one over in Buckton?"

"That's all she said and no one asked her for the address, I don't s'pose."

"Then you'd better. If she's connected to Eric Kramer then she's probably linked to the Rogers and Japana. And we've now got both Adam Rogers and this John Kessler-Smythe missing."

Greg sat down heavily. “I’ll see what I can do. But just go away, Dennis. I can’t cope with you this early in the morning.”

“Don’t forget to get those fingerprints checked a.s.a.p. You never know. It might be someone who was in Unit 14. I don’t take kindly to getting my constables bashed.” But to DS Sullivan’s relief he went out then and round to the hospital to visit Sam Hussein before heading back to Buckton … and peace reigned again. It did not occur to Greg Sullivan that it might only be the peace before the storm.

Another car chose to drive by Constable Hussein’s yard late that evening and throw some more stones. One hit his parked car, another hit a window and cracked it. The car again accelerated away, a souped-up rumble. But this time they were not so lucky. Kerry Thomas, delighted to be allowed out to drive her father’s car, was taking two of her friends home from watching a video called ‘Big’; she was driving carefully and responsibly along the narrow strip of bitumen that ran along this side of Buckton Creek. The other car swung, squealing, round the corner. Its driver facing her without preparation on a usually-deserted road swung the wheel too hard to avoid her and ran off into the scrub along the creek. The vehicle’s speed took it down the bank with screaming and bouncing and hitting the trunks of scrubby wattles and the couple of bigger stringybarks. Kerry, terrified, managed to pull into the verge and stop. She and her friends sat a few minutes trying to stop shaking and gasping and decide what to do next.

Dennis Walsh, still buttoning his shirt, arrived on the scene a few minutes later. Lights went on in nearby houses. Dogs barked. He came over to the girls and said, “Are you all okay?”

They said they were but pointed to where the other car had slewed off the road and gone down the embankment. “They mightn’t be,” Kerry said miserably.

“Doesn’t look like it was your fault. But don’t try to drive for a few more minutes. Not till you’ve got yourself on track again.”

He went over to the road’s edge and looked down.

It was the gleaming black ute he had recently seen over in the car park at Japana …

Case No. 4: One Good Deed

The two men in the ute were conscious but shaken up. Their vehicle had come to rest half in the muddy trickle that was Buckton Creek at the moment. They were struggling to get the driver’s door open and climb out. The powerful vehicle had done more damage to the vegetation than to itself on its wild plunge. But the men had not been wearing seat belts and they had been tossed around.

If they were already feeling pretty fragile Sergeant Walsh struggling down the bank wasn’t a lot of help to frayed nerves. “And what do you bloody morons think you’re up to! I’ll be charging you with damaging property and driving without due care.” The two men finally managed to get out and stand up cautiously. “You’d better sit down and wait for the ambulance,” Dennis said without sympathy. “In the meantime you’d better give me your names.” He hadn’t brought his notebook.

The two men, Daniel Harris and Luke Harding, offered that much before saying they weren’t going to answer any more questions.

“Suit yourselves. You can climb up the bank if you want to. But this ute will stay here till I’ve searched it.”

He wasn’t absolutely certain how he might interpret the look they exchanged. Then Luke said, “I’d better try and get my bag out.” Dennis Walsh said grimly, “And what the heck are you carting round this time o’ night?” He went over to the vehicle and hauled out a duffel bag from behind the front seat and opened it.

“Hey, that’s mine! You leave it alone!”

“What’s in here? Stolen property?” Walsh half-expected to find more of the ubiquitous pills which seemed to be making a habit of turning up. But there was nothing obviously criminal in the bag, not even some more posters to be glued up round Buckton. Maybe Luke protested out of habit,

out of principle, out of doubt. But people didn't make a fuss, in Dennis Walsh's opinion, unless they had something to make a fuss about. He put the bag down on the ground and began unpacking it. An old windcheater. A packet of biscuits. Two cans of Coke. A comic. Hard to see why anyone would make a fuss. The biscuits might have large red pills stuck into them instead of choc chips. The cans might be fakes. The comic was an action comic about 'Hawkman'. He might be the usual American stuff or he might be Hendrik Bruloder in comic form but this was hardly the moment to sit down and read a comic by the light of a torch.

He went through the pockets of the windcheater and took out what looked to be an address book. He heard the ambulance pull up along the road above and two anxious faces dimly seen behind torches appeared. "Can you walk up?" Jim Phelps yelled down, "or will we bring a stretcher?"

"We'll come up, Jim. I want to take these two round to the station first and write them a receipt." Jim Phelps debated on querying this. The men might be concussed or bleeding internally. "Better still, you get them both settled in, Jim, while I duck back to the station and get something to write on. Also some tape. I don't want anyone messing with this car till I get it checked out."

Jim Phelps, offered what seemed a simple alternative, said, "Okey dokey," and went on down the bank to give a hand.

Dennis was away nearly ten minutes. He wrote a receipt, detailing the contents of the bag, he also wrote a note to say the car couldn't be moved and rang Winville and left a message, asking them to send Ray Gould round tomorrow to check the vehicle. He wasn't so keen on getting Ray now that he knew Ray had gone to the Farm Stay and 'played around with' Eve Rogers but it couldn't be helped. Ray knew his job.

Daniel Harris had got into the ambulance without demur but Luke Harding was still saying the police had no right to touch his possessions. Jim said mildly, "I'm sure he'll have it back by tomorrow morning." This didn't appear to be much comfort.

Dennis watched the vehicle move away. Kerry and her friends had also driven away. The dim road seemed its usual unremarkable self again. But he climbed down the steep slope again and did his best to search the vehicle thoroughly. Then he went home yawning.

*

If he thought that was it for the night he was mistaken. He had a call-out to Burleigh in the early hours of the morning. Someone had tried to set fire to the store room of the little general store there. Fiona got up while he was re-dressing and boiled the kettle and filled a Thermos for him. "My poor darling," she handed it and a box of biscuits over. "And you might like to do your zip up."

"Christ! Shows where my thoughts mainly are these days!"

She gave him her sweetest smile and watched him go bumbling out. The kitchen clock said 2.45 a.m. Was everything purely coincidence, she wondered as she went back to bed, or was there a campaign to run Dennis ragged?

Unsurprisingly he was late getting over to open up the station next morning. A bit of chewed string was about the way he was beginning to feel. But he had hardly got the place opened up and switched the phone through and started to try and fill in the details of his call-outs when he had a visit from Gavin Whittaker. The lawyer looked very smart in a double-breasted suit and a dark-blue tie. He was of the generation which still saw cuff-links as being useful and stylish.

"Two young men," he said without preamble, "in an accident last night. I gather you've threatened to charge them."

"I have. Don't tell me you're doing another Price-Cooney deal?"

"You have any evidence to back up your charges?"

"They came along Heussler Street, threw some stuff into Constable Hussein's yard, cracking a window, then raced down to the turn there on to Creek Road and ended up down the embankment."

"You saw them throw things?"

"No. But I heard them and I got out of bed."

"That is hardly evidence."

"You're suggesting *two* hot rod utes came along Heussler Street in those couple of minutes?"

"It's possible."

"And one managed to come by without a sound. For crying out loud, mate, go down and have a look at that vehicle before you say stupid things like that."

"And are you going to charge those silly young girls with their P-plates?"

"No. They were driving very slowly. And they hadn't reached the intersection—"

"That's not what I heard."

"But then you didn't visit the scene last night."

"That's your word against theirs."

"No. It isn't. Half the people living along there came out to stickybeak."

"And you had no right to take their belongings."

"I made out a receipt. The bag is here and you can take it back to them—but I am going to keep the notebook that was in a pocket of Luke's coat."

"Why?"

"Because he appears to have jotted down a recipe for cooking up amphetamines. That is not normal behaviour and don't start telling me he's compensating for a deprived childhood. The little shit has something to do with all those pills that Martha Harding reckons she never saw before in her life over at the nursing home."

"You've got proof of that?"

"No. But let me give you one piece of advice, Mr Whittaker. If you've dipped your toe in this Neurand Bruloder Caritas pool be prepared for it to turn a very nasty black and drop off—"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, I think you do. Were you the one the Hoysteds asked to set up the trust in the first place? Did you suggest to Sam Hoysted that your old school would be just the place to park his poor little motherless boys? Did you sign the cheques to bankroll the Bruloder operation? And now they've got some hold over you, haven't they? Because hot-shot lawyers don't come tearing all the way out to Buckton just because two brainless little squits have run their car off the road."

"I will get a court order requiring you to return their vehicle and their belongings—"

"Go for it. Now I'd better keep going. It seems your Hardings are behind these outbreaks of racist thuggery so I need to find a way to get them sent down for a nice long spell so they can think on the value of a Get Out of Prison Quick Party instead … "

Gavin Whittaker said, "In that case you'd better show me this notebook. I don't want it to turn up with some little additions to help you in your campaign."

"Suit yourself." Dennis went through to the store room and brought back the shabby little bag. "One bag, one windcheater, one packet of biscuits, two cans of Coke, one comic. Check it. And one notebook." He removed it from under a pile of papers and carefully slipped it out of its plastic bag and flipped it open. "Of course you can always stand up in court next week and explain how the little lad has taken up cooking—might be good for a giggle."

Gavin Whittaker remained expressionless. Then he said, "Don't forget, not back by tomorrow, I'll take action."

"I s'pose they've got money … but I still find it hard to believe Daniel and Luke have your kind of money. Luke maybe. Nice farm Saul has got there and parents don't mind chucking it down a bottomless pit … " Whittaker turned and went out and left him to his musing. After he'd dealt with some more calls he put his sign on his door and also took the long road to Winville.

Tony Chapman photographed the book page by careful page. But Reid Strohling, their current lab technician, didn't need to take much care; "I'd say you're right but I'll have a careful go over it. The stuff I've seen is more adulterated but same recipe. But I don't understand. Why would some youth be carting it round in his address book—and since when did young fellas like Luke keep address books anyway?"

"Luke's very ambitious. Young Farmers. Young Nationals. Young fascists. Young anything—he's in there, or so I hear, pushing his barrel."

"Carting what around?" Doug Towner came through. "You're like a bad penny, mate."

"Yeah, but there's gold under the dross. Don't you worry about that, Doug. You wouldn't happen to be one of the trustees of the Neurand Trust, would you? Gavin Whittaker went very green around the gills when I asked him the same question."

"You're out of your tiny mind, buster, now get back to your patch before I put in a formal complaint."

"Yeah. On my way. I've got to find the time to get out to the Harding farm this afternoon. I think they move this little cooking operation around. Here, there, hard to keep up with all their pots and pans and bags of ingredients."

"You can't waltz in there and expect to be given a guided tour. No search warrant, no entry. That's the rule."

"Your rule maybe."

"No. The Department's rule. In case you still haven't got that through your thick head."

Dennis Walsh shrugged. No point in staying to argue.

Not that Dave Grumm was wild about being asked to leave the factory and drive twenty kilometres to the Harding farm. But he accepted, as many people did, that it might be simpler to go along with Dennis and do one of his random checks. He got his bag to take samples as needed. But he had never driven with Dennis Walsh as his passenger and he said later to his wife, "I felt like a kid out trying for my Learner's again."

The Hardings were just starting their afternoon milking when the car drew in alongside the dairy. Mr Grumm went over apologetically. "Just a quick look around, if you wouldn't mind. I was just in the area."

"Go for it, Dave," Saul Harding was a big blustery man with a habit of trying to stare down anyone who came within his orbit. But as Dennis Walsh got out of the car his expression changed. "Here, what's that bastard doing here?"

"I'm giving him a lift. Don't worry about it, Mr Harding."

"Well, he stays put. I don't want him getting underfoot when I'm busy."

Dennis shrugged. "Don't be too long, Dave."

The factory manager shot him a hunted look, then went on into the dairy with his bag. Dennis remained leaning up against the car and looking around. The Hardings were prosperous by the look of it. All their vehicles and machinery looked to be in good nick. The big holding yards for the cows, and Dennis thought there was probably close to two hundred there, were spruce and painted. If the Hardings' cream wasn't top-of-the-line then it was probably carelessness and cutting corners not lack of good premises and equipment.

After about five minutes he wandered over towards the machinery shed. The place smelled of cows, of hay, of oil and wood and smoke from the kitchen chimney. But there was a faint overlay. Hard to pin down. Beyond the fowl run someone had been having a bonfire. It might be the source of the smell. Some smouldering plastic. People were careless. He wandered to and fro. And something odd caught his eye on the shelves behind the big Case tractor. No one was around. He slipped in. Boxes and boxes of bottles. The brown sort some chemists used. And tucked into one box was a roll of prescription labels. He had a look. Bennett's Pharmacy, Braxton Street, Winville, and a phone number.

Except that he had never heard of Bennett's or Braxton Street.

He came out and stood at ease in the big space in front of the shed. Saul Harding came out about five minutes later with Dave Grumm and said, "Well, let me know if we've got a problem and we'll get straight on to it." Then he saw Dennis Walsh and came striding over. "What the bloody heck do you think you're doing there!"

"Not much. Standing round waiting for Dave." He gazed around the farm scene. Harding employed two young men as well as his own family and the numbers of cows waiting with bulging udders continued to decrease slowly. "But I s'pose it's like a franchise operation. You cook up the pills and bottle 'em for someone else. I hope it pays well."

"You been in there mucking around?"

"It's a funny thing—but I did inherit good eyesight. Mind you, I don't think much of the skin I inherited from my nice white parents." He held out one brawny arm and seemed to contemplate it … "Anyway, we won't keep you."

"What was all that about?" Grumm said cautiously as he drove away.

"Our Mr Harding is cooking up illicit drugs and bottling them, it looks like, maybe so he can fund his foray into politics. People call me a fascist. But I think Mr Harding's ideas would come closer to the mark."

The problem with all this was—it wasn't illegal to stock your shed with empty bottles, nor to have a bonfire in the back yard, nor even to make fake labels … it was what you did next, and he could not think who to get to help because he didn't know who was corrupted and compromised … and who, if anyone, wasn't …

And it wasn't finding the six or so men who had attacked young Yusuf Hussein and put him in hospital …

Grumm was not precisely a timid man. However he had always seen his job as 'quietly getting on with the business'. But now he swallowed and said with some difficulty, "Dennis, there is one thing which might interest you. I don't s'pose it has any connection. I just found it a bit odd."

"Such as?"

"Every year or so I get a request from Buckton High School to show some kids around the factory, tell them about job opportunities, how butter is made. That sort of thing. I don't mind. If kids don't get interested in farming there won't be new generations of farmers. But a little while ago Eric Kramer came to see me. He said he sometimes hears from parents who are looking for somewhere to find their children decent jobs—and he wanted to know if I could show him around and tell him what sort of employment opportunities we could offer. I was busy at the time and I asked one of the men to take him round. When he'd done a bit of a tour they came back to the office and he asked me if I had any current openings and I said no. Then he said, I'm sure you soon will, or something like that, almost as if he knew someone was going to resign. I said he was welcome to check back any time to see if a vacancy was coming up. Then he went away again. I didn't really see why he should come rather than the parents or the young men. I don't bite. But maybe he's keen to see young people find local jobs. The thing is though—when your constable got bashed there behind the factory I couldn't help wondering … "

"You think Eric Kramer set it up?"

"Gosh no! But I wondered if he'd mentioned to anyone … the thing is … I worked late that evening and Anne and I had friends round to dinner the next night and they stayed quite late, say ten. And then Anne and I went to dinner and a concert in Winville on the Saturday night. We very rarely go out of a night but I had mentioned it to him while he was in the office and Anne was there with me. Afterwards I thought—I'm sure we didn't mention it to anyone else. Someone might've noticed us driving away but they wouldn't know how late we were planning to stay. I wondered if he had mentioned it to anyone. Because it would take a little organising to set up that attack and they would want to be sure I wasn't in the offing … "

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To come out of the bank and walk along to the shops to buy lunch was sometimes a great relief, Fiona thought; getting away from Hilton Browne gave even the simple act of walking away from the bank for half-an-hour a sense of escape. She had said she would finish up at the end of December but there were days when she wasn't sure she could make it through. It was Hilton. But it was also the heat and dust of Buckton. 'I must've been mad to even think of having a baby in February … when I'm finding it hard going at the end of October.' The dusty days of harvest round the district stretched ahead. There had not even been enough rain to lay the dust. People were speaking gloomily of low yields and income down.

Now she stepped out on to the footpath and walked away. A willy-willy rose on the oval of the High School, sped across the intervening spaces and dashed on to the bitumen in front of her. Caught up in it were lolly papers and chip packets. It spread them out across the road. She watched it dwindle and die. A piece of paper floated down into the gutter. Thinking it might belong to someone she bent to retrieve it. It was a flyer, rather grubby now, but advertising this new group

that Dennis had mentioned. And it included both the time and the place. She wrapped it in a tissue and walked on; walking, everyone agreed, was nice gentle exercise.

She had thought to simply buy something at the bakery then sit out by the cricket grounds and eat it. But she ran into Joanne McNally as she turned into the main street. "Hi, Jo. How is everything?"

Jo had been looking increasingly harassed lately. Whether it had to do with Dr Davis, her son, Guy Briggs, or anything else she had no idea. "Have you got time for a quick snack? We could go in the café or get something—"

Jo glanced at her watch then said, "Why not? It wouldn't hurt him to answer the phone occasionally." They went into the little café and ordered a shared plate of sandwiches and two fruit drinks.

"How is the baby?" Joanne never quite knew how to chat with Fiona because of that sense that Fiona was an intensely private person. If it had been one of her schoolfriends she would not have thought twice about asking for every tiny detail.

"I do feel a bit tired at the end of most days. Swollen ankles. But compared to Dennis my life is a picnic. I think they take a perverse delight in calling him out in the middle of the night."

"Who is they?"

"Almost everyone, I begin to think. I feel guilty if I even just expect him to sit down and chat a few minutes. But perhaps things will quieten again. How are things with you and Guy? He is obviously in his element now. I see him at our reading group and he just seems so much more relaxed and happy."

"Yeah," Joanne said wryly, "books don't jump up and yell at him. He wants us to get married but I honestly don't know. He might get tired of me. I'm no great brain and I've never traveled or done much in my life. And I'm not sure that I love him."

"What you probably need is a long weekend away, just the two of you, just to have a bit of time together. Jason could come to stay with us if you don't like to leave him on his own. I know Guy thinks a lot of him. But he'll grow up and leave home so it's what's between you and Guy that really matters." She knew Dennis had always had problems with Guy as his constable but the Guy who was passionate about books was a much easier person to like.

Joanne seemed to think the idea was worth doing something about.

"And don't worry about not having traveled or anything. When I think of all the times I have said silly things or put my foot in it here … but people mostly just look at me in a sort of pitying way and tell me what I need to know. I'm sure it works both ways … "

But as she walked back towards the bank a few minutes later she knew it was one thing to dispense ideas and advice—and quite another to apply things to her own life, the sense of being on the sidelines of her own marriage, and it wasn't what she knew about life out here but how she coped with living it.

She understood now why Dennis had understood and appreciated that gap. His lovely gentle mother was living proof that some gaps can never truly be crossed. She had told her something of her life: the young woman who, as the one unmarried girl in the family, had come out to Townsville in the 1930s to help her brother who had four children and a chronically-ill wife who died soon after. Her homesickness. Her distress at the life she found in that raucous 'frontier' town.

"All I wanted, my dear, was to go home again as soon as my brother's children were old enough. And then I met Jimmy. He had come to be with his mother while she had treatment here. I had only known him about two weeks when he asked me to marry him. And I said 'yes'. I did him such a terrible disservice but I didn't know it till we went out to live on the property with his parents and his brother. I thought I had come to the end of the world. It was so far away, right out there near Julia Creek. So hot, so dry, so lonely. And everyone seemed so casual, so callous, so … I would not say it in front of Dennis … so cruel. I was terrified of his father. The men that worked there seemed so rough. No one cared about the things that were important to me. I had never gone a Sunday in my life without church and my father-in-law just laughed when I said that. I don't mean he was unkind to me. But he was a hard man. Very fair. But he made no allowances for weakness or failure.

"I remember a traveling clergyman asked him for a donation to help build a church and he said 'what, money for some little humpy! Don't be absurd!' The minister said it wasn't going to be a humpy and Walter said 'fly up there where the hawks are and it will look a humpy'. He heard a man laugh one day because a cow came through the yards and her horn had grown around and started to grow into her face. He sacked the man on the spot. But he just had the men chop off the horn and pull out that bit. I used to cry for the things I saw. And I used to get such terrible headaches from the glare and the heat.

"But my mother-in-law liked having me there. And Jimmy always tried to understand and make it up to me. I came to live in Townsville with Terry so he could go to high school and I brought Dennis too. But he missed the station. Jimmy and his father had moved us all to the place near Normanton just after the war … "

"And did you ever go back to Scotland?"

"Jimmy thought it would cure me. I hoped it would. And then … I remember the boat coming in and there was a seal near the rocks and the seabirds … and it seemed so soft and green … I had prayed and prayed that I could leave it behind me, that the family would've half-forgotten me, that I wouldn't belong any more. And instead, I knew I had come home again."

"But you did come back to Townsville again."

"I did. It was as though the land I loved and the people I loved were separated by thousands of miles and I knew I could never combine them. But I was brought up to believe a husband came first, my children, I couldn't not come back. After my mother-in-law died, Jimmy arranged for a young woman to come from Aurukun to help me in the house. Norena was a lovely happy-go-lucky young lass and I understood Dennis wanting to marry her. And even if their children were caught in that great divide between their ways … I knew she would never yearn for something far away … and instead she died. And little Danny. Dennis was angry that she tried to drive home that same night. I think it was his way of trying to deal with it. But he always knew she turned round to come home because she never wanted to spend so much as a night away from home. Perhaps some of my prayers were not fit to be answered but I always felt that one finally got answered. I think I have prayed every night that life would still hold good things for him … "

The gaps I try to cross, Fiona thought as she went up the shallow front steps of the bank again, seem such puny ones … and yet with this dry wind blowing and Dennis so preoccupied they too sometimes seem insurmountable … but perhaps I need to assert myself … not let things drift …

But as she lay on the couch that evening, a little interlude in which he placed his hands on her growing midriff and said "It's like a little ripple, like something just under the surface of a creek, a little invisible bunyip swimming around", she smiled and said, "Yes, a little bunyip. I like that. But, sweetheart, is there any way I can persuade you to slow down a little? You are the blue flash that whizzes by, the blip on my radar screen. I don't want them to wear you into the ground. Is there any way you could take a few weeks rest from this other stuff, not the local work, but all this Bruloder stuff? Maybe come back to it with a fresh eye? Maybe create a plan of action? I hate to see them wearing you out. It's like an octopus. As fast as you neutralise one tentacle another one seems to grab you. I know it's no good me asking you to pass this drugs stuff over because you don't trust anyone—"

"There are a few people I still trust. But they aren't senior enough to do things for me. I asked Ashley to keep an eye out for those two missing men but we can't officially list them as missing." Then he realised this was more of the same. "You're right. I've known it for ages. But you know me. Give me a bone to worry and I won't leave it alone till it's dead and buried."

But the other side was just as true. He often thought what was the point of achieving something he had longed for—and never having the time to relax and immerse himself in the wonder of it.

"I don't want you to change. You're very special the way you are. I just want you to take time out to get your breath back."

"I will. I won't promise … but I want to spend the time just sitting here feeling amazed … at this, at us. And shouldn't you be taking things easier too? These little girls might think it's great to come round and dream of ballet … but you're the one coping with them all."

Megan and six of the girls from school, including rather dauntingly Jade Murphy another of the abducted girls, had started coming round regularly on Saturday afternoons for an hour. Fiona had got Dennis to turn the sofa a little so they could use the top of it as an impromptu barre and they had begun learning the five positions for arms and legs as well as some more general exercises. For most of the girls, Fiona thought, it was a novelty and wouldn't last. But Megan impressed her. From being a doughy little girl who had probably over-eaten out of loneliness she was suddenly blossoming under Fiona's tactful kindness.

"I do take care only to do the gentlest things. It is strange though. I had no little playmates until I went to school. My mother thought no one was good enough to play with her little princess. I don't think it ever occurred to her that it can be very lonely in the tower. If we only end up with one little one I hope there will always be lots of little friends to make up … I thought I wouldn't be able to understand young girls now but perhaps things haven't changed all that much, just the surface things. And Megan is a dear little girl. I want her to feel happy and confident … "

He nodded. "Then … before I start taking life easy … can I ask you something more about trusts?"

"If you want." His questions had to do with how the Hoysted boys might gain access to funds … and would minors be likely to be able to make decisions about the trust's assets.

"It would depend on the way the trust was set up. It's more usual to make a regular allowance to under-age children. They could possibly ask for a larger amount for something special. But the trustees would most likely pay big bills like their school fees. It is always possible that the trustees haven't been honest and reliable. But without knowing who the trustees are … I can't even make a guess."

"Fair enough."

He let the matter drop. It could wait. This moment was not to be squandered …

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Mr Kramer agreed that he had gone round to see the factory manager. He said parents occasionally asked his advice or help with their children. He said he couldn't remember mentioning to anyone anything about a concert. "My mind is on more important things than a lot of people sawing away at violins, Sergeant Walsh. I won't say music is the work of the devil but I regard most such concerts as pretentious nonsense." Dennis Walsh, not particularly musical himself, suddenly thought on how much he liked to sit and listen to Fiona practise on their old piano. Kramer went on: "The fields of the Lord are parched and withered. I have little time for other concerns."

"But you did take time out to have a tour of the butter factory?"

"That was so I can assure anxious parents that the place is safe and that the men do not keep girlie magazines and … other things … in their lunch room."

"I see. And do they?"

"Not that I saw."

"This group that meets now and then in your church hall—what d'you know about them?"

"Not a lot. But run by respectable farm families. And being a relative newcomer … I have no objection to promoting loyalty."

The trouble with Eric Kramer was that he was so wrapped around in an impregnable cloak of self-righteousness it was extremely difficult to find the chinks and give-aways ordinary guilty mortals displayed.

He could see the value in stepping back. He *had* been exhausting himself running to and fro. But the real exhaustion was a psychological one: the knowledge that Winville was not giving him even the most minimal cooperation and support. He could talk about making it on his own but he knew it wasn't realistic. And the value of trying to spend a little more time with Fiona was incalculable. This precious time would never come again.

Even so he was determined to get someone for the attack on Constable Hussein. The young man had been moved to a convalescent home connected to the hospital—and from there he would take his accumulated leave. But there was no point in urging him to reconsider his decision to resign, not while six cowardly thugs remained at large.

Over the next few weeks he door-knocked practically every house in the vicinity of Buckton. He got at least six sightings of the dark car parked along the road from the motel but no one had noticed anything special about it. Nor, apparently, had anyone noticed anything unusual. No running figures, no group of youngsters cramming into it, nothing about the car itself which appeared to have been a dark-blue Datsun … or if not dark-blue then dark-green, brown, even possibly dark-red or maroan … But he felt sure the problem was resolvable. He just needed to keep digging away. He had put out a request in the *Buckton Bugle* and over the local radio station in Winville. Sooner or later something would come together. And there were the other probably racially-motivated attacks: the damage to the Castley car, the attempted arson at the Burleigh store where the wife of the couple who ran it came from the Philippines. In his spare time he drew up lists, not forgetting the attack on Sam Hussein's home. Was there a connecting factor? But it seemed to him as he set things out and ruled columns that there were two kinds of attacks. There were the stupid sort with Price and Cooney, with Harris and Harding, and there were the almost military-style operations like the attacks on Hussein and the store. Attacks where no one seemed to notice anything untoward and where the offenders seemed to disappear into thin air …

And along with this went those reams of unanswered questions he often jotted down as he answered the phone or made himself a morning cup of tea. But he let them sit as though they needed to mature and come to fruit and seed. Harvest always brought various small problems; harvesters on roads, trucks carting grain to the silos, disputes between farmers and contractors and casual labour. And the shops in Buckton started the first tentative approach to Christmas; 'get in early' specials, little signs in windows asking for a 'casual girl' or 'school leaver wanted', reminders not to leave things till the last minute, the first mention of the RSL Christmas Party 'with Santa!' and the lively reminder by the new combined churches op-shop (to which Eric Kramer and his flock had refused to contribute; holding himself vigorously aloof and saying that Christians hardly needed to descend to grubby second-hand clothing and chipped china to spread their message) that they would have hampers for any family doing it hard as well as a Toy Tree for children …

He had to go to court when Daniel Harris and Luke Harding came up. His efforts to get them charged with malicious damage to the house and car had come to nothing but he hoped they would both get at least some hours of community service and that Daniel would lose his licence. Magistrate Hull looked over at the increasingly ubiquitous Gavin Whittaker but made no comment.

Instead it was Daniel Harris who put a large foot in it. When asked by the magistrate if he had any explanation of his presence along Heussler Street and down Creek Road he had grinned and said, "Sure. It's what he deserves."

"Who deserves?" The magistrate said it neutrally but Gavin Whittaker turned a contemptuous look on the young man.

"Dunno."

"I think you do." Hull sounded rather tired—as though he'd had his fill of cocky young hooligans. "I am waiting for you to answer my question."

"I don't remember. I hit my head when the car went down the bank."

Hull sat back and steepled his fingers. Normally he went through his list with exemplary crispness and decision but today he looked as though he was having difficulty putting his thoughts together. At last he said, "Fortunately you did not hit the other car and most of the damage was sustained by your own vehicle. But I am going to make an example of you."

Luke Harding walked confidently out of the court; as the passenger he could not be charged with careless driving. Daniel Harris was asked to attend a Driving Skills course and lost points from his licence. "Now," Hull said when Whittaker and Harding had gone out, "I would like you to sit down again." He wrote a note for Dennis Walsh and his clerk passed it along. "I do not know if the two of you are irresponsible young men or whether you asked Mr Harding along for the ride or whether he recruited you to do the driving. But if it is the last … then I would like you to go across to the interview room behind the office and tell Sergeant Walsh why you agreed to drive all the way to Buckton for such a pointless reason. If it isn't, then you will just go and report to the office as usual to get your paperwork done."

Daniel Harris looked bemused. But it also seemed to Dennis Walsh as he too got up that the young man also looked faintly scared. Was Luke Harding his bulwark against a confusing world—or the man who turned the screws?

It did not really surprise Sergeant Walsh that Harris simply went out and walked over to the office counter. Losing points was easier to handle than being seen as a dobber-inner.

Other than that Dennis Walsh stayed away from Winville. They had done nothing for him. No update on the drugs found. Only a bland statement that they had not found a match for his fingerprints. No support for young Hussein (except that DC Deane went to see him regularly). And the possibility that Adam Rogers and John Kessler-Smythe might not have left under their own steam was treated with derision by Doug Towner. Now Walsh found himself wondering if a prolonged silence might start to make them feel a bit uneasy. If they didn't know what *he* was doing and saying …

Fiona had come to Winville a couple of times for appointments or to do her first small forays into the world of baby products with the sisters from Buckton Hospital. But he always brought her when he could. It was nice to be cocooned in the car away from demands and if he still found himself getting lost in the maze that possibly led to the minotaur he usually made a concerted effort to abandon such speculation. But once Fiona was dropped at the doctor's surgery he sometimes went to see Hussein.

This next time though Sam Hussein had gone out for a quiet stroll in the long fight back to normal health. "With Ms Deane?" he asked. The nurse in the convalescent place said she thought so. He left it at that. Ali Deane would probably be better for the young man than he could ever be. But it left him at a slightly loose end. He was tempted to go and see Miss Lockwood but he felt that it was best that she not be linked to him.

"Oh well, what the heck." Sometimes it was worth trying something that got nowhere. He drove round to the Hoysted home and found himself pressing a button at the gate and speaking into an intercom system. "It's Sergeant Walsh from Buckton. I won't keep you long but I'd appreciate a few minutes of your time." A voice said to come round to the side gate and someone would let him in. The absent Hoysteds appeared to have an elderly couple minding the place. A rather formal husband. A softer warmer wife.

He felt it was worth buttering them up a bit. A commiseration for the situation the boys found themselves in. A clear statement that he knew they could not do anything that might affect the boys' privacy. But he had heard some unpleasant rumours to the effect that someone was trying to milk the trust fund set up for the boys' future.

The old couple, the Millers, allowed him inside the house; possibly because it made it easier to talk privately. This time of the evening a number of Winville people were out walking dogs or coming home from work or jogging.

"Well, it's an amazing house," Walsh said with apparently genuine admiration. "I s'pose you feel very lucky to live in it."

"Oh, we don't live *in* it?"

"You mean you just come in every day?"

"No. We have quarters out the back. We treat everything here with great care. We could not do that if we *lived* with it."

"Couldn't you?" Dennis digested the idea but couldn't agree. These people might feel themselves fortunate to work every day in a pleasant environment but they obviously weren't treated as friends or confidantes. "I s'pose the Hoysted boys bring friends home from school and that sort o' thing?"

"Not usually, no."

"Well, I can't ask you to show me their office or papers or anything private … but I would appreciate getting a contact number." As he spoke he wandered to and fro. "It must be strange for youngsters to live like this and then go out and play around in a country town."

"Oh, they never *play!*" Mr Miller looked quite shocked at the idea. "They work indoors mostly. They will take over all the businesses. They take their responsibilities very seriously."

Dennis only nodded as Mr Miller pointed to a door and said, "That's Randy's room and his brother next door."

Walsh contrived to walk over and lean his back against the door as he turned slightly to see where Mr Miller was pointing. He had no idea if doors were kept locked in here but he thought it was quite likely. So he was as stunned as the Millers when the catch on the door gave way, it crashed inwards, and he went hurtling to the floor in the almost dark space beyond with nothing but a tiny red votive light burning.

"Strewth! Can you find a light!" In his struggle to get to his feet he bashed against something, probably a chair. Mr Miller said, "Oh dear, this isn't good. This is their *very* private room."

It wasn't hard to see why. As an overhead light came on Dennis realised he was in some sort of shrine. Boys put all sorts of things on their walls—from racing car drivers to pop stars, from weird gothic characters to naked ladies. But this room had hugely-blown-up and laminated photographs of the one man. Those chiseled features, that ice-cold stare, that sense of a man who placed one boot on a groveling world …

"What the heck is Hendrik Bruloder doing on their walls?" He looked around like a dazed Alice landing at the bottom of a long hole. In between the larger-than-lifesize posters were beautifully calligraphed and laminated statements. Dennis Walsh read the nearest one and blinked. It was a terrifying racist jibe apparently attributed to Bruloder.

"Is all this what this man is s'posed to have said?"

The Millers came diffidently into the room and looked around. Finally Mr Miller said nervously, "I don't think so. They like to sit in here and make up things for him to say."

"The sod is dead. I don't s'pose it matters what they put in his mouth now."

"He is their hero. They say he has sent hundreds of criminals to prison."

"Hendrik Bruloder was an out-and-out thug—from what I can gather. But I s'pose every boy needs a man to look up to."

"You won't tell anyone you've been in here. The boys would be very upset."

"I don't blame them. I hated people coming into my room when I was a kid. But what do the boys do when they're upset? They don't take it out on you, do they?"

"Oh no, no, nothing like that. They just say … maybe someone needs to be taught a lesson … and they go away and discuss it. It isn't our business."

"Well, look, sorry about the door. I hope it won't take much to get the catch fixed." He took out his wallet. "Let me pay for it." The old man accepted the thirty dollars Dennis handed over but his hand now showed a faint tremor. "Any problems—do what everyone else does. Blame me. Say I just barged in."

The old couple managed a faint smile each. But he did not doubt that he had seriously frightened them. But why they should be frightened of two teenage boys was another matter. Or was their real fear that Sam Hoysted, even in prison, was still managing to keep a finger on what went on in his house?

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He took Fiona and a reheatable Chinese meal home but said he would just like to duck round to see someone. "Don't be long," She took the cartons out of their bag and turned on the oven.

"Ten minutes." Then he went and got a spare photograph of Fiona and went out. It had come to him as he left the Hoysted home that Artie Kees had a different kind of shrine; a pathetic little one. He had tried to keep a close eye on Artie's comings and goings but he wanted Fiona to be able to go anywhere round Buckton, day or night, and not be afraid that Artie was stalking her. This was a gamble. But he thought Artie did finally accept that Fiona was off limits and that her picture was all he was ever going to get.

Artie was picked up by his distant relatives, the Rolls' family, every Sunday after they had been to Mass and taken out to the farm for a nice Sunday lunch and a chance to do things on the farm. He now had vouchers to eat at the café every night. And the Council had arranged for someone to come in every week to help him with laundry and cleaning. It wasn't ideal but it seemed to be working reasonably well. He found Artie at home just putting some sandals on so he could go round to the café.

"I'll give you a lift if you like. But I came about the picture next to your bed. That picture of Ms Greehan."

Artie stared at him. It seemed to him almost miraculous that Sergeant Walsh would know what he had by his bed. He had never invited him into the house … so far as he knew.

"I look at her at night. And then I … " Artie made a vague gesture towards his groin. For a moment Dennis Walsh wondered if this was one of his more dangerous or ridiculous ideas. He wasn't sure that he wanted Artie masturbating while he gazed at Fiona. The image was distasteful and disconcerting. But at least Fiona need never know.

Artie picked up the picture which he'd roughly cut from a magazine and put in a cheap frame. Dennis showed him the photograph he had brought around. Artie took it and simply gazed at it for a long time. Then he took the other one out of the frame and put it in.

"You can have it, mate, but let's get one thing straight. You never go near Ms Greehan. You never follow her. You never try to scare her. You never take a chisel near the bank. Nothing at all. Is that clear?"

It was always hard to know just how much Artie took in. But the other man nodded. "Leave her alone. Yeah."

"That's right. And I think it would be a good idea if we gave this woman in the picture a different name. What's a nice name for a beautiful woman?"

Artie seemed to find this question almost beyond him. But at last he said, "Lizzie. I like Lizzie."

"Okay. This is Lizzie. And Ms Greehan is *my* wife. So you stay right away from her."

Artie nodded cautiously. Dennis told him to finish getting ready to go out for his evening meal. But something else seemed to be on Artie's mind. "That fella," he said at last, "at the church. He says to hit him."

"You stood outside the church?"

"Yeah. He dunt let me in. I listen a bit."

"You stand out there in the front or the back of the church?"

"Back. Beside the hall." This, too, might be a form of stalking, but Walsh said only, "He was telling someone in the hall to hit … him?"

"Men go there. Lotta men. Dunno who they are. Say hit him. An' they all laugh."

"Did you hear anything else?"

"They said things." He shrugged. "I dint know what he's sayin'."

"Okay. Come on then. Thanks for that, Artie."

He took him round to the café and watched him mooch inside in his big hunched-shoulder way. As he drove home to Fiona and a Chinese meal he wondered if Artie was the danger … or if Artie was *in* danger. Either way he didn't intend to share any of this with Fiona. It would be lovely to sit back now, for an evening, just be the person who loved her and wanted to keep her safe against the world.

Case No. 5: By Their Fruit …

Walsh had a ring a few days later. It was from Tony Rowlands. For a moment he faced a totally blank moment then the other man said as explanation, "Kieran asked me to give you a ring sometime. Sorry, I've been away. But you wanted some info on the old meatworks. Is that right?"

"The more info the merrier. Not a lot I can do up there. Not my patch. But I think there might be a Buckton connection. So what can you tell me?"

"Nothing really. It's still owned by Long Hitch and the Kings use it to slaughter the occasional beast. But there have been rumours round for years about phantom animals going through there. A bit of beef on the quiet which ends up at a certain hotel in Toowoomba. I actually went there one time for a meal and got a very nice slab of rumpsteak. But my question about where they got their meat from was just brushed off. I let it go. I'm not sure which is the more important

question—whether they're running some stolen beasts through or whether the real question is hygiene and workplace safety … "

Walsh had rung George Stadler in Garramindi, thinking to give him a blast, and found that Stadler hadn't contacted Winville. Doug Towner had heard on the grapevine that Dennis had been out to Long Hitch and had put poor George on the spot. Stadler had quietly, perhaps relievedly, dropped any possible enquiry into land titles. He was retiring at the end of the year and he and Patsy Browne were planning to buy a camper and go away to see something of Australia. The question of who owned what out there, like a lot of other questions, continued to hang.

"I think it is a problem," Dennis finally said. "A bloke that lives here, Wayne Booth, just might be slipping cattle to and fro. I haven't had time to get on to it. But if you wouldn't mind to keep an eye out."

"I can probably do better than that. If it's only the meat getting sold on … then there must be a pile of hides buried somewhere there, maybe some ear-tags, not to mention all the unwanted bits. Either they have some arrangement with someone to cook everything up and turn it into meal … or they've got a pit there somewhere to dump everything. Nobody'll think anything of it if they see me parked out that way. They all know I'm a mad keen nut when it comes to bird-watching. I can use it as cover—"

"Okay. But don't take any risks. It's not on a big enough scale to be worth putting your safety or your career at risk."

"Don't worry. I'm not the Errol Flynn type." This was probably true. Tony, Kieran later said, was fifty-something and running to paunch.

If only other people would be similarly helpful, Dennis thought as he hung up. He hadn't been able to find a Bennett's Pharmacy in the phone book; nor had he been able to find a Braxton Street on any map of Winville. But then the bottles were probably destined for Brisbane where no one would query it. He had also wandered past Eric Kramer's noticeboard out the front of the church. It said unequivocally: Men's Bible Class. Every Wednesday. 7 — 9 pm. He thought he probably needed to find the time to come around at about nine and see who came out. But it was always possible Artie had misheard, misunderstood, or put some of his own frustration on to something innocuous.

Or, seeing that Eric Kramer did not mind calling him out late at night for a non-existent prowler, he could possibly hint that he was checking one out …

But the real problem that he couldn't help coming back to over and over again was the unhealthy fixation of the two Hoysted youngsters. Was Bruloder Inc in fact the clever fiction of two teenage boys? Given his own slow awkward dealings with the station computer the idea that two adolescents could set up a sophisticated-sounding organisation apparently operating on several continents was disconcerting. But he was gradually coming round to the idea that, unhealthy or not, Neumann and Randall and their secret admiration for that dead man might be something he left out of the equation at his peril.

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He and Fiona had been planning to go round to have dinner with Noel and Mavis the following Wednesday but he put it off to Thursday and went round to the church hall instead. There were a number of cars parked along the street behind the hall in the shadows of trees. He went up and down and made a note of all the makes and numberplates. Then he went in the back way and along towards the side door of the white-painted hall. He could hear a murmur of voices but it was hard to distinguish anything. Possibly Artie had good hearing to make up for his other deficits. Or possibly this was discussion and he had overheard Eric Kramer haranguing the class. Although he had tried to pin Artie down to a date, even a month or a season, he hadn't got anywhere.

He could simply stand out here and wait for the class to disperse in another twenty minutes but some might go out the other exit and out past the church. And standing round contemplating the night, even with crickets in the church lawn and a mopoke over beyond the houses somewhere, was frustrating. In the end he knocked on the door of the hall.

A man in his thirties came over and opened it. 'Not a local,' Walsh thought first. "Sorry to interrupt but you seem to have a prowler hanging about. Have you seen or heard anything?"

There were ten men of varying ages in the room, along with their pastor who showed no pleasure in such proactive policing. Several of the Bible students shook their heads.

Walsh walked casually over to the nearest bench and lifted what appeared to be a Bible and opened it. To his surprise he found himself facing a foreign language. “Well, if that’s a Bible I’ll eat my hat,” he said cheerfully. “Reminds me of naughty boys reading comics inside their school books.”

“You would know all about that, wouldn’t you, sergeant,” Eric Kramer seemed to be holding his temper in with an effort.

“So while I’ve got a captive audience and seeing I don’t need to be worrying about you missing out on your proper lessons—maybe someone here could tell me something about a bloke called Verwoerd. Any takers?”

No one responded. “You do know who he is, don’t you? Sorry! Was. I gather he died in a nasty accident.”

Still no response. He felt uneasy trying to provoke a response from a group of strangers and dealing with a subject he didn’t know a lot about. But none of the men looking at him were aware of his inner doubts. “What? Never heard of the bugger? Now, that is a surprise. Hands up who is South African here? A good old springbok.”

He wasn’t sure if it was Kramer’s iron control of himself and this group that was keeping the younger men silent or more simply that they believed he had no evidence and no support and they could afford to ignore him.

“You lot amaze me. But I s’pose you all came to good old Aussie to get away from the stink of people like Verwoerd—” A muscle twitched in Eric Kramer’s cheek, then he said coldly, “If you wouldn’t mind to hurry up and go, sergeant. We haven’t heard or seen a prowler. So that is the end of the matter.”

“It might’ve been that bloody wolfhound again, skulking round the back. But you all like dogs, don’t you, specially when those dogs are going for someone’s throat … or if it’s a bit hard to set up that kind of contest here … just another dog, maybe. But I was reading up a bit on this Verwoerd character, a real thug by the sound of it. He didn’t just get this apartheid business up and running—before your time, of course,” he turned to the younger men. “Not your fault. No, he had his eye on the main game. Move all the blacks off any good land they might happen to be sitting on, stick ’em up in the dry hills, and flog the good land off at a very healthy profit, friends and rellies first, then party faithful, and so on. What do they call those places where he stuck the blackfellas? Not mission stations, not reserves.” He looked around the room.

One fair-haired young man in his twenties suddenly broke ranks, as though he could no longer bear this crass ignorance, and said, “Bantustans.”

“Yeah. That’s it. So there were some very nice pickings for the people in the right places. The Neumanns, for example. Olivia Neumann was rolling in the stuff, I gather, but she didn’t seem to get much fun out of it. Lovely husband, beautiful kids, dream home, money to burn. And she went round like a month of wet Sundays. Nice to know someone in all that sad mess had a bit of a conscience.” It was a gamble but he had decided it was worth going for broke. “But her husband got his greedy little mitts into it, didn’t he. Some people are addicted to collecting footie cards. But he collected companies, farms, businesses. And old Mr Neumann didn’t like that one little bit, did he? So he thought it was time to send over someone to check out what was going on here. And what did Mr Kramer find when he arrived? Poor Mrs Hoysted was on her last legs. Going downhill fast. No time to waste.”

He held up the spurious book. “A lot of people thought you didn’t know much about church doctrine, Mr Kramer, but I never doubted that there were brains under all that hot air. And here you were in a little country town, time on your hands, and if not as good as your homeland you saw a lot of nice possibilities. A home away from home. The call went out. And this lot,” he waved a big meaty hand, “thought—why not? There’d always be a job going in a Hoysted business. Gratitude. All that stuff. Sam wasn’t sure if he liked what was happening—with his kids and their huge trust fund on one side and you on the other. Not that he deserves any sympathy.”

“Have you finished?” Eric Kramer came towards him.

"No. I'm enjoying this. Chance to speculate. So why would Martha Harding regard you as her 'Verwoerd'? I know the poor dame hasn't got much up top," he touched his forehead, "but that was going a bit far, wasn't it?"

He had hoped if he could keep talking long enough someone might give something away. It was hard to keep rambling on. He never had any trouble finding the words to blast a recalcitrant teenager into next week. But he didn't think of himself as a particularly talkative person and he wasn't sure how long he could keep this up.

"Those three brainless morons talking about Martha, talking about selling pills, talking about Randy … I s'pose it's debatable who was the most mentally challenged. Never talk private stuff in a public place, isn't bad advice, and not when Randy and Neumann had every reason to be suspicious about the way their trust fund was being run—"

He glimpsed it then: the tiny flicker of alarm on the face of the young man whose 'Bible' he had picked up. "That's been the trouble all along. Stacks of fingerprints everywhere … on posters, on chisels, on bags and boxes, even saliva on a cigarette. Now that's another handy piece of advice. You go out to ambush someone—never never never smoke a cigarette and drop the butt."

And again, the start of a swiveled head towards the possible culprit, then the curtain dropping.

"I'll give you a receipt for this book. And I'll want to get everyone's name and address. Won't take long. Then I'll leave you in peace. Mr Kramer, a sheet of paper, if you wouldn't mind. And while I'm here I'd like to just say that I think you're doing a wonderful thing here. I always think it's pretty sad when young men lose their language and culture. But I think you'd be wise not to let Saul Harding and his mob use your hall. Nothing personal, but he seems to have gathered up some hot-headed young hooligans to do his dirty work. And he was silly enough to leave clues to his little line in illicit drugs sitting there in full view last time I called by—"

He took the list of names and addresses, all but two gave Winville addresses and those two put down Japana, then he handed over a receipt, said, "Night all," and went out. Hanging round outside was pointless. Eric Kramer certainly spoke to his 'class' again but as he spoke this time in Afrikaans …

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The usual Christmas cheer began sprouting everywhere. But as Fiona decided she could only handle a very quiet Christmas Dennis agreed to lunch at Rae's, then drinks round at the Barnards' in the late afternoon, along with various of their friends such as the Pounders. Her mother and her mother-in-law, both willing to come if she would like any help, had been put off until after February. She thought she might prefer help with a new baby … or, if not help, then their chance to enjoy their grandchild.

Mavis had shared the delightful little story of the film crew trying to get old Mervyn Pounder 'to dress the part' for his interview about the long ago prickly pear infestation. They hoped to make him look like a character out of Steele Rudd, a sort of 'Dad' in braces and old serge singlet and battered hat. His daughter Elaine had urged him to dress 'nicely' in his best suit and tie and polished lace-ups. But Mervyn was having none of either image. Instead of allowing himself to be meekly bullied into doing what the clever young professionals from Brisbane wanted he called up reinforcements. When they came round to film the interview they found themselves facing six elderly men in comfortable cardigans and old shoes.

After a first startled moment the interviewer, a woman called Cathy Le Pont, and the film crew led by Calum Hill realised they had been handed a wonderful scene on a plate. Because the old men once they loosened up were far more lively and loquacious in a group than they ever would be treated formally as a one-on-one interview. Two hours later they were still reminiscing. With only the occasional gentle nudge to get them back on track when they strayed Le Pont realised she had the heart of her documentary. With each other to bounce old yarns and memories and events off the impact of the prickly pear on people's lives seemed to come alive. What they had chosen to wear was irrelevant …

But it wasn't Christmas or film crews or even female relatives who were giving Dennis Walsh some of the hardest questions to answer. He rang Sam Hussein, who was now staying in Ali Deane's flat in Winville and planning to return to Brisbane soon, to tell the young man that he had a

line on his attackers. “No wonder the bastards didn’t say a word. They would’ve given the game away.” Sam didn’t sound very interested but he said he was planning to come out to Buckton in a couple of days to pick up all his remaining things left in the house. Noel and Mavis had come round to check his car and take it to Winville for him. But it wasn’t really Sam who was his concern, he accepted that the young man would not be returning to Buckton, nor was it Ray Gould’s failure to come and check out the black ute in the creek before Noel winched it up.

In the end he decided there was nothing to be gained by waiting round for Michael Hull to stop giving him the occasional speculative look and make contact; he picked up the phone and rang the magistrate one evening at home. “Mr Hull? I think you’ve got something to tell me. So would you like me to come there—or you can come here if you like.”

“Something to tell you?” The direct approach did not seem to sit very well with the other man.

“Yeah. Just off the top o’ my head I’d say it might have something to do with the Neurand Trust. On the other hand you might be wondering why a lot of potential cases never come to court. You might be wondering if there’s a fly in the ointment when it comes to justice and all that stuff. I don’t want to pre-empt your confession. And there’s a good chance you didn’t realise there are some people better not mixed with.”

There was a long silence. Then the magistrate said calmly, “I’ll be in Buckton in about an hour.”

“You’d better come round to my place behind the station. Run your car into the drive. More private that way.” He didn’t know what Hull drove but it probably wasn’t a beat-up old station wagon.

Fiona spent some nights round at Rae’s, not least to get a quiet night undisturbed by the phone, but he also liked to say it was so she could catch up on all the gossip that Rae peddled with such zest and profligacy. Tonight she was with him. But she said quietly, “Would you like me to leave you to him? I don’t mind an early night.”

“Just say hello while we get him a coffee or something. I’d like a witness to his presence in my house. Then you can leave him to me. I don’t think he’s going to find it any too easy.”

This might be so but Mr Hull as he came in and shook hands with Fiona showed no sign of discomfort. But then thirty years on the bench and hearing some of the more bizarre manifestations of human nature had helped him hone a look that gave little away.

Fiona poured coffee and invited him to help himself to cake. Then she said politely, “I’ll leave you to your chat. Goodnight,” before going out and leaving the two men to talk in the kitchen.

“You might as well leap straight in.” Dennis sat back slightly and waited.

“I expect you already know that Olivia Hoysted went to Eric Kramer and asked him to help her set up a trust for her two boys. She knew she was dying. Eric was a colleague of her father’s. She said he had been a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church there. I don’t know what arrangement he made when he came here and took over the church. She didn’t say in so many words but we had all heard rumours about Sam Hoysted’s desire to own every business larger than a corner store—and that most of them were not good decisions. Sam was, if you’ll pardon the expression, like a boy with a new toy. He wanted to own everything. And he got Gavin to set things up in the most extraordinarily convoluted ways. One business would buy another and something else would enter into a fifty-fifty agreement with something else. Gavin didn’t mind. It was more work for him and I assume it helped avoid some tax.”

“You mean—Gavin Whittaker?”

“Yes. Olivia approached me and I agreed to be one of the trustees. But it was Eric who approached Doug Towner and Gavin and asked them not only to be the trustees but to do the day-to-day decision-making. I knew Doug and Gavin were close friends of Sam’s but I didn’t see a problem with that. The boys were very bright, very interested, and Olivia had set it up in such a way that they had some say in the decision-making. She said she wanted them to know how to handle money sensibly.”

He sipped his coffee. “I knew I was mainly there to make everything look ultra-respectable but I did try to keep an eye on what was happening. But I soon realised that was impossible. The trust was buying and selling huge amounts per week. I didn’t have the business knowledge or the

time to really keep the necessary watch over things. And as you know Sam married again and I heard some rumours that things weren't the best in that household."

"In what way?"

"I suppose it is academic now. But I think she found herself in a very uncomfortable sandwich. She had trained as an accountant and was an intelligent woman to boot and she found herself in the middle of a kind of free-for-all. Sam wanted her skills but he didn't want her trying to impose some sense and probity on everything. I don't know what exactly what went on in that household but she looked increasingly thin and worried."

"And how did you all as the trustees get along with her?"

"I felt I should resign. I did not feel I could discharge my duties properly. So I suggested that she be invited to take my place as a trustee. The others vetoed that. I felt more and more uneasy and in the end I went ahead and resigned anyway. They didn't appoint anyone to take my place. Doug and Gavin continued to run the trust. I am not sure just how Eric saw his oversight role. But I heard he had started a program to urge more South Africans to come here. If they brought money and skills I did not have any problem with that. And the two boys I think had their own agenda. I really don't know. But Doug, every time I would meet him socially, would start mouthing off about the little gits and how they would end up wasting all the money. I never found out what he really meant."

"The two Hoysted boys set up Bruloder Inc and insisted that the trust buy out their father's operation of Japana when he went to prison. I s'pose it was their way of saying he was yesterday's man and they didn't want him to interfere." Walsh shrugged. "I haven't got all the connections worked out. But I think those boys made sure that Doug and Gavin and Eric were left to grimly hang on to the tail of the tiger. Maybe you were wise to get out when you did. But I don't think you can walk away from the mess. The boys wanted to make sure that everyone else was compromised. That way their trustees could not veto their wishes or go to the authorities. They effectively gained control over their trust but could not be held responsible for anything it did. Something like that."

"Dennis, I'm not sure what you're saying. Are you suggesting both Doug and Gavin are involved in something criminal?"

"Of course. Why did you send fruit to my constable? You knew that there would be no conviction, not with Kramer and Towner pulling the strings. But there's something you don't know. I heard on the grapevine last night that the body of Adam Rogers has been found in a shallow grave in bushland south of Brisbane. Man walking a dog. Police pulled in the Hoysted boys for questioning this morning. For all I know they're dobbing you all in as we speak." He didn't see any need to mention that he'd given Ashley Turner at Missing Persons his information on the Rogers-Bruloder connection …

"I don't understand. Why would they want to hurt Adam Rogers?"

"You could always ask Doug for chapter and verse. Adam Rogers admitted to killing the boys' hero. Hendrik Bruloder. Whether Rogers went there to blackmail them, or ask for help, or simply didn't realise their connection … I'm only a simple country copper. I can't keep up with all these devious minds."

Not even that rather pathetic little red herring … if Rogers was alive when he left the Farm Stay Centre …

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Fiona had always seen herself as an outsider in Buckton; separated from most people's interests by her position in the bank, her background, her ideas and attitudes and interests. She had also come to accept that she would never belong here. So it was touching in the weeks leading up to Christmas and her increasingly obvious pregnancy to realise just how many people wished her and Dennis well. Faced with the dismal business of Hilton Browne at the bank, and she had begun to refer to him as 'The Old Man of the Sea' who would cling to their backs for ever, it buoyed her to know that many people felt that the bank had not given her the support and respect she deserved. And there were unexpected things. Mrs Applegarth and her elderly aunt Bee Lockwood, on a day's outing from Parrvilla, came up to her one evening outside Rae's boutique and wished her well. Old Miss Lockwood gave her a sharp scrutiny before saying, "They were quite right, all the people who

told me you were beautiful, but then anyone with those eyes would always pass as beautiful." Fiona wasn't quite sure how to respond to this except with her kind smile. And Mary Pacey, Mavis's aunt, sent a soft toy and Ailsa Grant gave her a little set of embroidered pillow slips and sheets. Mavis herself dug out her son's long-forgotten cradle to see if Fiona would like to refurbish and use it.

But when she shared some of these nice little gestures with Dennis she often found him only half-listening. Perhaps it was too much to ask that he would take more than a brief moratorium from his raft of issues. But a couple of days after the magistrate's visit he said, "Would it bother you if I lose my job?"

She looked at him in surprise. "Is this 'a man's got to do what a man's got to do' sort of thing? You know I'm with you all the way. But I hope it won't come to that." He nodded and seemed to sink back down into his reverie. Doug liked to accuse him of charging people first and looking for some evidence later; so maybe it was time to do just that.

She wasn't there when he walked into the station at Winville around smoko next morning. But the people who *were* there remembered the event till their dying day. Stephanie noticed he looked grimmer than usual as he came in and her 'good morning' died on her lips. Dennis never deviated in his line to DI Towner's desk. He stopped. "Stand up." Doug Towner was not in the habit of obeying a lowly station officer but he did stand, not least because he felt himself at more of a disadvantage with Walsh looking down at him.

"Douglas Towner, I am arresting you on charges of fraud, theft, perjury, conspiracy to commit a crime, obstructing police, and being an accomplice to murder. The list may grow. You do not have to say anything—"

It wasn't only Doug Towner who finally grabbed wits enough to say "What the fuck—" Greg Sullivan started with, "Have you gone mad, Dennis—" Even Stephanie gave a little gasp and put her nicely-manicured hand to her mouth.

Dennis looked round the growing crowd. "You all knew, didn't you? You knew that nothing was being investigated properly. You knew Doug was closing down or obstructing every investigation that had even the slightest connection to the Hoysteds, the Neurand Trust, Japana, Bruloder, Caritas, Eric Kramer, or any of the Hoysted businesses. You knew I was running myself ragged out there trying to get dangerous people investigated. You knew I had to try and circumvent Doug to get search warrants. You knew massive amounts of drugs were being produced. You knew Eve Rogers and Sandra Hoysted were being abused."

Greg Sullivan shook his head. "That isn't true, Dennis. Doubts aren't the same thing. And why are you here now?"

"You want to know? Doug knows already. Police suspect the Hoysted boys of murdering Adam Rogers. But they did a deal to get police in Brisbane to back off by the look of it. Get them for Rogers—and they'll dob the lot of you in. And not only you. There's Jimmy Garcia out there floating round—and God knows how many others have got their nice big backhander from Doug and the Neurand Trust. I think Rogers is a nasty little pervert. But I have a simple philosophy. A crime is a crime. So I thought it was time I got in first instead of bringing up the rear as per usual."

"You can't charge Doug," Ray Gould finally ventured. "He's done nothing wrong."

"Same as you never bothered to turn up to investigate a serious accident. Same as I couldn't even get a few sets of fingerprints and a blood stain properly checked. Same as I had to go looking for two missing men myself. Now, I've got a lot of paperwork to be getting on with. So you'd better clear a desk for me. And in the meantime," he handed over a photocopied list, "I want every man on that list brought in and interviewed in regard to the attack on Constable Hussein. If you had half an ounce of decency you would all have been clamouring to get justice for a decent young lad—instead of doing fuck all."

Ali Deane had come in quietly during this and was standing unnoticed at the back of the group. When he glanced briefly in her direction he saw she had tears in her eyes. But he wasn't about to make any exceptions. "Now, I'll need to subpoena all of the financial records for both the Neurand Trust and its crooked trustees and beneficiaries. And a couple of you better go round to Hoysted House with a search warrant and clean the place out and put the Millers in some sort of protected witness program. No one who was innocently involved with any of this is safe."

He looked around and beckoned Greg over. “You’d better get on to headquarters. Tell ’em to take the Hoysted boys back into custody. Even if they didn’t kill Adam Rogers they may not be safe. If anything happens to those boys I gather their money goes to Eric Kramer, Douglas Towner, and Gavin Whittaker. Instead of just creaming off their take year in year out they get the whole pot of gold. Unless Sam Hoysted can find a way to stop them. It’s probably just as well that Kramer and Doug here never bothered to read the trust deed as closely as Whittaker and Hull did. And just as well that Whittaker and Hull, even if they’re going to have to answer some very serious questions, were not keen on physical violence.”

As he drove home five hours later, Dennis Walsh felt a great sense of weariness. But for the first time in months, years even, he thought it might be possible to clear out the truly criminal and go back to chasing the Goodricks and keeping a weather eye on Artie and hoping the Maxwells would drag themselves out of the mire and that Paul Pickering would continue to keep a low profile. And in between it might be possible to relax some evenings and enjoy this special time in his life.

After he’d told Fiona and Rae and Kieran and Jon Dundas and Matt Holloway what he’d done, over a quiet dinner at Domenico’s, he felt Fiona’s hand slip across under the table and take his briefly. But it was Kieran who said, “Well, I think it’s time for a few toasts. To a long stretch for friend Doug. To a lovely peaceful Christmas for us all. For a beautiful healthy baby in a few more weeks. For some decent summer rain. No, that’s a wish still … ”

“And to all the people who have died because they happened to meet the wrong people at the wrong time.” Dennis raised his glass. Then he beckoned Bill and Anna over to join them. “You might like to help us remember them too. Frank Obidini. Sandra Hoysted. Eve Rogers. Even young Sam Hussein who is going to take his courage in both hands and come back to Buckton.”

Tears sparkled in Fiona’s eyes as she raised her glass along with the others. But she knew he was under no illusion about the amount of work ahead of him. It might take years to sort out all the tangled affairs and fraudulent dealings … And no guarantee he could get the help he needed to do the sorting …

It was just as well she wasn’t there to hear Rae say to Kieran as they went home later: “Do you know Dennis really hasn’t got such terrible table manners, after all, though I don’t suppose he matches up ti Fiona’s mum’s standards” or Kieran’s reply, “I don’t know where you got this idea he’s some sort of Neanderthal escaped from his cave. I’ve always seen him as a pretty decent bloke. He just can’t be bothered with all the frills you think are so important. But seems he gets results.”

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Fiona rang the station one late afternoon. The last few days had been exhausting, the temperature hovering around thirty-eight degrees, the glare and dust wearing her down. The summer had managed a couple of thunderstorms but nothing sustained. She had been spending more time round at Rae’s flat because Rae had put in an air-conditioning unit. But the only person who probably truly understood how she felt was her mother-in-law.

“Dennis, I’ll need to go soon. Can you get away or shall I ring Rae?”

“I’ll take you—” It was strange to hear him suddenly just less than calm.

“I’ll come round in a couple of minutes.” She put the phone down to breathe through the next contraction. Then she picked up her handbag and went out to her car, her hospital bag already stowed in readiness, and drove round to the station and changed to the passenger seat for the long drive to Winville. She did not trust his old station wagon; nor was it as comfortable. She had rung Alistair Thompson to let him know she was on her way. Although he had at first been a bit dubious when she talked of wanting as gentle a birth as they could manage he had come round to supporting her. That, she thought, was the advantage of an older man. He no longer had an ego or a career to get in the way. And he took the time to genuinely listen. Perhaps it was as well for everyone that she had not stayed with Dr Kamala Davis. “If there’s no sign of any complications,” he had said. And although she had grown increasingly tired and listless in these last few weeks that was natural.

At least it was a reasonably good road. At least there was hardly any traffic. At least they hadn’t struck the hospital in the middle of their busiest time. And the nursing sister who escorted Fiona away and left Dennis sitting feeling vaguely superfluous and out of place said briskly, “It shouldn’t be long.” It. Just for a little while longer this mysterious new life would be ‘It’. And then

they would begin to deal with the whole new person who had lived so secretly but so vigorously, the unknown guest at all their highs and lows over the last nine months …

He tried to remember back to how he had felt waiting on the birth of his little daughter all those years ago. But it had been treated then as purely 'women's business' and he only got to hear hours later when the baby was clean and wrapped. He thought this sense of inclusion, though daunting, was much nicer.

Yet to sit with Fiona for the next two hours and watch her suffer was hard. He knew she had done everything she could to prepare herself. He knew she was brave and possessed of a stoic persistence. He knew she wanted everything to be as simple and natural as possible. But it wasn't a lot of help to *him*. He had been involved in other people's traumas and sorrows and violent deaths … but nothing quite prepared him for this sense of being unable to take away the pain from someone he would protect from every hurt if he could …

And then the baby as though suddenly saying 'this hanging about won't do—let's get it all over' came with a last slippery rush and a first definite bellow. Dr Thompson simply wiped the squirming little creature and laid it down on Fiona's stomach so its weary mother could have her first glimpse. And then to everyone's surprise the newborn baby as though already at home in this strange new world began to snuffle and worry its way against its mother's breast. Fiona had secretly agonised for months that she wasn't a 'natural mother', that she really wouldn't know what to do with a baby, that she hadn't grown up surrounded by female relatives and babies and growing young children, that she would be stiff and awkward. Now, without needing to think, she found herself cradling the little naked body against her and pressing a nipple up against that seeking mouth. She felt it latch on with a sudden confident draw.

"Well, well," Alistair Thompson said cheerfully, "you don't often see *that* happen. But it's a good start to life."

Fiona, still feeling too weary and overwhelmed to talk, took Dennis's nearest hand and brought it over to rest lightly on the baby's still damp head with its little fuzz of pale brownish hair. Only Sister Uniacke of those there thought in religious images; afterwards she said to various people—"Do you know, it was like a benediction" …

Raelene Perry found the evening alone over-quiet and faintly worrying. It still seemed hard to believe in Fiona, with her style, her reserve, her slender beauty, as a mother. Kieran was away at a refresher course for extension officers at the Agricultural College in Gatton. There were other people she might invite round to share this waiting with her. She liked many people and had many friends. But she found, after all, she did not want to share it.

And Fiona was …

Of course everything would go to plan. Of course there would be a lovely healthy baby at the end of it all. Of course there was nothing to worry about … But in the end she went over and poured herself a stiff drink.

It was nearly eight when the phone rang and made her jump. It was Dennis. "I thought you'd like to know. A lovely little girl … well, not so little. Eight pounds."

"Dennis, how wonderful! Congratulations. Did everything go okay?"

"Well, it was the hardest thing I've ever sat through. And I was only doing the sitting. She's pretty exhausted but she'll be fine in a day or two. No complications, the doctor says." He spoke a little more about Fiona and the baby and then, unexpectedly, he said, "At least I was there for her this time."

Raelene, so tense all evening, found herself relaxing, even becoming expansive in her relief and pleasure. She hesitated, then rose to the occasion. "Dennis, you've always been there for her. I've always known that."

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THE END