COUNTRY CASEBOOK

(Omnibus Six)

By

J. L. Herrera

The characters and events in these novels
are imaginary.
Some of the places exist but the key locations
are fictitious.

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I came at Omnibus Six with a sense of trepidation.
Of course there are characters that go on, seemingly, for ever.
But should they?
Do they lose something in the ageing process?
Or do they grow more 'real' book by book?
I don't know the answers to these questions.
But as Cheryl said 'More please' here they all are again, the folk of Buckton and places roundabout …

For Cheryl …

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Country Casebook: Book Thirty-One

Case No. 1: Don't Miss the Show

Buckton Show was not a major event on Queensland's social calendar but it was a happy little occasion, well–patronised by local people. This year the small Darling Downs show also had the Walsh family back from overseas with Sergeant Walsh wandering round in his official capacity and carrying his small son Robert while his wife Fiona Greehan took their daughter Elise for several rides and to look at the poultry and the ponies and the CWA hall. Robert got to put some balls in a clown's mouth, though without winning anything, and got to enjoy a 'windmill' on a stick. His father also took him through the produce pavilion with its sorghum and corn and barley, its pumpkins, its cauliflowers—and its various local farmers standing chatting. As Dennis Walsh came in he saw one of these men was local farmer Luke Molloy.

"Just the man who might be able to help out—"

Luke didn't rush to say 'Anything, anytime' but he sounded unfazed as he said, "What've you got in mind, Dennis?"

"Young kid called Aidan Walker from Dinawadding. Japana sacked him for dobbing in their manager. I know he's been in trouble as a teenager but he struck me as quite a bright kid—and it took courage to go public about James Hove. I don't know if you're needing a bit of help—or know anyone who does?"

The big Japana feed lots were a constant thorn in the side of the local police. They recruited men from overseas, some of whom seemed to think they were above the law here. Aidan Walker might not have come to the police with information completely off his own bat, Dennis Walsh thought several people there might have pressured him including John Simpson, but he *had* come forward and it had made a major difference. Whether the court case against Hove for the killing of Constable Craig Wrightson at the feed lots would stand up remained to be seen.

Luke Molloy was an energetic progressive farmer with no children of his own but he didn't rush into speech. When he finally did it was to say cautiously, "Well, we just might. The bloke who's buying Norm Jennings' place says he's happy to go on renting the cultivation to us. So it's a fair workload. We took it on more to help Margie and Norm than because we wanted the extra work. So tell him to give me a ring if he's interested."

Dennis moved on, pleased. If Aidan Walker had any sense he would grab the opportunity with both hands. He stopped to talk with local DPI man, Kieran Dobbs, then passed out into the crisp autumn sun again—and almost immediately ran into a detective from the nearby town of Winville, DS Greg Sullivan. "Not trouble, I hope?" Dennis said with a sudden slump to his spirits; maybe the peaceful day was too good to last.

"Purely a social visit," Greg said with a grin on his big square good-humoured face. "Jasmine missed out on going in for Show Queen in Winville because she had the chicken pox so we said why not give it a whirl in Buckton—so here we are." Buckton was using the entrants to put on a fashion show before the final judging so Greg was obviously only planning to put in an appearance just before the announcements were made.

"Well, good luck to her—"

"Fiona's not a judge, is she?"

"No. They prefer to get someone non-local."

Greg nodded. "But I have got some good news for you—"

"Hove has confessed?"

"No such luck. But Brophy has finally got serious about staffing. You'll be getting a constable in a couple of weeks and he's looking for a new man for Dinawadding—and he even took a trip out to Garramindi to talk with Dave Bishop." Sergeant Bishop had been threatening to resign for a while now.

"Strewth! What's brought all this on?" Superintendent Brophy had been talking, muttering anyway, about closing Dinawadding and Garramindi …

"You know when that young fella from Japana, that Chris Harper yelled at Brophy that he had no idea what it was like to be bullied—and Brophy went pale and got up and went out of the room? Well, we all think it has something to do with that. Don't ask me exactly what."

"I heard on the grapevine that Brophy got bullied a lot when he was a kid at school."

Greg's face seemed to clear. "Did he now? Well, that would explain a lot. We all wondered when he got to be such good mates with Hassell—well, if he was a bit that way … you know … but it was more like him wanting to have some big guy to mind his back, that was the feeling I got." John Brophy wasn't exactly small but he was running to fat and there was something about him which suggested a man who didn't quite believe in the reality and permanence of his power. Someone might yet find a way to whisk the rug out from under his feet.

"So the more he looks like doing—the more people will be grateful? Something along those lines. John Brophy saved our station. Hoo-rah!" Robbie, oblivious to the underlying sarcasm, seemed to think this was a moment to join in and did his own little 'hoo-rah!' Yet Dennis thought, regardless of Brophy's motive, getting more cops into these small stations had to be a good thing.

As he left Greg to move on to the main hall to support Jasmine he hoped his new constable would turn out to be a blessing. His last constable Jay Gutteridge had never had his heart in the job.

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Fiona and Elise went in and sat down beside Greg and his wife Narelle and a girlfriend of Jasmine's who was introduced as Bec. Jasmine was an attractive girl though she didn't quite seem to know what to do with her hands and feet and she hadn't chosen the colours and style to show off her long brown hair and hazel eyes to best advantage. But as Narelle leaned over to point Jasmine out to Elise who immediately gave her a wave Jasmine smiled and waved back. It was such a happy outgoing sort of smile that it transformed the young woman and made her slight gaucheness seem merely young and rather charming.

Fiona did not feel she should hope for any particular girl—given that she knew some of them, one of the Thomas girls, young Sasha Gray from the video shop, a couple of young nurses from the hospital, the oldest Mackie girl … But it did strike her that except for Elspeth Mackie all the girls were from the town itself. And from that came the thought that there weren't many young families on farms; they were mostly run by people whose families had left the land or by elderly people without families.

Would farming as a family business eventually disappear with most farms run by contractors or as offshoots of companies with many other interests? It might not necessarily be bad for the land, there were farmers who gave Dennis grey hairs with their cavalier attitudes to soil and water and trees, but it was hard to see how someone who simply came in for a few weeks ploughing or harvesting would really care about each farm …

In the end one of the young nurses was chosen as Show Queen with Jasmine as the runner-up and the Junior Showgirl title went to the youngest Thomas girl, Cherie. Jasmine looked as delighted as the winner. "What's she got in mind as a career?" Fiona leaned over to ask.

"She's got a job in the little gallery in Winville," Narelle said. The nearby town of Winville ran to only one art and craft gallery but it had quite a good reputation. "She'd like to learn more and maybe learn more about … what do they call it?" Narelle turned to her husband. "Curating, I think, and putting on exhibitions and things."

"That would make an interesting career. I would love to see more happening, arts, music, theatre … but one thing she might enjoy is seeing around the old house the Talbots are selling. I went to see inside just out of curiosity—and it's got this lovely Art Deco interior. I always wondered why people paid good money for a house which is really quite plain and ugly outside. But as soon as we went in we could see that it would be an attractive house to live in."

Narelle obviously didn't know what Art Deco was but she said she would tell Jasmine. "You mean that big two-storey place?"

"Yes. At least it's got trees around it to soften it a bit and blend in." Other houses round Buckton were mostly one-storey places often with verandahs and it did look rather out-of-place. A few minutes later Fiona and Elise went out to find a seat in the grandstand for the Grand Parade and, possibly, meet up with Dennis and Robbie somewhere along the way.

She had gone with Elise and a friend Karen Dalton to see around the Talbots' house. None of its occupants had stayed very long so no one had been tempted to give the interior a major makeover; for that she was grateful. The lovely staircase going up to the top floor, the stained-glass windows in unusual designs of pink and maroon on the eastern side, the curious angular niches with black-and-white pottery urns. It would not take very much effort to bring the furnishings back into the period, just removing a few later carpets and curtains and add-ons …

Mr Talbot had been the manager of the co-op store for several years but it had leaked out that he had been having an affair with one of his employees. People round town had largely taken Mrs Talbot's side and he had found himself, not suffering anything so drastic as a cold shoulder (after all, he had the power to employ or sack), but neither had he been invited to take on the various roles he had seen as his due. He had considered toughing it out. But in the end he decided it was time to move on. Whether he could get the money he believed the house was worth was another matter …

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In fact the sale of the big house was quite a talking point around town. How much would it bring at auction? Guesstimates ranged from sixty thousand to two hundred and fifty thousand. It might be worth more as a house but as jobs were hard to come by in Buckton there was little demand for houses of this size. If people came in—as teachers, to work at the Butter Factory, perhaps a job with the Council—they usually rented to begin with before looking round for a modest family home. And the house itself had a curious reputation, not exactly a jinx, more a sense that no one who lived in it stayed for long …

But the discussions on the house's future, the vague hopes that it might bring a 'useful' new family, preferably with lots of money to spend, took an abrupt turning with the news that the house was being bought by a wealthy Sydney man who was going to store his art collection in it. No one knew whether to believe the story or not—until the sign in the yard giving the auction date suddenly disappeared. Obviously the unknown buyer had offered more than the Talbots thought they could get at auction.

"His art collection!" Fiona said in astonishment when Mavis Barnard at the service station told her about the rumour doing the rounds. Buckton wasn't the obvious place to store an art collection. "You mean—he's going to open it to the public?"

"Heaven only knows," Mavis said cheerfully. "I don't think he's planning to live here himself. Got a business to mind most likely. But maybe someone in the family has asthma or needs a quiet country life. Your guess is as good as mine, love. But I heard the art collection is worth a lot of money so he's going to be putting in state-of-the-art security systems. I just hope someone warns him not to get John Goodrick to do the work for him." The Goodrick clan had a reputation round town for helping themselves to anything 'not tied down'. John Goodrick was the go-getter of the big family, always hustling business by fair means or moderately foul. Sergeant Walsh didn't see any of them as truly bad hats—just a constant and unpleasant reality.

Fiona smiled at that. "I wonder what kind of art collection? Old Masters—or the most modern stuff?"

"Well, if he *is* going to let us in to see it I hope it's the sort of stuff most of us like, nice landscapes and portraits of children at the beach and things like that."

Afterwards Fiona thought Mavis was probably voicing the thoughts of many local people. And Fiona, though she might be more open to trends in art than most Bucktonites, wasn't averse to paintings of children on beaches or a 'nice' landscape.

But after the taking down of the sign things seemed to go quiet again. Removal vans were seen backing in to take the Talbots' furniture. A farewell party with a band and a nice supper was put on at the RSL hall for the Talbots. And then the house stood briefly empty and people's

attention was diverted to the new manager at the Co-op and generally assessing him as a man, a manager, whether he might be an asset to the town. Fiona heard from Dennis that he was a man called Roddy Asten and that he had been a manager with one of the big supermarket chains.

"This is only hearsay," he went on, "but I heard that he disagreed with something they were doing, I'm not sure what, and resigned."

"Well, they have a bad reputation for coming into a town, undercutting local shops till they go to the wall, then putting up their own prices when they've destroyed the competition. But if people put cheap prices before keeping local businesses I suppose they can't complain." And people could disagree with management for all kinds of reasons; it didn't necessarily mean they were courageous people blowing the whistle on something.

"Course they can. Never met anyone who didn't enjoy complaining. But I'm not sure I'm any too happy about this bod with his ruddy *art* collection." He made art sound a distinctly iffy word.

"Why? Have you found out something about him?"

"Yeah, I did a bit of digging. It all seems a bit suss to me. Seems he hasn't got a record but a couple of his alleged associates have—for money laundering."

Fiona took a minute to quietly digest the implications of this. Then she said only, "I see."

"Some of 'em spend it via the bookmakers—but some spend it on things, art, diamonds … whatever … and some put it through a tax haven and then back into normal living … "

She agreed. "I know. But it still doesn't explain why he chose Buckton."

"No. I guess we'll just have to wait and see."

*

Waiting round to see wasn't Dennis Walsh's way but he was busy with normal routines while he had no constable to take some of the workload off him. Vans backed in and unloaded things at the big house. The fences were redone. Two dogs, a Doberman and a Labrador were kenneled there. A sign went up on the gate 'Beware of the Dogs'. And a couple moved into the house.

The new man occasionally dropped into the pub but his wife was never seen. Two of the CWA stalwarts, always keen to entice new members, braved the dogs and went to the door to knock. Later Bronwen Applegarth spread it around that the dogs were not as fierce as everyone had been led to believe—though several wits claimed that no self-respecting dog would dare bite Mrs Applegarth anyway—and that the man had simply told them his wife didn't speak English so she obviously wouldn't want to come along to the CWA. To this Mrs Applegarth said tartly, "And how is she going to learn any English if she never gets out and about round town?"

To this the man had reportedly shrugged and said, "Hardly your business, ladies," and shut the door in their faces. Not exactly a convivial meeting. But Noel Barnard at the service station told Dennis that the man's name, seeing he had bought petrol via his credit card, was Graeme J. Albini. And George Johnson, the barman at the Coolibah Hotel, told Dennis that the man had let drop the information that his wife spoke Spanish—or possibly that she *was* Spanish; it had been a noisy night. Bronwen Applegarth and Vera Hopgood also told people that the few paintings they had glimpsed from the front steps were 'dreadful daubs' and not what *they* would describe as art.

None of this added up to anything criminal and Dennis privately debated on whether to try and find out more about either the owner or the caretakers. He liked to know who was living on his patch but he was busy without a junior and not wild about taking on more work. And gossip might well get round to answering most of his questions anyway …

It was Fiona who sparked a different curiosity. One evening she said, "Do you think his wife, if she is his wife, is safe there? She might be shy or unable to speak English—but it may be that he is some sort of domestic tyrant. I wouldn't like to think she is being kept a virtual prisoner. And it does seem odd that he even does the supermarket shopping. Even if she can't speak English—she could surely manage the supermarket?"

"Yeah, it is a bit odd—but not criminal. No one's reported hearing her screaming or crying or anything. Maybe she thinks they'll only be here a little while … but it still doesn't explain why Mr Danny Halpert bought that house … "

"As an investment?" Fiona said drily.

"But it's more likely to go down—not up. If the Butter Factory closes the town'll end up like Dinna—"

"But we *have* got one of the TV networks interested in doing a little doco on the factory. 'The Last Co-op' or something along those lines. It'll be good publicity. And so long as we don't lose any more suppliers … but it did strike me when we were at the Show that there isn't a local dairy farmer under forty … unless you add in Anya Mackie." The factory had pared itself to the bone. It had entered into an agreement with Jake Castley to sell him the factory-owned house he'd been renting for many years, five thousand down and three thousand re-paid per year and no more worries about repairs …

And the competition to design a new wrapper for their butter had been well-advertised. There would be three divisions: Open, Youth, and Under Ten. They hoped to tie in the exhibition of designs to the filming of the short human interest documentary. Fiona and Karen Dalton had raised ten thousand dollars, via local businesses, as prize money and were looking round to find several high-profile judges. Although some people felt it was a criminal waste of money—$10,000 just for a few prizes!—it had made the competition an Australia-wide event. A lot of people who had never heard of Buckton let alone Buckton butter might enter, might be curious enough to put Buckton on their itinerary next time they came out this way. And even if they only bought a milkshake at the café it all helped.

"Yeah. And I can't blame the youngsters for not wanting to take on a dairy farm. It ties you down more securely than any other kind of farming. So who are they going to feature?"

"Well, Cathy Binnie and a couple of the boys who've come back there to work for her. I think that's a nice story, the way some of those kids have rallied round." Cathy and her husband Owen had run a training scheme for delinquent boys for many years. After Owen was killed in a car crash Cathy had given up the training scheme but several of the teenagers had got in touch to ask if they could help. She now employed two of them full-time.

It was something Dennis had noticed; give one kid who's been in trouble a second chance and they'll chuck the chance away; give another kid the same chance and they'll make a real go of it. Even if the short film couldn't save the factory he hoped it would get that message over. Kids deserve a second chance. If they don't take it … then that's their bad luck …

Young Travis Low who'd been to prison had been given more than a second chance by his father; and Travis had treated his father, the job, and Buckton in general with contempt. Graham Low had finally turfed his son out of the local video shop and put in young Sasha Gray to help. Travis after making an almighty fuss had taken himself off to Winville. So far as Dennis Walsh was concerned Winville was more than welcome to him.

Now he said to Fiona, "And what about asking this bod with his art collection if he'd like to be one of the judges for the wrapper competition?"

Fiona was first surprised, then thoughtful. "But does the caretaker know anything about art?"

"Only one way to find out." But after saying that casually he wondered if it might, after all, be time to get serious and check Mr Albini's credentials. As he was said to have come from Sydney Dennis rang the CIB head in Winville, Daniel Wang, and said, "Any chance you could just check this bod for me? His name's Graeme J—don't know what the J stands for—Albini."

"What's he done?"

"I'm not sure if he's done anything. But I'm not quite comfortable with the whole set-up here. I'd like to get in on the ground floor if there's any chance they're using Buckton to hold hot stuff. He's put in dogs, burglar alarms, I see he's now got padlocks on all his gates." The padlocks had gone on since Bronwen Applegarth and Vera Hopgood had visited. "I'm not sure whether it's to keep his wife or girlfriend a prisoner—or to keep all the locals well away."

Daniel didn't sound thrilled at the opportunity to do some digging but said he'd check with New South Wales when he had a minute. "I won't hold my breath," Dennis said to the empty station. "And where the heck is this kid that Brophy's promising—or is he another bit of moonshine?" He had a reasonable amount of respect for DS Wang but he thought Supt John Brophy was a mere time-server and a waste of a comfortable ergonomic chair and a quite decent office.

The news when Daniel Wang got back to him three days later was a … not exactly a surprise, Dennis was half-inclined to lean towards the idea that the whole set-up was iffy … but fairly strong stuff. "Your bod," Daniel said without emphasis, "seems he's got two convictions for GBH … and he's done three and a half years behind bars. Nothing for the last four years so he's maybe got the message."

"Or they haven't tied him to anything? Any chance he's laying low?"

"Over to them now. They know he's here. If they want him—"

"And the GBH? Young women? Pub brawls? Elderly pensioners?"

"I didn't ask."

Maybe Mr Albini had seen the error of his ways. Dennis saw no reason to spread it around town if the man genuinely was determined to keep to the straight and narrow. But he felt it was a question which needed to be tidied up. He got Wang's permission to check a little further. If Mr Albini had a particular spite against refugees or transvestites or some unusual minority he might be better off in Buckton—but if he had whacked an elderly lady or two he didn't want local and usually elderly CWA ladies trying to find a way to get in to say hello to that unknown wife … and the unknown wife might be at risk if she answered back or burnt the dinner …

The answer when he rang Wang's original contact was a puzzle. "Albini," DS Ron Maguire said calmly, "is a nasty piece of work who went into an art gallery in Woollahra and bashed the owner and put him in hospital for six months. I remember being wild about the way they couldn't bring up his previous conviction—because the little shit should've got at least another two years I reckon."

"So the previous case that the jury never got to hear about was what—"

"Well, that's the thing. It was nearly identical. Hold on a tick and I'll pull up the details. But it was another art gallery. But up in Artarmon." While Dennis waited he pondered on this. He didn't know anything about the suburbs of Sydney, other than gossip about Kings Cross and Bondi Beach, so he wasn't sure if there was any significance in the way Maguire had said that. And why would someone go round bashing up art gallery owners? Did he object to what they were calling 'art'? Had he made off with a painting? Or did he just have a spite against the art world?

"Yeah, here it is. The first one was a guy called Henry Montpelier. Same thing. This guy walked in on a quiet day, the owner was sitting at the desk, this guy went over to ask about a picture, next thing he hoes into the owner with a piece of metal he took out from inside his overcoat, might've been a tyre iron, something like that, and belts him round the head, then he just walks out."

"Did he pinch anything?"

"Not that we heard. Not unless both owners weren't leveling with us."

"So how did you get on to him?"

"Both owners were able to give us a good description. He had a birthmark on his cheek, it was quite distinctive."

"And he didn't try to cover it? Now, that is odd—if he didn't intend to kill them. And I'm pretty sure the guy here's got nothing like that. Just looks like a pretty average guy in his forties, going grey, going to pot a bit."

Maguire agreed that it was a little odd. He also seemed to think that as Albini was now well off anything which he might regard as his patch or even his potential patch he wasn't going to ponder on the oddness. Dennis knew the feeling well, the hope that a bad hat would up stakes and move on, but he thought Maguire could stir himself a little before he put Albini out of his mind. "Could you get me copies of anything you've got on him. And a mug shot. There's just a chance this is a different bloke. But if it's him I'd like to get some warning. Buckton's a bloody strange place for some multimillionaire to dump his art collection—and seeing we've never set eyes on this Halpert guy I'd like to know how he connects up to Albini."

Maguire said he'd do what he could. Dennis then put the whole thing to one side. Dealing with a thug was one thing. Being expected to know something about the art world was quite another. And he had a horrible presentiment that trying to understand why Halpert had sent Albini, his wife, and some paintings to Buckton would end up requiring him to understand something of

what was going on in the art market. Because, unless he was jumping to a completely wrong conclusion, both those bashings had the hallmarks of someone wanting to scare and frighten and … influence …

*

Constable Kelly didn't hurry round to the station the minute he drove into Buckton. He attended Mass at St Augustine's on the road in from Dinawadding. He got himself invited to lunch by Father Meagher. He felt welcome and comfortable in the house there with Meagher and old Father Colgan and the tart presence of Carmen Cavanagh. It was John Colgan who said drily, "Is Dinny Walsh waiting for you?"

Brent Kelly had not been enthusiastic about his first posting to a country station after working in the heart of Brisbane—and someone had made it worse by saying, "Well, you have drawn the short straw! They call the bloke there 'the Ogre of Buckton'—he'll chew you up and spit you out, most like." For Kelly, not very confident or happy in his chosen career, this was a grim thought to carry west-by-north-west on the long drive.

"What do you mean—the ogre?"

"That's what they call him. But you'll have to wait and see, won't you?"

To Colgan he said, "What is Mr Walsh like? Is he Catholic?"

"I've never head of him going to any church," Father Meagher said mildly.

"Dinny Walsh is a pagan," Colgan said with his sardonic grin. "But don't let that worry you. Now, d'you want to ring him from here—or go round and check in?"

"I guess I'd better. I have to start work tomorrow."

"Well, let me give you a bit of advice then." But the old priest didn't rush on immediately. "He'll expect hard work, initiative and—" He looked across at Michael Meagher who nodded and said quietly, "And integrity. Never try to hide anything from him. It won't work."

When the young man drove away, primed with directions for the station and the Walsh home, if Dennis wasn't in the station on a Sunday afternoon, Colgan said to his colleague, "Why did you invite him round for lunch?"

Father Meagher didn't respond immediately.

"A lost sheep—was that the feeling he gave you?" Colgan went on.

"A little. But it wasn't that. I was curious, I'll admit that. But the more time I spent with him—the more I had the feeling of someone who has taken a wrong turning but can't admit it to himself … maybe it will become clearer as we get to know him."

Later he thought it strange that he never doubted that they would get to know young Brent Kelly much better.

Dennis was in the station when he went in; he had to be in court in Winville first thing on Monday morning and had several exhibits to pack ready to go in the car for the long drive. He was tempted to say "About time" but it wasn't Kelly's fault that Brophy hadn't pushed to get him here sooner. Instead he just said, "Good oh, I need a hand. So whack your bags in the flat and come and give me a hand getting these boxes into the car. It'll be one less thing to do tomorrow."

Fiona had done the flat out and stocked the frig and put a couple of op shop books and magazines on the kitchen counter. He put his bags down and looked around. He had lived at home in Brisbane and although he was used to cooking and washing for himself he wondered how well he would manage now that he would be completely independent of any home 'comforts'. The window looked on to a bit of dry grass and a row of trees and he could see a little of the backs of the houses that fronted the next street over. At least he was unlikely to get lost in Buckton but its dryness and brownness were hard to warm to. As he stood a minute looking round the small space he felt a deep sense of loneliness and loss.

But he came out and helped Dennis and got shown round the small station. Then Dennis said, "I'll get along home now for a while. I'll put the phone through to my house but it'll be your responsibility next week. If you need a meal this evening and don't want to cook the café and the pub are open of a Sunday night."

"I'll be okay."

Fiona and the children were curious about his new constable when he got home and told them he'd arrived. "And I only understand one word in ten," he said drily, "but I'll get used to it, I guess."

"You mean—he really is Irish? Not just a name like the rest of us?"

"Belfast, I'd say."

Fiona, with her quick ear, had not felt attracted to the cadences of Northern Ireland when they'd come from Scotland across to Belfast before getting the train south. She had much preferred the accents of the Irish midlands where she'd done some searching for the background of her ancestor William Greehan and they had both liked the softer brogue to the west as they headed for Shannon airport and their flight to Canada on their round-the-world journey during Dennis's long service leave.

"I wonder what has brought him all the way here?" she mused.

"The Troubles, maybe. So let's hope he's left them firmly at home."

"Catholic?"

"Sure to be." He was about to go on to something different when a thought came to him. "That Albini buzzard—I wonder if he ever goes to church? And if his wife is Spanish—does she want to go—and he doesn't let her?"

"I suppose it's not the same—now that the service isn't in Latin. But she would understand most of it—not the sermon but all the routines. I wonder if Father Meagher has thought of calling round?"

"Can't get in now. He's padlocked all the gates and the garage." The old garage in which Mary Tripp had died of carbon monoxide poisoning more than fifteen years ago had been pulled down and a big two-vehicle garage put up. So far as anyone knew it only contained Albini's Camry.

"But he would answer his phone, surely?"

"You know something—I think that's a bloody good idea."

Fiona looked at him in puzzlement. "To get Father Meagher to ring him?"

"To get all these folk that want to get in touch—ring him, write to him, drop things in his mailbox—remind him that this is a country town and people expect a bit of give and take."

She wasn't certain that everyone in Buckton did expect that. But many new arrivals *did* make an effort to support local organisations, local businesses, local events. "Yes, you could ask George to drop in a sample copy of the *Buckton Bugle* … and the op shop has now done a leaflet on what kind of help is available locally for people doing it hard. But it does seem strange that no one has even seen her, not even to come out to check the letter box or do things in the garden. Maybe she's blind or deaf or something."

"Then why not say that?"

"Perhaps because people might be extra sympathetic and want to invite her out?"

He wasn't sure that this would be most Bucktonites' immediate response but he let it go.

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Constable Kelly had the station to himself on Monday morning but to his relief he had no phone calls and only one visitor; young Sasha Gray called in about getting her P plates. He was deeply grateful to have a quiet beginning and a question he could answer. He spent time looking through the store room and the current paperwork and went on the computer to see what was already there. So far as he could see it was mainly used as a glorified typewriter, mainly letters to be sent, reports, and information received from Winville. From there he went on to the filing cabinet and looked through the labels; then the shelf of manuals and directories, then the office drawers. In one he turned up a photograph of a beautiful woman. He wondered if she was local …

He checked the morning's e-mails and walked along to the Post Office to pick up the station's mail. Buckton now had a delivery service but Dennis had stayed with the post office collection partly because he saw it as safer and partly because it gave him an excuse to be downtown of a morning and having a good look around. The postmistress, Judy Bilton, was friendly and helpful and sold him a map of the district for his own use and stamps for the station's use. On his walk back he called into the Bank of the Darling Downs and opened an account. His new boss had told him to

start out by patronising everything he realistically could as a way to get to know people and their likely problems.

It was Eve Binnie who came over to the counter to help him. When he had completed the paperwork for the new account, Eve hesitated then said, "Are you very busy today?"

"Not so far. Is there a problem?"

"Could I come over at lunch? It's not exactly a problem—but it's getting me down a bit."

"Sure. I should be there. The boss has gone to Winville but he'll probably be back by then." Eve wasn't sure if this was comfort or not. She thought Walsh would treat anything she told him seriously but she always found him a little daunting. On the other hand she knew nothing about the new constable and whether he might be helpful and discreet …

Kelly had only been back at the station for about ten minutes when the door tinkled and an attractive woman came in. Brent Kelly looked up, primed to give the standard greeting, and then his mouth dropped open. It was the woman in the photo in the drawer. She came over to the counter and gave him her warm smile. "Hullo, you must be Mr Kelly. I hope the flat is okay?"

"Sure … it's fine. C-can I help you?"

"No, it's just that Dennis left his sandwiches behind." She handed over a lunchbox. "He was in a hurry to get to Winville, I think. I'm Fiona, by the way."

When she went out again he pulled himself together and tried to banish the horrible feeling that he had spent half their conversation with his mouth hanging open. And could she really be the boss's wife? He had expected some tough hard-bitten countrywoman, all leathery and sharp, not this graceful woman with her lovely eyes and soft voice. It somehow seemed all wrong but he couldn't decide what he meant by all wrong …

And he hadn't thanked her for stocking his flat and making it look comfortable; the thought made him writhe inwardly in embarrassment. And she was so much like his dream woman. He had spent his last posting in and around Fortitude Valley and he had come to dread the big busty raucous aggressive women who yelled taunting things after him or tried to compromise him. The other men there couldn't understand his reluctance. On that beat there was endless trouble, fights, dealing, underage girls and all the rest … but as one sergeant had said to him "You won't get the same chances anywhere else, son, so stop behaving like a ruddy prude."

He couldn't say to the men there that he had no intention of having sex before marriage and certainly not with the women he saw regularly … he wasn't even sure he could say it to Dennis Walsh, to anyone …

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Eve Binnie was an attractive woman, tall and willowy, in her late twenties. She dressed quietly and conservatively for the bank but her clothes suited her. Young Constable Kelly thought she would be very efficient, even mildly intimidating. She in her turn saw a not very prepossessing young man, tall certainly but over-thin and with his sandy hair cut much too short. It wasn't that longer hair would hide his prominent ears but they would be a little less noticeable. He still carried a crop of summer freckles and his best feature, his greeny-grey eyes, were set a little too close together. Later she wasn't quite sure why she had immediately felt sorry for him; after all, she knew nothing about his personal life and she knew from experience that most of the stories about Dinny Walsh chewing up and spitting out new constables simply weren't true.

She sat down in the interview room and said briskly, "It's about my ex-boyfriend, Boyd Singleton, and, well, not to put too fine a point on it—he's stalking me."

"And you want him stopped? You could take out a restraining order, you know."

"I might be able to. But everyone knows the Singletons and I'm not sure they would believe me."

"Maybe if you could go back to the beginning—I don't know anything about your situation."

She nodded. "The Singletons have a big grain property out past Burleigh. There's Boyd and his parents on the property—his three sisters are all married and living away from there. I went out with Boyd not very seriously for about two years. I know people said he was a catch, that he'll inherit a good farm and all that, but I always had reservations about him. I tried to keep up a more general social life here so he would know I wasn't serious, that I was happy to go out sometimes but

nothing heavy. At the bank we've got Kyle Risby as manager and Janice Low as his deputy. But Janice has applied for the same position in Winville so she can be closer to Ramón Guttierrez, the man she goes out with. So I've been working more closely with Kyle so that I will know what's involved. I don't know if I can get Janice's job if she goes but it looks quite likely. And, well, just working more closely with Kyle … we sort of found we have a lot in common … and we've been out to dinner a couple of times … and someone told Boyd … and he put me on the spot, telling me I had to give up Kyle or else. I said we didn't have that sort of relationship, Boyd and me, and he had no right to be giving me orders. And then I told him it was all finished. I thought I'd rather be without anyone than keep on with Boyd after that."

She sat back and wondered what of that he had actually written down. "I know it sounds a bit tacky," she went on more slowly. "But it's what's happened in the weeks since that is the awful part. He sends really disgusting e-mails to me. He rings me up and makes horrible suggestions and I hang up on him but he doesn't seem to get the message. He sent me a box which looked like perfume or something, a really pretty pink box, but when I opened it it was full of shit. It's really getting me down. But I don't want to embarrass his family or anything—and maybe someone told him stories about me and Kyle which weren't true. That's what Buckton is like—people do spread nasty stories, well, a few people spread stories."

"D'you think it'll just fade away? That quite soon he'll accept that it's ended and move on?"

"I really don't know. Maybe. But now he says he knows I always wanted him and I was just playing hard to get—and this is more of the same. I don't know how to convince him that I never want to see him again. And it isn't nice for Kristin who shares the house with me. I'm scared he'll try and dump some of this aggro on her." Kristin Archer was a teacher at the primary school.

"So you'd like us to have a word with him?" He found the idea of having a 'word' with what sounded like a pretty weird farmer a bit nerve-wracking but sometimes just the arrival of a man in uniform was enough to make someone back off.

"Would you? Just ask him to leave me alone. I haven't been answering the phone for the last week which makes life fairly difficult—but I just got to the point where I couldn't bear the thought of hearing him come out with some more of his disgusting stuff."

"Does Mr Risby know about it?"

"I—I don't think so. I haven't said anything. I wouldn't want him to think that I come as a package deal—me and a whole lot of unresolved problems."

He was just about to say he would check with his boss when he got back when he heard the car drive in and park. "That sounds like Sergeant Walsh now," he wondered if his relief showed. Having a quiet word with someone could sometimes be a quick and simple and virtually costless way to resolve a problem but he wasn't sure that he was very good at having 'quiet words' with anyone. A minute later the door opened and Dennis stepped in.

Eve Binnie stood up. "Thank you, Constable, I'm grateful for your help."

She gave Dennis a slight smile and went out. "Got a customer?" Dennis said drily as he came in and tossed his cap down. His constable described the situation and finished up with, "I said we'd have a word with him? Is that okay?"

"Sounds fine. Get some lunch and off you go." Dennis walked over to the big map pinned on the wall of the interview room. "That's the Singleton property there. You can't miss it once you get into Burleigh and turn right there by the store."

Brent Kelly wasn't used to the fact that Dennis saw things as best done immediately. "You mean—now?"

"Why not. It'll give you a chance to get familiar with that side of your beat. Drop into the store there and check whether they're having any more trouble."

Since Saul Harding had again ramped up his political ambitions and his anti-Asian immigration stance there had been several acts of vandalism out at the small store in Burleigh; the wife of the couple who ran it came from the Philippines. Even his son getting into serious trouble with the police had not squelched Saul; nor, strangely, had it undermined local support for him. People seemed to see troublesome sons as a cross for parents to bear. Saul was planning to run as an Independent at the next state election. Dennis might blame Saul for putting ideas into people's

heads but it hadn't brought him any closer to finding the actual culprits; but then, in mitigation, he had been pretty busy and it was only nuisance stuff …

"And what shall I say to him?"

"She has said the relationship is ended. So it's time for him to back off."

"Sometimes people don't mean it when they say that. Maybe he keeps hoping … " But as he said it he thought it wasn't very likely. Sending rude e-mails was hardly the way to get a girl back.

"He can hope all he likes. Doesn't give him the right to harass someone."

Kelly nodded. "And a lady brought in that lunchbox for you." He pointed to the top of the cabinet.

Dennis nodded but didn't say anything about it. Several minutes later Constable Kelly, unable to stave off the moment of reckoning, got on the road out of Buckton. He still found these wide spaces vaguely confronting. Dry grass along the verges bent under a brisk westerly and he could see a couple of headers at work on the last of the autumn crops—but just what the crops might be he didn't try to guess. His life had been spent with asphalt under his feet and brick and concrete surrounding him. He found the Burleigh turn-off without difficulty and the general store and the turn which took him away from the last of the timber and out on to flat country which ran away to a straight sharp horizon and which made him feel rather lost and puny. It wasn't the ideal state-of-mind in which to tackle Boyd Singleton.

Singleton, he found, as he came up the long lane and parked by a garden gate in the thin shade of a line of affal trees was a large fleshy man with his hair brushed back off his forehead but falling forward slightly over his ears. As he came out to the gate with two large dogs trotting at his heels he also struck Constable Kelly as an impressive man—and behind him was obviously a degree of wealth and status. Suddenly the idea of a quiet word didn't seem so simple after all.

"And what brings you here, mate?" Singleton told the dogs to sit. To Kelly's relief they did.

"I'm Constable Kelly, sir, and we've had a complaint—"

"Really?" Singleton turned and looked around the quiet farm. "What sort?"

"That you are harassing a young woman in Buckton."

There was the faintest flicker of anger then Singleton said genially, "Harassing, eh? That's a new one on me. You mean it's actually a crime?"

Put like this, Kelly wasn't sure how to respond. Sending threatening letters through the mail was a crime. But he didn't think it applied to e-mails. You could get a filter on your phone or have it changed to a silent number … and he hadn't asked how she'd received the box …

"Stalking, yes. But she hopes you will just back off without anyone needing to talk about offences and charges."

"She? I take it you mean Eve?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you can tell Eve she has two choices. She can stop playing hard to get—or she can put her money where her mouth is."

"You don't object to the bad publicity that might cause?"

"Look, mate, I'm not the one that's going to be bothered. But little Miss Evie wants her promotion—and banks don't like their assistant manager's sex life spread all over the front pages."

"I'll tell her—but we would still have to keep a closer eye on you." This came out sounding like mere bravado. The mouse had decided to try a little roar.

Boyd Singleton turned and took a long look round his land then he dropped a hand to his nearest dog's neck. It started forward suddenly. Kelly stepped back. "A closer eye?" Singleton merely sounded amused. "But you're welcome to come out any time."

Then he turned and walked away. Brent Kelly stood there watching his back then there seemed to be nothing for it but to walk across to the car again and drive away. And nothing for it but to repeat the conversation to Dennis Walsh who to his surprise said, "Might be enough, just him knowing we know, to get him to back off. But I don't like the sound of his dogs." Kelly had merely described them. "I heard someone over Burleigh way bought the Hennigers' dogs when they left the district. Sounds like it was this Boyd character. Just tell Eve Binnie to get straight on to us, and I

mean straight, if she has any more problems." The Hennigers had owned several Rhodesian Ridgebacks.

Kelly stopped himself from saying "How should I get on to her?" He had both her home and her work address. And Dennis was asking him about the store in Burleigh … He had hoped to resolve something, make a good impression, on his first morning and instead he was left with an ill-defined up-in-the-air feeling. He would've been surprised to know that his boss thought he had handled the unpleasant character that was Boyd Singleton probably as well as anyone could; he would've been equally surprised to know that Dennis, far from dismissing Fiona's kindness in bringing over his forgotten lunch, saw it as one of the many little things she did for him and which he wasn't sure he deserved …

Case No. 2: More Rumours

Dennis was still in the process of making sure his new constable knew his way around and had a reasonably efficient attitude to his work when they had a visit from a man he preferred not to see. It wasn't that John Duarte was in any way unpleasant but he was a lawyer for the Hoysted family and Dennis always hoped that by some magic waft of a wand the Hoysteds, father, sons, and more distant rellies, would all disappear from his life.

Duarte didn't look particularly cheerful or bursting with bonhomie as he came in; possibly because he hadn't relished the long drive but equally possibly because he couldn't second-guess Dennis Walsh. Buckton's incumbent might have been relatively sympathetic to Sam Hoysted when it was a way to score points off DI Doug Towner in Winville. But Towner was retired now to the Gold Coast and Sam Hoysted remained in jail for the murder of his wife.

Dennis didn't know who had killed Sandra Hoysted—or how or when or why—but he believed there was a possibility that Sam had not got a fair trial because three of his so-called friends were trustees for his sons' large private trust and those same three friends had all played a role in sending him to jail all the while trumpeting their belief in his innocence; Doug Towner had headed up the investigation, Gavin Whittaker had been his solicitor and briefed his legal team, and Michael Hull, then a magistrate in Winville, had committed him to stand trial for murder. Dennis believed all three should have stood aside but that hadn't gone over well; not least because many people believed Hoysted had got a *better* deal by having his friends in there rooting for him. Dennis believed the three men wanted Sam with his greedy irresponsible ways of doing business out of their hair so they could play whoopee with the massive amount of money in the Neurand Trust.

Duarte said he wouldn't mind a coffee and went into the small interview room and opened his briefcase. He accepted the hot drink. He said hello to Constable Kelly without enthusiasm. Then he said wearily, "What a can of worms."

"You can't decide who the bad guys are?" Dennis said.

"I've been through the trial documents with a fine tooth comb. I've been over the ground out at the airport and the creek bed where they found Sandra. I've got both the sons to take lie-detector tests and swear out affidavits. I've got Sam to take a test. Though they said the death is so long ago Sam has probably put it out of his mind anyway. I can't get the Attorney-General to budge on it. So there seems to be nothing for it but to go public and try and whip up a bit of concern. Innocent man in jail. That kind of thing. Always popular on current affairs programs."

"Are they afraid of you pointing the finger at Doug Towner—or simply that, release Sam and they're back to Square One with no other realistic suspect?"

"Both. And part of it is Sam's fault. If he'd jumped up and down and screamed that he was innocent—"

"But he was scared one of his kids might've done it? Yeah. Serves him right. In my book people take responsibility for their own crimes. No wonder those boys are such arrogant little gits—thinking their dad'd do that for them."

"It isn't that simple. But I can see the problem. Clear all the Hoysteds—and it will make everyone look bad. The cops made a major cock-up. The justice system didn't work."

"So what now? What brings you to Buckton?"

"When we go public—it may bring some publicity to you—and Doug Towner isn't going to be any too happy. And I'm told he's still got some clout."

"He's still a trustee for the boys."

"I know. But we've finally got the go-ahead for an independent auditor to look at the books from when the Trust was set up. He's none too happy about that."

"Should've happened years ago," Dennis said grimly.

"Easy to say—but again it was partly Sam's fault. He should never have invited Towner to be a trustee and he should never have agreed to give so much power to Whittaker."

"So why did he?"

"I don't know for certain—but I suspect it was to spite his wife. She knew about trusts, or she knew a lot more than him … "

"But the Trust was set up before he married Sandra."

"I know, but I've since found out that the Trust Deed has been re-written three times, each time strengthening the position of the trustees at the expense of the boys."

"That can't be common practice, can it? Seems a bit odd."

Duarte drained his mug and set it aside but he didn't hurry into a response. "There were other members of the Hoysted family putting pressure on Sam to let them have some say. Sam borrowed several million dollars from his father to buy and develop the land where the Japana feed lots now are. His father wanted the trust to be a purely Hoysted thing, he wanted Sam's brother and his nephew Bryce and God knows who else to be on it. And Sam had his father-in-law, his first wife's father, putting pressure on him. Neumann was a major shareholder in that Ansvar outfit in the US and he wanted Sam to set it up in such a way that they could funnel funds out of South Africa—if push came to shove—and the Neumann family had more money and more clout than the Hoysteds. Sam let his father-in-law have a say on the trustees—and Admiral Neumann didn't know much about Towner and Whittaker and Hull. He just saw them as small town professionals and thought they would be a pushover as front men—and once he finally convinced Sam to sell Japana to the Trust he thought he could do what he liked."

Constable Kelly had heard bits and pieces about the feed lots but he couldn't make head nor tail of this. Later when he said so to Dennis his boss merely said, "Join the club. I'd reckon the bastards deliberately made it as complicated as possible for that reason. But I didn't know there were three different Trust Deeds—"

"And did they live in Buckton?"

"Only the brother and his wife and their son Bryce. They lived in the Talbot house for a couple of years. Now that's a thought … Bryce Hoysted is s'posed to be living in Sydney. I wonder if he's got any connection to that Danny Halpert. A bit hard to connect the Hoysteds with anything arty-farty—they wanted to be seen as the new cattle barons … "

"And—d'you think Sam Hoysted *is* innocent of killing his wife?"

"Sam Hoysted is a nasty piece of work—but—I've always felt a bit uneasy about it all. I can't say more than that. And I hate the thought of Doug Towner … ah well … no point in running to meet trouble … " He thought of leaving it there but it might be just as well to make sure there wasn't a Hoysted-Halpert connection. "God knows where that Hoysted lives in Sydney but we might be able to turn something up if he's got business interests there. You might like to try him through the internet tomorrow."

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Fiona took the children to Winville at regular intervals to have a thorough check-up. Not for her the sort of story Sister O'Brien had passed on; of a youngster going right through primary school with no one, neither family nor teachers, picking up on the fact that he was almost blind simply because the child had got so good at compensating for his poor sight, going into the classroom before the class started and memorising what was written on the board … Kath O'Brien

had smiled rather sadly and said, “Maybe things are better now, things get found out sooner but not necessarily soon enough.” The Walsh children were not likely to fall into this category.

She took them to Dr Kamala Thompson but it probably wouldn’t matter what doctor she saw; they would accept the need to be thorough. Though both children were a little ‘chesty’ in the June weather they came through with flying colours. She worried a little about Robert, not about his health but rather about his unhappiness with other children. Perhaps he was a natural loner but she wondered if something was secretly bothering him that he wasn’t articulate enough yet to understand and express—or that she was too obtuse to pick up on. She asked Dr Thompson whether she thought it might be better to take him out of childcare for a while.

“Is there another child he seems happy with?”

“The little Brumby boy … maybe.”

“And you are quite sure he’s not being bullied? It can happen in childcare, you know.”

“I think, I’m fairly sure they would pick up on it … but perhaps if he just had some one-on-one fun with another little boy … it does get rather competitive there … ” Small children were no less pressing for attention at two and three than children in classrooms.

“It would be worth trying.” Kamala Thompson thought he was an unusual little boy for someone like Dennis Walsh to have. Robert gave the impression, not so much of shyness but rather of living in his own little world. And noisy small children rushing round on trikes and throwing sand with their shovels would not appeal. She found herself wondering what he would choose to do when he grew up …

“I’ll be off from about September till Christmas,” Kamala said with a smile. It wasn’t hard to guess why. Fiona said as they went out, “I’ve got some superceded things. Would you be able to use them?” It was a risk for Kamala to have a first baby at forty or more but she seemed very relaxed and happy about it all.

From there Fiona took the two children to a buffet as a treat and afterwards they went around to The Gumnut Gallery. She and Karen Dalton had arranged to get Patrick Guest, a well-known Brisbane artist who specialised in rather naïf paintings of tropical landscapes and people, as one of their judges for their butter wrapper competition. Her friend Patrice in Brisbane had mentioned him and he seemed delighted to be asked; saying he would be happy to just have his accommodation paid, the rest would be part of his pleasure in judging such an unusual competition. They would have a People’s Choice Award but they needed a second judge and she thought the gallery might be able to make some suggestions.

It was a pleasant low building in large clumpy blocks of white with intriguingly-shaped windows and a slate floor. If it weren’t for the angular walls and windows it would have a little of the cool quiet underground feel of a wine cellar. The main room was given over to an exhibition by a Roma-based artist, rather bleak pictures of arid outback scenes but well painted. Jasmine Sullivan got up from the desk where she had piles of brochures and brought one over to Fiona with her cheery smile. “What d’you think of them?”

Fiona saw several of them had red spots so Winville had not been completely unappreciative. “I think—they’re pictures which would go well on a boardroom wall or a hotel foyer but I’m not sure they’re quite what I would call liveable-with.”

Jasmine didn’t try to persuade her into a different view just saying, “We’ve got some nice things in the other room. They’re all local people.” These were pictures and crafts sold on commission and included everything from traditional macramé and crochet to bark paintings and silhouette cards to strange toys made out of superceded things such as bits from clocks and old telephones; interesting with their sprockets and chains and tiny gears. It also included some more paintings.

The set Fiona found herself drawn to was of pen-and-ink sketches with a little colour wash. She thought they showed great talent. Each one was of a small domestic scene. Clothes blowing on the line. Two cats waiting hopefully by a kitchen table. Another cat on a post by a rather wonky paling fence. An old Holden, bonnet up, and some parts set out on newspaper. A little jenny wren on the handle of a digging fork with the sort of garden, with its cabbages running to seed, which would give a gardening guru the itch to leap in. None of the pictures contained people; more, they

gave the sense that someone had just ducked inside for a cup of tea, maybe to answer the phone, and would be back. But they could be read as memorials to loss and abandonment too. She thought the way the pictures were sketched in, with a few pure clean lines and then key points picked out in soft colours fading out was very attractive.

"These ones, Jasmine, can you tell me anything about the artist?"

Jasmine went over to her desk and picked up a small brochure. "Renata Bingham. She's only come to Winville quite recently. She married Geoff Bingham, y'know, the dentist?" There were a half-dozen or more professional people in a centre over behind the court house. The Walsh family had never been to Mr Bingham but Fiona had heard him praised as a good dentist. The brochure said Renata Baume had trained as an artist in Sydney before marrying and moving to Winville. The brochure then said a little about her art works.

"So there were originally eight pieces?" Fiona looked at the set of six on the white wall.

"Yep. But she said they could be sold separately so two of them are gone."

"I wonder—do you think she might be interested in being one of our judges for the butter wrapper? Do you know anything of her private life? Does she work outside her home?"

"I don't think so. Well, maybe she helps at the practice if someone is sick. But she's got a little boy so I think she's hoping to build up a reputation here for when he goes to school. Something like that, maybe."

"So would I be able to get on to her—or do you think it should come through the gallery?"

Jasmine hoped this interest might result in a sale but she didn't like to push Fiona.

"I could ring her for you and see if she'd mind coming round—or you going there."

"Would you? That would be the best, I think."

Fiona went back to considering the set of paintings and trying to picture them in her house. Perhaps along the hallway by the phone … She had been thinking about wallpapering it. At the moment it was painted a pale cream and these pictures as long rectangles in plain black frames would probably look good against that background. But would they be overlooked there? She considered other places to hang them without coming up with a better alternative.

"Is there anything you like especially," she said to her children. Robbie seemed to like some of the sewn and knitted animals while Elise, unsurprisingly, was wrapped in the peculiar toys. Or perhaps, rather than toys, they were meant as decorations for men who didn't want kitsch in their homes …

Robbie finally chose a giraffe whose yellowish felt body had been marked out by crochet patterns in black cotton, sewn on. It was rather effective—though it might not withstand the usage of a small boy. Elise liked a thing which was vaguely reminiscent of a steam-roller but had all sorts of interesting little gizmos that moved and chugged and whistled and suggested a multi-purpose machine; even if the purposes were not obvious.

Fiona carried them over to the desk and put them down. Jasmine finished her phone call and began to wrap the toys. "And can we take the pictures now—or only when the exhibition is finished?"

"Oh no! You can have them today. It's only the advertised exhibition that has to stay till the end. And Mrs Bingham said she would come round in ten minutes. She sounded interested but I couldn't give her any details."

"Then—while you're wrapping these and the six pictures we'll just duck along to the deli and get a couple of things."

Mrs Bingham proved to be a rather plain woman but with lovely ash blonde hair and a very faint accent. She was obviously delighted to know all her pictures had sold but she took her time to think over the idea of judging a competition. "It will close mid-September," Fiona said, "and the entries will be on display in the hall in Buckton through October and the winners will be announced at the end of October. We're hoping to get lots of publicity for the butter factory."

Jasmine brought them cups of coffee on a tray, and she had conjured up two small plastic beakers of milk for the children; then she went away to chat with the several other people who were wandering around.

"I haven't done any judging before so you would be taking me on trust," Mrs Bingham said carefully. "Have you decided on your other judge?"

"Yes, it will be Patrick Guest from Brisbane. And there'll be a People's Choice Award as well for each age group. Would you like me to leave an entry form with you so you can think it over a bit more?" Mrs Bingham said that seemed sensible. "And could I come out to Buckton one day and just see the venue … and maybe the factory?" It wasn't essential but she could see that a butter wrapper that was beautiful artwork but didn't give any sense of Buckton might not go over too well locally. Waving palms and sea. Or a grand old façade. That sort of promotion wouldn't be realistic.

"Yes. Why not. Just give me a ring when you'd like to come and have a look around and maybe stay and have some lunch with us. I imagine we'll get any number of entries with cows on them—which of course makes lots of sense—but it will be hard, maybe, for one to stand up above the rest."

Renata smiled at that. She hadn't yet given any thought to what the entries might actually be like. "I'll see what Geoff is doing this weekend and maybe we could all come out to Buckton?"

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Sergeant Walsh hadn't expected anything on Graeme Albini any time soon so he was pleasantly surprised when a large packet arrived the following morning. It contained some newspaper clippings, court material, several photos, some background material on Mr Albini, and copies of statements made by both gallery owners. Dennis took out the two photos of Mr Albini alone and a group picture captured at a function. Both mug shots showed clearly a birthmark on Albini's right cheek and disappearing into his sideburns. "Same man?" Dennis said drily and put the photos aside. He needed to catch Albini somewhere long enough to have a good look. The group picture was not a clear shot of Albini; its interest, no doubt, lay with his apparent companions.

Dennis passed this one over to his constable. "Any thoughts?"

"D'you think they might all be Italians, Mafia maybe?"

The function obviously included food and drink though nothing so obvious as a bride and groom and it was interesting for its lack of women. "Might just be a do at the Italian Club or wherever, ordinary importers of olive oil, that sort o' thing." Dennis picked up the background for Albini. "It gives his parents as Giovanni or John Albini and Rosa Albini. It also says he was married with two children but the marriage broke up. So if the marriage broke up—who's the dame with him now? And no one's seen any kids around the place. I s'pose Rosa could be Spanish rather than Italian but it sounds like the wife that left was … no, he told Noel 'my wife *is* Spanish'. So I wonder if that means he's not divorced—or that he's remarried?"

"He might not have been telling the truth."

"Mmmm, well, we'll have to leave it for now. But any quiet moments you get—go through it—see if anything strikes you."

Constable Kelly thought this was unlikely but he said he would. And while he was having his lunch he read through some of the material and made a couple of tentative notes for his boss. And then, as Dennis was still out, and he had brought everything up to date he went on to the internet to see if he could draw up some more information. He had already found Henley Hoysted listed as a 'cattle exporter' and as a board member for Hoysted Holdings but nothing for his son Bryce though it was quite possible Bryce had some involvement in the family business.

Now he tried for the two galleries and found they both had attractive web-sites. But the artists' names meant nothing to him. Danny Halpert seemed to keep a very low profile so how he had made the money to buy his art collection wasn't clear. Possibly he was a sleeping partner in something. Mrs Applegarth's story about the 'dreadful daubs' had done the rounds and now been expanded to all the paintings in the house and people were increasingly willing to believe the whole thing was a big con. But Brent Kelly was bright enough to wonder if that was deliberate. If people thought the paintings weren't worth the canvas they were painted on then they were less likely to think about pinching them.

When Dennis came in from the cold blustery day and said, "Anything?" his junior said, "A message from Winville, there's a con man doing the rounds. He mainly targets older women to get them to sign up to a bogus insurance scheme."

"Okay, pass the details on to George Hickman. He can whack something into the next *Bugle*."

"And I did find something that just might be relevant to Albini. One of those gallery owners said he thought Albini said something about 'this's for turning down that exhibition' before he whacked him. He's very vague as he was out for nearly ten hours. But he says the only proposed exhibition that he turned down, and that he didn't know the artist personally, was for someone called Hidoyono. He isn't absolutely certain that that was what Albini told him and Albini said he never said anything to Mr Montpelier because he wasn't there." Dennis nodded. He had wondered if any of the paintings were stolen but turning someone down might be a good enough reason for revenge. "The other owner doesn't remember anything being said although he thinks he remembers Albini's lips moving."

"That's an odd one. But I guess the mind might play tricks." Dennis finished making himself a hot coffee and brought it over to his small crowded working area. "So is there anyone called Hidoyono?"

"It looks like it. A Christoph Hidoyono. He is a very popular artist in Indonesia and he has apparently got a couple of paintings in the Indonesian Embassy in Canberra. And there's something else. I found a site which says he is very popular with wealthy people in Indonesia like the Suharto family."

"So what has our bit of muscle got to do with a popular Indonesian artist—if it's the same man—and why did those art galleries turn down an exhibition by this bod if he's so popular? You'd best e-mail them both. Even if the other gallery owner doesn't remember what Albini said—he must know if he was ever approached about an exhibition. And where Halpert comes into the mix—I hate to think."

But to Fiona that evening he posed a different question: "Even if all these bods get up each other's noses when they turn artists down and all the rest of it—I still can't see how Buckton comes into it. How many people in Sydney have ever heard of Buckton?"

She smiled at the thought. "Not many, I'd think. I hadn't heard of it either—till the vacancy came up. And I'm a Queenslander. But perhaps the Talbots or their agents advertised the house on the internet?"

"And Halpert bought it sight unseen? Yeah, could be. D'you remember who the agents were?"

"It was a place in Toowoomba, I seem to remember … Darling Downs something … realty or property or something … and an address in Russell Street, I think ... Let me get the phone book and it might jog my memory." She came back a minute later and opened the yellow pages and ran a finger down. "I think that would be it. They don't list a web-site in their ad but they might've gone on-line since this listing went in. I could ring them for you to ask—"

"No, I think it better come from me. I'll ring tomorrow. If they aren't on-line then how were they contacted by Halpert."

"I don't suppose agents grill prospective buyers—they just want a quick signature on the dotted line."

"Still—did he ring? Drop in? Come out to Buckton? See an ad in the paper? They must have some idea. I wondered if it might have something to do with Bryce Hoysted but I can't see how."

"But Danny Halpert must've made his money in *something*—if he isn't an art dealer himself. Maybe that's where things connect up."

"Maybe. I've got Brent on to it, keep the little bugger out of my hair while he's got this thing about you—and thinks I don't appreciate you."

She smiled a little ruefully at that. "I know. He blushes and stammers every time I say hello. But I'm sure he'll get over it … it's probably loneliness, homesickness, being out of his comfort zone, as much as it has anything to do with me." She had not gone out of her way to be kind to Brent, afraid that he might read something else into it. "And he does know I am … taken."

"D'you ever think I don't appreciate you?"

"I know you don't wear your heart on your sleeve … but I do feel loved and appreciated … although you didn't even notice our new pictures in the hall—and it took me nearly two hours to get the hooks in and make sure I had them all absolutely straight."

"Didn't I? I'd better have a look then." The hall wasn't the ideal place for them, it wasn't possible to stand back far enough to take them in as a group, but he walked along considering them one by one and finally said, "Very nice."

"I don't think 'very nice' is in the vocabulary of an art connoisseur." She couldn't help a smile.

"Well then … they're real … without being real."

"That's a very good description. At first glance they're such everyday mundane scenes. But then when you really stop and look you realise it's your imagination that's doing it, they're little more than those few lines and the colour. But they're so well planned and done."

Real … without being real. Afterwards he wondered if it might sum up how he felt about everything to do with the old Talbot house and its harbouring of that supposed art collection.

*

Dennis Walsh, after sending his constable out to tackle several small complaints, made a call to Toowoomba to ask whether they'd advertised the house on-line. The young woman who answered said no, they had advertised it in several Queensland papers. They had got the job of selling the house because Mr Talbot was buying a house through them. Or so they assumed. They had decided to put it up for auction because they weren't sure how quickly a big house would sell in a small town.

"Did anyone else make an offer?"

"We had some interest from the feed lots out there. They said they were looking for a house for their new manager."

"And?"

"We were contacted by Mr Halpert with a better offer. Naturally our client accepted it."

"So what was Japana prepared to offer to get a house for their manager? The last manager lived there in a caravan."

She sounded surprised; perhaps she pictured the manager at least in a comfortable bungalow. "Oh, they were prepared to meet the reserve on it."

"Which was?"

"Sixty thousand. Can I ask why you're asking? Is there something wrong with the house?"

"Not as far as I know. But possibly with the people buying and using it. So Halpert paid over sixty thousand for it?"

"Yes. He paid a hundred thousand."

"Even though he could've got it for sixty-five, most likely."

"Mr Talbot wasn't complaining."

"Then Mr Talbot better hope that Mr Halpert never finds out someone diddled him—because I don't think Mr Talbot would like the sort of men who do business with Danny Halpert."

He heard the sharp intake of breath then the young woman said, "Is this something we should know about?"

"It's not a crime to get the best deal possible. Buyer Beware and all that. And if Mr Talbot didn't tell Mr Halpert the house was up for sale and you're not on-line—then I wonder who did?"

The first answer to occur to him was someone at Japana—but why would they gazump themselves—when there was a good chance they could've got the house for $60,000 or a little more. But Japana was an amorphous concept. Did he mean the people working there, Neumann and Randall Hoysted, someone in Hoysted Holdings … that still didn't remove that basic problem though. Unless Japana's offer was more in the nature of an ambit claim and never very serious. So he left that problem and went on to the next one.

DS Maguire probably hoped he would never hear from Dennis Walsh again but he accepted his thanks and said he hoped the material was useful. "Yeah, could be. You haven't got a wife down for Albini. D'you know who she was and what happened to her?"

"She was Spanish, I think. Couldn't give you a name but he said she'd taken the kids and gone back to Spain."

"He's got a woman here, keeps her a prisoner, and says his wife *is* Spanish. You might like to check that she did leave."

Maguire was not familiar with Dennis Walsh and his assumptions that everyone else was as keen as he usually was to get to the bottom of everything. He said stiffly, “I don’t see that it’s relevant and I’ve got better things to do with my time.”

“Suit yourself. What I really wanted to know is how Danny Halpert made his millions.”

“How d’you know he has millions?”

“Just found out he paid at least thirty-five thousand over the going price for the house here. That doesn’t sound like a bod who minds his pennies.”

“I’ve heard he’s got various interests but as he hasn’t been linked to anything … ”

“What kind of interests?”

“All sorts. A horse stud. Couple of properties. Exporting livestock. Shipping. I’ve never checked so don’t take any of that as dinkum.”

“Exporting livestock? Sheep or cattle?”

“How would I know?”

“Then where to?”

“Dennis, I’m glad to help out a bit but Halpert’s off my radar. If you’ve got problems your end then you’d better get something a hell of a lot more definite before you ask for more help.”

“Well, if you find out anything—let me know. Because people don’t send valuable art collections to Buckton for the fun of it.”

Maguire said several unprintable things as he hung up. Then he tried to put Sergeant Walsh, Buckton, art, and everything else Walsh had mentioned, out of his mind.

*

When Dennis talked of having an old mate in the Stock Squad he didn’t mean someone he kept in touch with regularly but he thought a ring and a bit of a yarn in the evening might help to clear his head, if nothing else. But Dr Sorenson came in and said he had a small problem round at the surgery. It looked like someone had been trying to lever up a window.

Dennis said, “Kelly’s up there at the bakery. I’ll get him to call by and give it a good go-over. It sounds a bit like Artie Kees but I thought he’d given up going round with a chisel making a nuisance of himself. And before you go you might be able to help me with something—is there any way to remove a birthmark from a person’s face?”

Brett Sorenson took it in his stride. He had come to the conclusion that it was impossible to second-guess Dennis Walsh’s likely questions. “Laser treatment. It’s slow and it costs. But it’s the best thing on the market. It would depend on the size of the birthmark and where it is exactly.”

Dennis took out one of the mug shots. “Something like that?”

“Well, it certainly could be done. But you’d be looking at months, years probably for a complete job. I’d have to check whether you could get it done on Medicare. If not you’d be looking at big money.”

After Sorenson had gone out again and Dennis had called Kelly to do a detour to the surgery he sat a minute mulling over this information. Did Albini have money? How much had he been paid to do two jobs for someone—and had that money sat somewhere quiet and unnoticed until Albini could get his face done? And was Buckton meant to take him off everyone’s radar? The man who would resurface in a year or two would be a stranger.

Kelly when he came back to the station said it did look like someone doing some scraping with a chisel. “Then you’ve just got yourself an interview with Artie Kees,” Dennis said grimly. “He’s hard to understand so take your time. Try and find out what he’s got in the way of chisels in the house. If he gives you any trouble tell him I’ll be round to give him a blast. But it’s just possible that someone is trying to get him into trouble—or the window is a diversion and they’re planning to get in another way. If Artie says he didn’t do it and you believe him—ask him if he’s noticed anyone wandering round up there, or with a chisel. He does a fair bit of walking round town.”

Constable Kelly had already heard a few stories about Artie and had seen him at the café several times. “Does he actually try to break in?”

“No, he’s just a bloody pain. He hasn’t got much up here,” he tapped his own forehead, “but it doesn’t mean we can let him get away with his messing around.”

And while young Kelly was trying to get some sense out of Artie, and it might also be that Artie was struggling to understand the young constable, Dennis rang the Coolibah Hotel and got the barman George Johnson. “George, what time does that Albini bloke usually come in?”

“About sixish. Usually just has the one drink, maybe chats to me about the weather a bit, and goes out again. I said why didn’t he bring his missus along one evening but he said she doesn’t speak English. I said she’d soon pick up something—even if it isn’t the Queen’s English round here. But he just said something about her doing what she’s told and getting the dinner on. I s’pose there’s still blokes like that around the place.”

“Course there are, George. Aren’t I s’posed to be one of them?”

George gave that a bit of a snort. Dennis went on briskly, “Well, next time he drops by give me a quick ring and I’ll come round and say hello.”

“He usually sits up at the bar—“

“Okay, just say something like ‘I’ve got your order for you’.”

“Yeah, and what’ll I call you while we’re playing at spies and whatnot?”

“Mr McKay.”

George had a bit of a chuckle over that as he hung up. Graeme Albini might not be the life of the party but he hadn’t given any trouble. Still, George could see that it might be easier to talk to him at the pub than trying to negotiate all the security at his house. And sharp on six he had the pleasure of ringing Dennis and saying, “Mr McKay, your order is ready.” The only trouble was—it made him want to go off into a long snigger—and that wasn’t a good idea with Mr Albini sitting the other side of the bar with a glum look on his face. He might want to be let in on the joke.

Ten minutes later, Dennis turned up and came over and sat down beside Graeme Albini and ordered a beer. Although the stools weren’t crowded in close the large bulk of Maryann Dillon was plonked down on the other side of him. She might almost be enough to send Mr Albini scurrying home to the joys of a quiet evening with his wife.

Dennis paid for his beer and said with the kind of geniality which terrified some people, “Mr Albini, just the man I want. I hope you’re nicely settled in in your new house and no one’s bothering you.” It didn’t manage to sound particularly concerned or friendly.

“Bloody buggers! They never stop ringing me or putting stuff in the mailbox. I’ve already told those old dames to bugger off.”

“And who else—beside the CWA ladies?”

“Those priests. I told ’em I never go to church and I never will.” He took a swallow before saying, “And other people, don’t know who the fuck they are.”

“Probably just local people wanting to be neighbourly. But if it gets too bad you might be able to take out a restraining order—y’know, keep everyone fifty metres from your house, that sort o’ thing.” It wouldn’t stop mail or phone calls, not without something more specific. “But why not open the art collection to the public—then when they’ve all had a stickybeak they’ll probably leave you alone. They’ve all heard that it’s fantastically valuable. You can’t blame people for being curious.”

Albini only scowled at this. “It’s not mine. And it’s not worth much. Couple of thousand maybe. I don’t know where anyone got the idea it was worth something.”

Dennis wondered too. But he had an idea one of the drivers who had delivered stuff to the house had come round here and shot his mouth off. It hardly, when looked at in this cool light, amounted to very much. But Albini might well have been told to play down its worth …

“You know what people are like. Stories do the rounds.” He took one of the mug shots out of his pocket and passed it across. “Like this.”

For a moment Albini seemed to think he was being offered something to do with Buckton, then his face appeared to freeze. After an over-long moment in which Dennis thought it took a professional of long experience not to give himself away when suddenly confronted, Albini said calmly, “And what’s that s’posed to mean?”

Dennis put the photo back in his pocket. If nothing else it had created a small mystery for the pub patrons who had seen the small by-play. “Just curious.”

Albini didn't respond to this, instead he got down awkwardly from his bar stool and headed for the door. Dennis swallowed the rest of his beer, lifted a finger to George, and headed after him. He came up beside him on the long front verandah and said calmly, "Mr Albini, if you want to settle down in Buckton for any length of time you'd be wise to let your wife out. People naturally don't like the idea that she's a virtual prisoner there. And write a short bit for the local paper about the art collection. This is a great place for rumours and stories and you're like a red rag to a bull with all your padlocks and stuff."

"I don't think I asked for your advice." Graeme Albini turned his back on Dennis and headed to his car and got in.

What neither Walsh nor anyone in the pub realised was just how seriously the short conversation and the showing of the photograph had rattled him. He opened his garage door by the remote control, drove in, closed it again—but then he sat for nearly ten minutes trying to decide what, if anything, of this he should pass on. The cool night closed around him and he gradually regained his confidence. Just keep his head down, he thought, no more visits to the pub for a week or two, no chatting in the supermarket, just in and out, scotch any rumours if he could about the paintings being valuable, and wait to hear from 'the boss'.

Dennis sounded quite cheerful when he rang Russ Spicer in the late evening and listened to his news. But Spicer had a simple philosophy: Dennis might be a good bloke to have watching your back, he might have a good knowledge of stock, and his ideas about what a cattle duffer might do next were sometimes spot on—but if he rang out of the blue he was sure to have a tricky question needing an answer. And sure enough Dennis finally said, "Russ, you might be able to help me out." Spicer only gave that a non-committal grunt. "If I said to you—cattle—and Indonesia—what would you come up with?"

Spicer had spent his life in north Queensland and had a pretty good knowledge of landholdings, the changing face of the cattle industry, the new players, but the unexpected question left him floundering for a minute or two. At last he said cautiously, "Buying up stations here and in the Territory. Bakire who's one of Suharto's cronies has got several million hectares—or so I've heard. There's a number of smaller players. And there's cattle being exported there—not big numbers but enough. It's growing."

"D'you know if there's anyone major in the export trade?"

"Not off hand, no. There's the stud side of things and there's the cattle for slaughter. It hasn't raised much interest because the trips are short, not like sheep from down south to the Middle East. They're there in two, three days. But why the interest, Dennis?"

"Don't know really. I'm floundering round here—trying to link up a mysterious art collection to something to do with cattle to something to do with Indonesia. I'm out of my depth. But if you'd just keep an ear out." They talked a little bit longer. Russ was now Inspector Spicer. He had access in ways that Dennis didn't. As he ended the call Dennis Walsh found himself thinking: if I'd stayed would I be an inspector now? It wasn't a bad life …

But as he came in and sat down beside Fiona and said casually "Russell's just made Inspector," it came to him that he wouldn't swop the life that Russ had; not unless he could take Fiona and the children with him. She said, "And you're wondering if you should've stayed in the Stock Squad?"

"A bit, maybe. But I wouldn't have met you." He took her hand in his and then, unexpectedly, lifted it to his lips.

Case No. 3: 'Never Interfere in a Domestic'

Now and then Dennis ran into Father Colgan down town; he thought of saying, next time they met, that Mr Albini didn't want to be rung up because he never went to church. But it hardly seemed worth the breath and Colgan would probably just say 'then it's no wonder he's such a sour

old cuss'. Instead it was Colgan who mentioned young Kelly and asked how he was settling in to the job.

"Well, I can't say I feel all that comfortable working with someone who spends his time lusting after my wife," Dennis said drily, if not very seriously.

"Lusting is probably not the right word," Colgan said mildly. "That is a very pure lad."

To that Dennis only raised a wry eyebrow.

"Indeed. Though pure is perhaps not a word to come your way very often," the old man went on with his usual sardonic inflection, "in your line of business."

"Well, I'd appreciate it if you'd nudge him towards making some friends, male and female, of his own age. Just make sure they're the sort who won't lead him astray. Or better still, you can rope him into your Save St Monica's Committee. Get his mind on to other things."

"I didn't know we had one."

"Then what the heck is all that Bingo about?"

"Day to day costs … and we cannot make pupils out of thin air, Dennis, not when the young 'uns prefer not to stay and marry."

"Well, now you've got the perfect candidate to steer towards some nice young woman—"

It was true that St Monica's was struggling. It now only offered kindergarten and up to Grade Four under the guidance of Mary Davidson and three other teachers and there was talk of dropping back to Grade Three next year. It probably still helped fulfill the idea of taking and moulding the child before he reaches seven …

Dennis did not particularly like Mary Davidson although he appreciated the sharp eye she kept over her charges and the fact that she never committed even the smallest misdemeanour, not even parking crookedly; it had more to do with her holier-than-thou manner. She never raised her voice. Her expression was always one of gentle gravity. She moved slowly and quietly round her school on soft-soled shoes. She kept excellent order, apparently without effort. She made almost everyone around her appear brash and loud and clumsy.

He felt he should admire the way she ran the school but he always felt there was something over-obedient, almost cowed, about the children here; as though she wasn't prepared to let them be children with all the noise and energy and exuberance that implied. But without actually sitting in on her daily activities he didn't feel he could be more specific. Perhaps she had been brought up to suppress all but the most dignified and saintly of emotions and now she was encouraging her pupils to do the same. The trouble with this, Dennis thought, was that some of them broke out into rowdy and unacceptable behaviour as soon as they were well away from the school …

As he went back to the station Dennis thought he probably should put his own advice into action; maybe get Kelly on to a major blitz of local cars and local drivers. Sergeant Hassell hadn't stayed long enough in Buckton to carry out his promised 'crackdown' but there was no shortage of drivers who thought the road rules were only there for other people.

But before he got round to organising it he had a ring from the store in Burleigh. They had more racist graffiti on the side of the shop. "Okay, don't clean it off. I'll come and have a look." He was no more hopeful of getting anything this time but he thought he might as well take young Brent and see how observant he really was.

As they drove out he said, "The wife is Filipina. Kara Derman. He's—or he was, his family came from somewhere in eastern Europe and I think they simplified the name a bit. But there's no excuse for the way they carry on. Soon as they have an argument it gets physical and next thing their shop stuff is being chucked around. I had to go out once because they'd hit a customer on the head with a tin of beetroot. I charged him for that. But I've never tried to get him on domestic violence charges. She's as bad as him, I'd reckon. I even think she gets a bit of a kick out of it all."

Brent took this in. "And it would be hard to run the shop—say, if you told her to take out an AVO?"

"I think that's why people out here don't complain—how d'you run a farm or a shop if one of you's banged up? Still, there's a few people I'd like to see behind bars, farm or no farm."

Mrs Derman was sporting a very dramatic black eye when they arrived, all shot through with yellow and green even if it wasn't quite as noticeable as most local black eyes because of her brown complexion. Dennis said immediately, "D'you want the bastard charged?"

Her husband came out and stood beside her and Dennis half-expected her to back off and say she ran into a door … but she surprised him by saying, "Yeah, I do. The doctor said I could've lost an eye."

"She does the same to me," the husband said angrily.

"Nothing to stop you lifting the phone to complain to us." But of course a man steeped in male superiority would be extremely reluctant to do that. The jokes about hen-pecked husbands were legion. "Anyway, we'll have a look at your vandalism then Constable Kelly will charge you."

The store was a sprawling weatherboard structure with the living quarters incorporated. It had two bowsers and a mail box out the front. The owners couldn't compete with the supermarket in Buckton, pricewise, but they did additional things like men's haircuts, knife and scissor sharpening, acting as a dry cleaner's depôt for the business in Winville. Dennis always bought something when he was out this way but he had no illusions about the profitability of this little corner store. Whether money played any part in their constant spats he had no idea.

The graffiti had been done by a spray can of white paint all along the dark green side of the shop. It had big advertisements for Castrol motor oil, Coca-Cola, and Arnott's Sao biscuits. But that still left room for someone to write in big straggling letters ASIANS GO HOME WE DON'T WANT YOU JUST PISS OFF.

"Well, looks like punctuation's not their strong point," Dennis said drily. A wide gravel road turned by the shop and ran north from the little hamlet. Dennis kept his constable back from the dusty verges. They just might be able to pick up some footprints. Small tussocks of dry grass were interspersed with occasional dock weeds and a few miserable-looking strands of bindweed. The signs of someone having been there and worked their way along the wall were clear; but individual prints had been lost in the movement.

Constable Kelly was disappointed. He had vaguely hoped that something would show up, that he would immediately be able to point it out, and they wouldn't need to be worrying about coming all the way out here again just for a bit of vandalism. In his experience vandalism was a fact of life.

He stepped back but Dennis said sharply, "You haven't taken the time to look properly." His junior was tempted to say something about still not being able to see anything useful but thought it would only inflame his boss. He stood in silence looking at the rather scuffed marks.

"Doesn't it strike you as a bit odd, the way they seem to be pointing?"

He finally had to risk another critical comment. "No."

"Mime it—the way you'd write on that wall." Kelly did as he was asked all the while feeling a bit of a fool. At least there was no one around to watch.

"You'll need to turn your body a little, those prints are slanted a bit that way. It's not so comfortable, is it?"

At last, Brent saw what he was getting at. The person who had sprayed that message was almost certainly left-handed. The thought annoyed him vaguely. In some perverse way he didn't want to have to look up to his boss. Dennis Walsh didn't appreciate his beautiful wife … ergo …

"Now, move back slowly and walk along this way. We might get a better print … "

It wasn't much of an improvement but they found one fairly clear print before whoever it was stepped on to the gravel. Dennis crossed the road and looked for more prints on the other side. But various people had walked along this way and none of the prints were sufficiently distinctive. "Anything?" Dennis said.

"It's fairly small."

"So we can absolve Mr Derman. What about Mrs?"

Kelly was surprised. Was that the way his boss was thinking? That the store owners were trying to get a bit of sympathy. "No-o-o, she's not small."

"Did you look at her feet?"

"No. But … "

"Okay, have a look later. But she's a fair size … so what does that leave you?"

"Kids?"

"Looks like it. So where are we going to find kids round here?"

"We could ask."

Burleigh could only offer six houses plus the store and two small churches. "We could visit each house," Brent said after looking round. "Someone might've seen something."

"Okay, off you go. Don't lead. But anyone with kids—just ask which hand they use."

Kelly hesitated. Presumably this was another test; otherwise they could've divided the hamlet between them. Dennis continued to stand, four-square, near the graffiti while his junior began his house-to-house. Two of the houses didn't provide anyone to answer the door, a third had an elderly lady who said she had grandchildren but they only came to stay at Christmas. But at the fourth house he found a woman at home who said she had three children but they were all away at school in Buckton at the moment. Kelly took their names and ages before saying, "Can you tell me which hand they each use."

She looked startled, then wary, before saying, "The right. Why?"

"You're sure of that?"

"Of course I am!" He thanked her and went on to the next house which provided another woman who said both her children were grown up and living in Winville and neither had children yet. He turned into the final yard without feeling very hopeful. There was nothing to say that the culprits actually lived right *in* Burleigh. They could come from a farm.

He found another family but these children were much younger; only the seven-year-old now took the bus to Buckton. Could a seven-year-old have done those letters? If it was a clever seven-year-old. He went back to Dennis and told him what he'd found out. "Okay, in you go and charge Derman—then we'll drop round and see those kids."

But the Dermans had had a change of heart in the meantime. Kara Derman said rather grumpily that it didn't matter, she didn't want her husband charged. Dennis who had come in behind his junior said, "Why not?"

"Because the store needs both of us."

"Right then, we'll be on our way." Dennis turned and went out, his junior trailing him. Kelly felt, without seeing their expressions, that this seriously disconcerted them.

In Buckton Dennis sent Kelly round to the High School. "Check with their teachers first. Then make sure you do the interview with an adult present."

Maybe it was this kind of confidence which Dennis Walsh brought to his marriage; that his wife might not be enjoying her very restricted life in Buckton might never occur to him, that she might long for … all sorts of things … including appreciation … he probably would never even think about …

But in this case his confidence seemed to be justified. Kelly managed to talk to all three class teachers for the Evans' kids during the lunch hour and Lucy Hopgood said immediately, "Blair is left-handed." Kelly had a moment of wondering whether the mother really didn't know that—or whether she had been watching them from a back window while they were over by the side of the store and she had put their presence and their actions together …

And Blair Evans asked to sit down and answer questions soon caved in and admitted that he had been spraying things on the side of the shop.

"Why?" Brent Kelly was curious.

"Why? Why d'you think why?" Blair was a truculent fourteen-year-old who seemed to regard Constable Kelly as mentally challenged; possibly his truculence was to make up for his smallness compared to most of his classmates. "Because she shouldn't be here, that's why."

"Who says?"

"My Dad. He tells us—and he knows—what's wrong with this country."

"And what is wrong?"

"Too many bloody Asians. Too many bloody Abos. You can see it everywhere."

Brent wasn't quite sure how to respond to this. And he thought Lucy Hopgood might have something to say later. He didn't think her probably mild remonstrances would make the slightest

difference to this cocky young man who actually seemed to be proud of his vandalism and his way of thinking. At last he said, "Where did you come from?"

"Whaddyer mean? Where did I come from? I was born here!"

"But Evans is a Welsh name. Wales is a long way away from Australia. Your family came here—maybe your dad, or your granddad, even your great-grandad."

"No, they didn't. We've always been here."

"Always—meaning?"

"What I said."

Brent was silent while he wondered whether to continue this conversation. Then he took a leaf out of his boss's book and simply charged Blair with damage to property. Then he got up again and went to the door. "Come down to the station after school."

"I can't do that. Dad'll be waiting to take us home."

"I thought Sergeant Walsh might be willing to cut you some slack but as you don't want to do that you'll receive a summons to court in Winville."

He went out and down the corridor but Lucy Hopgood caught up with him just before he reached the exit. "You were pretty hard on him—but I'm not sorry. Their dad lectures them when he drives them in to town—and they come out with a lot of stuff that I think is too political for kids that age—and some of it is pretty racist." She thought but didn't say "even for here".

"Where does his dad work?"

"At the Butter Factory."

Kelly nodded and went back to the station to say that Blair Evans had admitted to doing it and what he had done and what Ms Hopgood had said. "Yeah, there seems to be a bit of scaremongering going on round the place at the moment," Dennis said. "I thought Saul Harding was behind it—but I think maybe it's general scaremongering—all this stuff coming out since Mabo and Wik and all the talk about Native Title—a godsend to some of the morons around the place. But I didn't think they'd be recruiting fourteen-year-olds. Well, ring the Dermans and tell them Blair's been charged."

It was just after four when Bill Evans came blustering into the station to demand to know what right they had to take his kid to court. "If you've got your son outside you can bring him in, Mr Evans. Damaging property is a serious matter—"

"Damaging property nothing! The sooner those stupid bastards get the hell outa that shop the better!"

"You're planning to buy the shop and work seven days a week to provide a service to that community? Good man. And when someone comes round and spray paints your walls to say all the Welsh should piss off home you won't mind, will you? You'll just laugh and say it's kids letting off a bit of steam."

Mr Evans stared at him. "What are you? Some sort of weird bod that likes having these darkies everywhere?"

"I run my life by a simple rule, Mr Evans. Whether people obey the law or not. Your son did not. If he'd showed that he was sorry I might've brought it down to a caution. But all he did was take pride in his pathetic scribbles. So we'll see how he likes having to miss school to go to court in Winville."

"I can't take him to Winville!" Evans shouted. "What the fuck d'you think you're up to!"

"Missing court is a serious matter. It won't go easy on your son if he's not there on the day and the time required."

Evans was a tough man to shift but he finally agreed that he would get his son to clean the wall of the store and apologise to Kara Derman in return for having it downgraded to a caution. When Blair had given his word he would abide by these conditions and gone out with his father Dennis said grimly, "What a waste of a good day—and maybe we should be looking at ways to counteract all the rubbish that's being spread around by morons like him. Have a word to George Hickman about doing an article. We can't stop people thinking what they want but it's about time we got a bit of sense knocked into people's heads. Tell George to put it in big headlines. There are *no* leasehold properties in this district so whoever's going round telling people they're going to

have Native Title claims over their clothes hoist and barbecue deserves a good boot up the arse. Drop round and see George after work. He lives directly behind the Uniting Church."

Kelly wasn't absolutely sure what he was supposed to be telling George Hickman to put into the small local broadsheet, the *Buckton Bugle*, but when he found the house George and May were interested and sympathetic and quite willing to discuss what sort of article would be most helpful.

"Not that it's really your worry," George said as he sat down at the table and handed Brent a mug of coffee and pushed a plate of May's just-iced chocolate slices over to him. "But I s'pose you see a bit of the fall-out."

"I guess," Brent said slowly, "if I'm going to stay here—I need to know more about what's going on here."

"Well, s'far as I can see the blackfellas can come on your lease to hunt and have corroborees and things like that only if they can prove a continuing connection with that land—and when you look at people like Maurie at the pub here—how the heck is he s'posed to prove that—when he was stuck in a boys' home hundreds of miles away when he was a little baby?"

May nodded. "I know there's some pretty awful Aboriginal families—they don't teach their kids *anything* from what I hear on the TV, nothing about respect or obeying the law—but if Maurie or the Castleys or Colleen Delaney would like to come round and join with us for a barbecue or something they would be more than welcome."

"And what about you?" George said cheerfully. "Can I run a little profile for the next issue? What brought you all this way, something like that?"

Brent Kelly looked slightly embarrassed and awkward. "It wasn't really me. It was my Dad decided to come, so my two brothers and I came with him."

"Still, readers'd be interested, just a paragraph or two about your life before you came. You could write me a bit or I could run it as a short interview."

George wasn't a pushy man but his sense of genuine interest in people could be quite persuasive. Brent came back to his small flat wondering how he was going to put together that 'paragraph or two' …

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Brent Kelly found an e-mail waiting for him next morning. It was from Henry Montpelier to say that he had turned down the offer of an exhibition by Indonesian artist Christoph Hidoyono because Hidoyono mainly did very traditional paintings of Ramayana scenes; "nothing wrong with the paintings or his talent but my gallery specialises in modern art and they wouldn't fit either my image or my long-range plans. I made several suggestions about other galleries he might like to approach." And at the end of his letter he said, "It wasn't Hidoyono who approached me but a man who gave his name as, I think, Antar Kutub. He gave me his card but I don't seem to have kept it. That was some years ago. My impression is that he acted as agent for several Indonesian artists and sculptors. I might be able to remember the galleries I suggested he try if you think it's important."

"What do you think?" Brent asked his boss. "Would it be any use to know about those other galleries, whether he approached them?"

Dennis re-read the e-mail and finally said, "No harm. This may be a red herring. But Albini did put two men in hospital for months. We're not talking about a tap on the wrist. So there has to be a reason behind it all. The other thing is that Bryce Hoysted's wife or ex-wife and son live in Garramindi. You could ring her and see if she knows what he's doing and where. Her name's Edwina Morton. If she's got round to divorcing him she must have an address. Her number's on the list." Of course Kelly was right to be dubious of the value of any of this, Dennis thought, but the only way he was going to resolve the issue of both the woman and the art hidden away in that house was probably to get a warrant and go in—and he needed some evidence of continuing wrongdoing to have any hope of getting a warrant.

It was two days before they had a reply from the other gallery, the one in Woollahra, and the response was almost identical. Kelly printed it out and put it beside the other one. Then he said to Dennis, "That is really strange. It's almost word for word. But this one says it was Anwar Kutub not Antar. I'd say they must've been in touch with each other."

Dennis came over and had a look. “Mmmm. So it looks like they know each other. But I wonder if it’s more than that. Maybe this Henry guy sent a copy to the other bloke to say it was what he sent to us and the other bod simply copied it, save him thinking for himself.”

“I guess gallery owners would know each other … ”

Dennis agreed. “Still, it might be worth knowing if these are independently owned galleries or there’s corporate money behind them.”

“There’s nothing on their web-sites—”

“Doesn’t mean there isn’t a sleeping partner or maybe a source of funding they don’t want the world to know about. We need someone with a bit of business nouse to do some digging. I wonder if art galleries put out annual reports. S’pose not … but I wonder if that Mr Halpert might have a finger in that pie?”

The trouble with all this speculation was simply that he really didn’t see how to resolve any of the questions. And ringing up Ron Maguire to ask for more help probably wouldn’t go over any too well … And there was the time factor. Should they spend more than the occasional spare moment on it all …

“I think we need to put what we’ve got together and I’ll take it to Daniel Wang next time I’m in Winville—or you can.”

As Constable Kelly found the whole thing strange but couldn’t see how to present it coherently to anyone he said nervously he thought it might be better if Dennis did it. “Well, I might run it past Fiona—in a general way—she knows more about financial stuff than I ever will.”

“Why is that?” Kelly hoped his voice sounded perfectly normal.

“She used to be manager of the bank across the road. That’s what brought her to Buckton.”

“And she gave up the job—to get married?” This was really skating on thin ice.

But Dennis said, “No, she gave up the job when she had Elise. But she was sick of the way the bank kept mucking her around. They got her to close the branch in Garramindi—just so they could spare the manager there all the aggro—so she copped the lot. It wasn’t nice.”

It didn’t stop Brent from going into his flat of an evening and dreaming about Fiona but he accepted there were aspects of her relationship with Dennis which he knew nothing about—and never would.

“And who was the manager there?”

“A useless old turd called Hilton Browne. He died a month or two ago. It saved him getting investigated for theft. He had been helping himself to an offshore account—and I’d say that wasn’t the only bit of graft he’d been up to … Still, that’s past history.”

Fiona listened to his questions about digging up the financial underpinnings of Sydney art galleries. Her Brisbane friends were all convinced that her life here was unbearably dull. And instead almost every day threw up its own unexpected and intriguing questions. She said thoughtfully, “They would be listed with the titles office if they own the land and buildings, they’d be listed with the company’s office if they’re not just an owner-operator business, there’d be their tax returns … but I’d think people in that world would probably have an idea on who owns what. I could ask Patrice if she knows anything. She knows the Brisbane scene pretty well—I don’t know if she has any Sydney connections.”

“Well, those are the galleries—but keep it very low-key. I’ve only wanted them to think it’s in relation to the owners getting bashed by this Albini moron. But there’s a good chance there’s a connection between the two galleries—and maybe some money behind them they don’t make public. It’s not an area I know anything about.”

He felt that was a giant-size understatement but Fiona just nodded.

“Well, they *might* be galleries that promote new artists before they’ve become commercial—but in that case they would need to run more commercial exhibitions to pay their way—unless they had money behind them using the galleries as tax offsets or something. Like the people who buy land as a tax dodge … ”

“Could a gallery be used to launder money?”

“I don’t see why not. But it’s more likely to be the actual artworks themselves—”

"But you'd still come back to that question of getting rid of large amounts of cash, no questions asked. Surely most artists would expect to be paid by cheque?"

She pondered on this. "Unless they were just selling through a market stall, a pavement artist, that kind of thing. But I wonder if Aboriginal artists would prefer to be paid cash? If the nearest bank is a hundred kilometres away—cash might be more attractive. You could at least use it at the local store … "

"That's a thought. And what if the artists were Indonesian? Would they prefer cash?"

"Gosh! That's a tricky one, Dennis." She couldn't decide if cash might be preferable to a cheque or bank draft. "I suppose you could sit on your cash and exchange it when the Australian dollar goes up … and I suppose you could filter money through exchanges at airports, if you did a lot of traveling, and probably there'd be no questions asked. Or if you were buying something to take back to Indonesia … I don't know how much cash you'd have to hand over before people might become suspicious."

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Edwina Hoysted, née Morton, was not thrilled to get a phone call from Buckton to find out if she knew where her husband might be. But she told Constable Kelly that she had finally decided to go ahead with the divorce. "By the time questions of custody come up my son will be old enough to decide for himself which parent he wants to live with. I haven't got the papers served on Bryce yet but I can give you his address—or both his addresses." Which she proceeded to do. One of them was an address for Hoysted Holdings in Ultimo but the other, to Kelly's astonishment, was in Artarmon. He thanked her, wrote them both down, and then went on the internet to see if he could pull up a map of the suburb.

When Dennis came in he said, "Do you think it's significant? Bryce Hoysted lives only two blocks away from that art gallery."

Dennis looked on the map and said, "Sure to be. Just don't ask me how—but Albini could easily have used that as his base. It was his birthmark which gave him away—not any useful witnesses—or not from what I could see from the court case."

"Why would they choose a man with a very obvious mark? And why didn't he cover it up?"

Dennis had wondered this too. "Maybe he was meant to be recognised. Dr Sorenson says getting laser treatment to remove a birthmark that big would cost big bucks. So Albini does the job, does the time, someone pays him to have the surgery and lie low … and they pull him out again for another job and no one recognises him as the same man."

He wasn't sure if that made complete sense. "But why lie low in Buckton … " And then he suddenly smote the desk in front of him. "Of course! When the Hoysteds lived in that house it was old Joe Bosch here in the station—and he never stirred himself from one Christmas to the next. You could put half-a-dozen major crime bosses in that house and he wouldn't lift a finger. Even if someone's told Bryce things are different now it doesn't mean he's taken it on board. He probably thinks he can still get away with … " He was going to say 'murder' and instead substituted 'art theft'. Because another philistine in the station …

Brent Kelly had heard a story or two about 'ol' Joe'; even now Dennis's predecessor was spoken of with a chuckle—and in the case of people like Craig and Dan Goodrick with a certain amount of nostalgia. Joe never gave them *any* trouble at all …

"So who ran those galleries while both men were in hospital?" Dennis had thought the attacks were to scare the owners but neither had backed down and put on that knocked-back exhibition. So maybe it was to get the men out of the way for a while … "Ask both of them who ran their businesses while they were incapacitated—and who would've made the decision on who to put in."

But this time neither gallery owner showed any sign of wanting to answer the question. Maybe they were just tired of corresponding with Buckton. Maybe they were starting to wonder if Buckton's agenda went beyond Graeme Albini. Time went by and no e-mails came back. Rather than route the question through Maguire Dennis rang the station in Chatswood as Artarmon did not appear to have its own station and eventually got to put the question to a Sergeant Brian Cox who said he lived in Artarmon and knew the beat well. "Do you happen to know anything about the Woolami Gallery? Bod who owns it was bashed a few years back. I've got the bloke who did time

for the bashing living on my patch. What I'm trying to find out is who looked after the gallery while he was in hospital."

Cox didn't rush in but he obviously knew his beat. "Yeah, I remember that. Folk always think a gallery is a nice quiet dignified place. It shocked them to see him coming out on a stretcher. A young woman ran the place when he went to hospital but we made sure there was a call button put in before she took over. She left when he came back and I haven't seen her since."

"D'you have a name?"

"Gina someone. I could ask around."

"Thanks. And d'you know if Montpelier is the sole owner?"

"Seems so. But I have an idea when he set up he had a thing somewhere, might've been on his brochures or on a window, I forget now, thanking The Art Trust for their support."

"So what's the Art Trust?"

"So far as I know it gives small loans to artists and galleries. Don't know if they're always loans, they might be grants."

"And who runs it?"

"Couldn't help you there, mate. Probably some guy who's made money in pigs or kitchen sinks and sees it as him now supporting the arts."

"Could it be a way of laundering money?"

Cox said "Pheww!" but didn't dismiss the idea out of hand. "Anything's possible. What did you have in mind?"

"Have you ever heard of a Danny Halpert?"

"Not in connection with this place. He sued a journo a couple of years back for saying he was connected to money laundering and won his case. The man couldn't come up with good enough evidence to back his article. But he's got a lot of fingers in a lot of pies. I s'pose it's not impossible. Just don't go round saying it in public."

"Because I'll get sued—or because someone'll come in with a tyre iron and bash me up?"

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"So d'you remember the journo?"

"Yeah, it was Cameron De Witt. He was with the *Telegraph* but I have an idea he's gone freelance now."

"Thanks. And one other thing—you've got a Bryce Hoysted living on your patch." Dennis gave him the address. "Has he ever come to your notice?"

"Couple of times. Noisy parties. Gay young bachelor, that sort of thing. Seems to get a lot of visitors. We've had complaints about them parking across other people's driveways."

"Well, he's not a bachelor. He's still got a wife and son here." Maybe not for much longer but he couldn't guess at what speed Edwina might be moving things along. "But he used to live in the house here where Albini's now living. That has to be more than a coincidence."

"I'd say so. And it might explain something. Why no one seemed to notice Albini coming or going. I'd say he came up that laneway, just round and in the door—and then maybe back the same way and into Hoysted's house—or at least his yard—I s'pose he would've been out at work at that time."

"Yeah, I'd think there's a good chance. So maybe young Bryce might repay a bit of watching, him and all those visitors." Not that Bryce was still 'young'; he must be at least into his forties by now. But Dennis couldn't give him anything clearer on Bryce Hoysted. Just how and if and why he might link up …

When Dennis finished the call he said to his junior, "In your spare time—see if you can come up with contact details for a Cameron De Witt. Now, hadn't you better be on your way. Can't keep Nelson L'Estrange waiting." Sending Kelly round to deal with the primary school's Road Safety day was sending a lamb out to deal with a pack of ravening young wolves. Kids thirty years ago might've listened to the police with polite concentration; now they were as likely to be talking and mucking round as listening. But it was what young constables were for—taking such routine matters off their seniors' shoulders. And L'Estrange despite being a rather tedious man did keep good order.

Dennis handled a number of small complaints and went round to a minor accident near the cemetery. But he thought he'd take advantage and go to Winville in the late afternoon when Brent was back. He might get somewhere by picking round the edges, by using Albini as his 'stalking horse' as most people could understand his reasons for being interested in Albini, but it needed CIB help to pull up the various connections and see if they were genuinely criminal rather than merely suggestive of wrongdoing.

The trouble—when Dennis got to Winville just before six and went in to find DS Wang still at his desk—was that Wang wanted his help. Not the other way around. "I can't see why you're going off half-cocked about this guy, not when he seems to be keeping his nose clean, and we need help with getting someone for Oliver Hone. That's my priority and maybe it's time it became yours."

"Not on my patch," Dennis said grimly. Dinawadding currently only had Constable Hussein one day a week. Brophy's promised incumbent had not so far materialised. "But I'm always willing to help. So Jimmy Hove refuses to roll over?"

"We've interviewed everyone there and got nothing. They were told no one was to leave without informing us but a couple of the guys *have* left so whether we're way behind the eight ball—I don't know. We'll keep going round and interviewing them till someone gives us something."

But the way Wang said this didn't ooze with hope and confidence. Dennis thought it was psychological. The feed lots intimidated Wang. He knew nothing about cattle and he found the big tough guys who peopled Japana vaguely threatening.

"So what did the autopsy tell you?" Oliver Hone had been found buried well inside Japana.

"They couldn't come up with a cause of death."

Dennis considered this in silence. There were poisons which could've broken down in the two months between death and discovery. Even something like being smothered might not show up convincingly enough to be given as the cause of death. "So they can claim he died of natural causes? Have they tried that on?"

"No. They saw nothing, they did nothing, they heard nothing. One guy went out on a limb and said maybe Oliver fell in when they dug that hole to bury some offal and the cattle kicked clods of earth on top of him and no one knew he was down there."

Dennis only gave that an amused snort. "Well, I can go out and grill the lot of 'em. But I'd still like some help with my stuff."

Daniel shook his head. "Nothing doing, Dennis." He held up his long slim fingers. "One, it's not on our patch, two, you've got no evidence at all about art fraud, and three, if it *is* art fraud you need to call in a specialist. You don't know anything about art." As soon as he said this he thought he might have put it more diplomatically.

"I don't reckon it's anything to do with art fraud. It's money laundering, plain and simple."

Daniel said sourly if it was so plain and simple why come to him.

"Because I'm not a bloody *detective*, that's why," Dennis said at his grimmest. But he couldn't get Daniel to budge. Buckton could deal with any problems to do with Mr Albini as and when they might arise. End of matter. And he would ring Dennis next time he was going out to Japana. But they were finalising the exhibits to go to court when James Hove came up for allegedly murdering Constable Craig Wrightson and "you'll need to be on the ball for that, not off thinking about *art*," Daniel didn't try to hide his sarcasm; he undoubtedly knew more about and had more respect for art than Dennis ever would, "because you're the Prosecution's key witness. They'll go over it with you next week. So stop going on about all this pie in the sky stuff."

Dennis wanted to see James Hove do time, life preferably; even so, he was in no good mood when he arrived back in Buckton and home to dinner. It would mean continuing to chip away at the edges in his spare time and he felt that whatever was hidden at the centre was too big for this kind of half-hearted amateurish work …

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Elise Walsh at three had quite definite ideas on what she would like to do most days. It had taken her quite a while to write the invitation she asked her father to deliver to Constable Kelly. "What's it all about, sweetie?" he said when she handed him the letter in its envelope.

"It's about taking him for a *picnic*," she said happily. "Mummy says we can—if he'd like to come—"

"And if I don't need him?" Elise had gradually become aware that her father was not only the town's policeman but that he was also the boss of the station and people like Brent Kelly and Sam Hussein and Jay Gutteridge did what he told them to do. Now she said earnestly, "You won't need him on Saturday afternoon, will you? That's the best time for picnics … or Sunday."

"The footie is over at Garra this weekend, with luck all the naughty boys will go over there to make a racket. But don't be disappointed if he says no." Nevertheless he handed the invitation over to Brent Kelly, saying, "I wouldn't let her hand out invitations to most people but I'd think she'd be safe with you. Say no if you want to."

Brent Kelly read the letter with its careful but sometimes crooked letters and the naïve idea that he might like to come for a picnic with her and Robbie to see the creek and "the paddock" and "our pony" and that she would make a picnic lunch. He was certain he hadn't been able to read or write at three and he wondered if this was some strange means by which Fiona was reminding him that she was the mother of two children. "D'you think she wrote all this?"

Dennis only said, "Oh, for sure. She's a bright kiddy."

Kelly's first impulse was to say, thanks but no thanks. He'd had very little to do with small children and he wasn't sure that he wanted to spend time with Fiona's children though he had not really tried to tease out his thinking on this. And he didn't really believe that Elise had done it all, including big words like 'explore', but it was curiosity on this point which finally led him to say cautiously, "I guess I could."

"Well, write her a short note back. She'd find that more exciting—and come round and pick them up about one. You don't need to be with them more than an hour at the most." He looked at the station clock. "Anyway, we'd best get on."

In the evening while Elise was still gloating over her reply from 'Mr Kelly', and Fiona was wondering whether e-mails and phone calls might one day remove this kind of pleasure, Dennis had a ring from Russ Spicer. "Did a bit of asking round for you, mate," he said cheerfully, "and I just might be on to something. You'll remember old Dick Wallingford and the family? They had Mt Gregory north of Julia Creek and a couple of places west of there? Well, it's an Indonesian company that's taken over. A guy called Joby Hassan. I've only got this second hand so I wouldn't swear to the name—but he's probably one of the cronies—and what they're doing is to ship cattle out to Kupang in West Timor for slaughter. That way they can still claim it's Australian Beef but because the labour costs there are so low they can then sell on the meat to Hong Kong and China and Japan and undercut Australian-killed meat."

"Well, I s'pose, strictly speaking it is still Australian beef—but I can't see the unions here being any too happy."

"Yeah, but I don't think the numbers are big enough yet, maybe fifty head a fortnight, not more. No one's taking much notice. But there's a second part to the yarn. Mt Gregory's got the Djuturri clan sitting on it. They do some pretty good paintings and make a bit of pocket money. So this Hassan guy said he'd buy up all they've got and send it to Indonesia to be exhibited and he hands out a fair bit of cash. Old Dick heard about this and said why didn't they use it to take out their own lease, he didn't want 'em to use it for a big booze-up, but they said they were putting in a Native Title claim seeing they'd been there long before any Indonesians … which is true enough though I heard Hassan wasn't any too happy. It seems he thought he could get leasehold converted to freehold just by talking about all he was going to invest here—and that would extinguish Native Title. I'm not just sure where their claim is at now. But then along came Charlie Jensen and his wife, I don't know if you'd remember them?"

Charlie and Natalie Jensen did the rounds in Queensland and the Territory buying up the best artwork they could find to re-sell to galleries down south. Dennis didn't remember ever meeting a Natalie Jensen but Charlie was a well-known eccentric with his long white beard and big van and a voice that made him sound like a man with a long dusty throat. "Charlie, sure, and Charlie was disappointed to find they had nothing for sale?"

"Well, they said they'd paint some more, quite soon. But this is the curious bit. They're starting to get more business-like these days, keep lists of what they sell, that sort of thing. They'd even taken snapshots of all the paintings they'd flogged off to these Indonesians. About a month later Charlie was in Sydney with his latest stuff and he went into a gallery—and there's one of these paintings. He told Bernie Walters who told me that he'd swear it was the same painting—but it had sold for two thousand to the Indonesians and now it had fifty thousand on it. He went back to Mt Gregory a month or two ago and had another look at the photo and asked if he could take his own photo so he'd have something to compare—and he faxed his snap to the gallery but didn't hear any more. I guess the painting had sold. But when he talked to the Djuturri mob he found that three of the men had died recently, some sort of pneumonia they thought. He said that was a bit off. Usually it's the old ones or the kids that get taken off if some sort of bad flu is doing the rounds."

Dennis agreed with this.

"So, anyway, Charlie buys two paintings and heads off again. But he wasn't too happy. He thinks they're getting diddled—all that cash suddenly floating round, maybe it blinded them to what they could get through Charlie … not my field, Dennis, but I just thought you might be interested."

"I am, Russ. I'm very interested. I think someone's laundering money but just how and why—so far I can't get to the bottom of it."

"Well, that wouldn't be a bad way. They'll always take cash over a cheque or a credit card—and they aren't going to be asking tough questions like 'is this drug money?' or whatever."

"I know." Aboriginal artists, like Murris involved in other kinds of businesses, were gradually becoming more sophisticated in their understanding of business methods but they still were no match for some of the sharks swimming round in the wider ocean. "But could it be drug money? I've heard Kupang is a major hub of drugs into Oz. Take over live cattle regularly, bring back drugs, once people are used to the regular run into the Gulf there—they might be more concerned about not bringing in any nasty bugs … quarantine issues … foot-and-mouth hasn't reached Kupang yet, or not that I've heard, but it's only a matter of time … "

"But you could sluice it all down with, say, caustic soda regularly and no one notices there's something sitting in the drum, a different kind of white powder, it's possible, Dennis, but not my area. Still, I s'pose I can have a quiet word … "

Dennis left it at that. The drugs part of it was pure speculation. But was the death of three men from, ostensibly, natural causes something someone should be investigating? The three men might've been alcoholics, diabetics, might've had other serious health problems and succumbed to something the young ones would fight off. But he wondered if it might be sending someone a message … sit down and shut up? …

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If Constable Kelly had doubts about his excursion—how on earth would he manage to converse with two small children? would they be safe with him? would people laugh at him and say he couldn't find friends his own age?—they soon melted away. Elise and Robert took him down Creek Road, across the footbridge, up to the paddock to show him their pony, with Elise pointing things out to him and telling him stories.

They had brought a small slice of carrot for the pony which someone, long ago, had named Twinkletoes; he was a shaggy little pony now in his winter coat and probably half Shetland to begin with, a little like the pony in the Thelwell cartoon so hairy its owner didn't know which end was which, and he had a friendly inquisitive nature—but a twinkletoes he certainly wasn't. He took the children round at a walk, with some urging he managed a trot, but anything faster was simply not in his vocabulary. It made him an ideal first pony.

"Can you ride a pony?" Elise asked as they watched Twinkletoes crunch the carrot.

"No. I lived in a big city. There was no space for a pony."

"Your legs would be too long for him." She looked from guest to pony in a summing-up way. "But you can come and pat him any time you'd like. He's a bit lonely on his own." He had the Castleys' house cow for company but the two animals didn't seem to take very much notice of each other.

They finally settled down on the creek bank with the thin trickle of water in the creek bed below them to eat their sandwiches and drink their juice. It touched Constable Kelly the way she seemed to take effortless charge; at no time was he aware of her bossing her little brother but she made sure he had his sandwiches and his drink and his fruit, she included him in everything, she reminded him of the day they found the kitten; she told her guest how kids came down to the bridge to throw things into the water "like Winnie-the-Pooh and Piglet, did you read about them?" When he said no she proceeded to give him a lively and funny account. She wasn't sophisticated enough to know that a working class Catholic boy from Belfast might not be terribly interested in the adventures of a middle class little boy in the Home Counties—and her own amusement with the story as a story started him thinking there were things he should perhaps read. Several times he laughed along with her and Robbie. He opened up in a way he never would with Dennis.

"Does your family call you names, like short names?" she wanted to know.

"They called me Benny at home."

She gave a sort of sigh. "They call me Missy. I'm too old now for that. Isn't it funny how you grow out of things?" He thought it was a remarkably thoughtful insight for a three-year-old but that was the thing about Elise, it was hard to remember she *was* only three. Three and some months. Now he had no difficulty at all in believing that Elise had written that letter. But as he ate his apple and thought on such things a woman came quietly down the back lane towards the footbridge.

As she came through the trees Elise said, "It's Sister Hitchener from the hospital. Isn't she beautiful?"

Elise had a clear carrying voice. Both Brent Kelly and Iris Hitchener heard her question but whereas Irish Hitchener thought it was a nice thing for Elise to say it embarrassed Constable Kelly. He mumbled something about that being a true statement. As Iris went to pass them Elise said cheerfully, "We still have some lunch left. We could give you a sandwich. I helped to make them myself."

Iris Hitchener hesitated, curious, but reluctant to intrude. Although she got on well with the other nursing staff and occasionally went to a function in Winville with Nelson L'Estrange she wasn't outgoing enough to make many friends round Buckton. She preferred to dedicate herself to her work and take quiet walks along the creek and have an occasional evening out with her fellow sisters. Although she was a strikingly beautiful woman she somehow got overlooked by the town and its men. Whether it was the way she preferred things or whether she regretted not having the knack of making friends no one knew. Several of the local men had been heard to say that she didn't look like she'd be 'any fun'. It was true that few people saw her lovely smile. Her demeanour was usually grave and rather inward-looking.

Then she came over and sat down beside them and shared a sandwich and half an apple. If she and Brent had been thrown together in different circumstances he probably would've been totally tongue-tied but they had Elise and Robert there to remove any awkwardness. When Iris finally got up and went on with her walk Elise said again to Brent Kelly, "Isn't she beautiful?"

This time he said, "Yes, she is one of the most beautiful people I have seen here."

"It would be nice to be beautiful, wouldn't it," Elise said without apparent rancour. "Princesses in fairy tales sometimes have black hair and sometimes they have golden hair—but they never never never have ginger hair. I wonder why that is?"

"Then I think it's time someone wrote a fairy tale and the princess has lovely ginger hair. And you are beautiful, you know, and Rob will grow up handsome." It was the first time in his life he had complimented two small children, rather than merely reassure them that they were safe and would soon be back with their families, and it gradually came to seem like a turning point in his life. He still found it hard to talk comfortably with Fiona, he still felt moments when he wished that he could somehow supplant his boss, if only to show genuine appreciation. He still found dealing with most women, beautiful or not, quite stressful and nerve-wracking.

But those feelings gradually faded as time passed and he got to know more people around Buckton. Certainly Dennis didn't immediately pick up that something subtle had changed … he simply wanted his constable to stop blushing any time Fiona came in to the station …

Case No. 4: At a Remove

It wasn't till the following weekend that the Binghams came out to Buckton for a visit. They called in to see Fiona first and she said why didn't they leave their little boy with her while they wandered round looking at Buckton and the key venues. Renata was obviously taking the idea of being a judge very seriously; she had rung the Butter Factory to check their office hours and arranged for Dave Grumm to show her around briefly; she had rung the local RSL to see if they could show her around the Hall and how the exhibition would most likely be set up (though, of course, no one could second-guess the number of entries they would receive), and they planned to walk along the main street and then go out and be shown round the Mackie's farm; the Mackie family all being Geoff Bingham's dental patients, occasionally, and quite willing to be visited.

At first their little boy did not look very enthusiastic about being left with strangers but he looked around at their toys and seemed to think it might have its compensations. "It would be nice for Rob to have some company," Fiona said, "and Elise might read them a story later."

Although the two little boys didn't have much to say to each other they both seemed quite happy to play at farms on the wooden floor and tell each other what noises the various creatures made. It might not be the beginning of a beautiful friendship but Fiona finally felt able to leave them to go and make a start on lunch; though with the Binghams' large itinerary to get through she thought lunch might well be closer to afternoon tea …

When the Binghams came back just before two they were rather wind-blown and full of apologies but they were quite enthusiastic. And they said they had donated a picture to the Butter Factory to raffle if they would like to.

"That was very kind of you," Fiona said with a smile.

"Self-interest," Geoff Bingham said wryly. "If Buckton goes downhill I lose patients."

"And I'm trying to get better known out here," Renata added.

"Well, I'm sorry Dennis has been called away but I've fed the children and if we relax over lunch he just might turn up while you're still here." The Binghams had heard quite a few of the stories which always seemed to swirl around about Dennis Walsh. Geoff had learned to discount quite a lot of them but Renata had not met him and the only thing which suggested the rumours might not be true was Fiona herself. If Dinny Walsh really was the terrifying creature of local lore then Fiona should be much more timid and retiring … and the children likewise …

When she had served out the casserole and urged them to help themselves to salad and rolls she asked Renata about her career as an artist in Sydney. "It hardly qualified as a career," Renata said with a slightly wistful smile. "We arrived here from Austria ten years ago. My father is a biophysicist but it was really my mother who pressed us to emigrate, she always said she just couldn't take another European winter. And once we got settled in I decided I wanted to go to East Sydney, to the art school there, and when I graduated I got some work in an advertising agency and I managed to sell the occasional painting. The good thing about art, I guess, is that you can simply frame your painting, or get it framed, and go down to the markets or talk a friend with a business into exhibiting it, you're not so dependent on other people. And when I came here and saw the gallery took things on commission I thought there was no harm in having a go. It's been a real boost to my confidence to have everything sell so quickly."

"I can imagine. So how did the two of you meet? Winville's quite a long way away—" She thought Geoff would be at least ten years older than Renata, maybe more, and she knew he'd been married before.

"I simply went down for a holiday, a bit of a break. I'd always wanted to go to something at the Opera House. You know how you see the pictures and you can't help wondering what it's like inside. And I did a harbour cruise and I went for a walk through the Botanical Gardens, the touristy things, and Renata was sketching in the Gardens and I don't really know how we got talking but we did."

"I looked up and saw this nice man looking at me," Renata said, "and I could see he was a visitor—so I said something just to be friendly and it went on from there. But I was a bit dubious when he told me about living in Winville. I didn't even know where it was. And knowing Geoff's first wife regarded it as the back of beyond … that didn't give me confidence. But then I thought, why not? An artist can live and work and find good subject matter anywhere, it wasn't like I was tied to Sydney. It's been quite hard to adjust but I'm glad I made the leap—"

"Yes, I know what you mean. I grew up in Brisbane and I really wondered if I could bear to stay in Buckton. And if I was constantly longing for things I couldn't have I would only end up making Dennis miserable. But bit by bit I've got involved in the life of the town. I'm on the Shire Council now and I've got a little financial consultancy business with a friend … But, tell me, have you heard all the rumours going round about the fabulous art collection that's now supposed to be here in Buckton?"

"Rumours certainly. But it does seem an odd place to store paintings." Geoff Bingham was curious but not as interested as his wife obviously was.

"Do you think store is the operative word? It's a long way to come if you want to steal something. Do you think the paintings really are valuable?"

"None of us have seen them. He doesn't let anyone in the gate even. It's all very hush hush. Two of the CWA ladies went round as soon as he and his wife arrived and they said the paintings they glimpsed in the front hall were 'dreadful daubs' but it might just mean he's got some abstracts."

"Yes, people out here have pretty conservative tastes. I've been asked quite a few times why don't I fill up the gaps. I did try to explain it to one woman as being like a book where you don't have to describe every detail of someone's day. Readers *can* assume that the hero had breakfast and got dressed and went to the toilet before he went out. But she only looked at me and said it wasn't at all the same thing. Now, I just say everyone has their own taste … "

"And—did you ever try your paintings and sketches round any of the Sydney galleries?"

"No. The competition is so fierce some of them won't even look at what you've got to offer. I've heard some of them say they're booked up for years ahead. And I didn't really have the confidence to try to push my way in and ask them to take me seriously … "

So whatever Graeme Albini had or didn't have he either had a lot of confidence or someone powerful behind him; but later Fiona re-jigged that. If those galleries really were booked up years ahead then no amount of standover tactics would get them very far. Even if the owners had managed to squeeze that Indonesian exhibition in it probably would not have been given the care and promotion an exhibition needs to succeed. Because she had no illusions about the difficulties most artists faced in making a living.

The Binghams had gone by the time Dennis came home for a bite to eat. She said cheerfully they now had their two judges for the competition; now all they needed were lots of entries. But Dennis was down in the dumps. He'd been called out to an accident at the Burleigh turn-off. "One of Japana's bloody trucks belting along—and old Terry Mitchell turning out there. It's not looking good for him." And Terry Mitchell was currently trying to look after his own land and mind the Fosdick farm until the legal work was settled and it could go on to the market.

"I am sorry. Is there any help we can offer?"

"No, I rang Mrs Clarke. She'll organise to care for his dog and his chooks." He made an effort to put it aside. Old Mr Mitchell had been sent by ambulance to Winville. The transport driver said he'd suddenly shot out of that side road and he couldn't stop or pull over in time. Dennis found the image of Mr Mitchell 'shooting' out of anywhere hard to accept. "So how did things go with the Binghams?"

"Yes, we've got our second judge—and we talked a bit about the art scene in Sydney. But I thought I probably shouldn't name those two galleries even though she might've heard of them."

"No. Best not."

"And would it be possible for you to go round and see Mrs Albini when he's out? Does he go out much?"

"To the pub—and I think I've scared him off going there—and the supermarket, he calls into Noel's … I have an idea he occasionally goes to Winville but I don't know what for. Yeah, it might be worth a try."

*

The Barnards, asked to let Dennis know if they saw Mr Albini heading out of town any time, rang Dennis one evening. "He's heading towards Winville, Dennis," Noel said. "Mavis just passed him on the road. Though he might just be going out to visit someone or pick something up."

Dennis didn't waste time chatting; he was round to the house in minutes, climbed the gate, said to the dogs "Down, boys, bark all you like but get back to your kennels," and was knocking firmly on the door. At last a faint voice said, "Who is it?"

"Police. Sergeant Walsh. Come and open up." Clearly the person knew a few words of English … but it was several more minutes before a woman opened the front door a crack but left it on the chain. He said simply, without urging her to take the chain off or anything, "I've come round to check that you're okay."

In the light of the hallway he could see she was probably in her forties, black hair with a few grey hairs, but it was her expression which made her look older. There was something apathetic and uncaring about her stance, her expression, her whole demeanour.

"Ye-es … I'm okay." She had quite a strong accent but she certainly didn't fit the local image.

"And your children—are they okay?"

"I guess so. I haven't seen them for months."

"Mrs Albini, if you need any kind of help, that's the station number." He handed her a slip of paper which she hesitated over, then accepted.

"No, it doesn't matter … "

"Why doesn't it matter? I know your husband's been to jail twice—for bashing people—so I don't want you to stay silent if he's doing anything to you. We can get you into a safe house—"

"No. It … it … I'm okay."

"In that case, maybe you can answer a couple of questions. D'you know why your husband bashed those gallery owners?"

"I guess he was told to. I don't know."

And then she seemed to think if she told him about it he would be satisfied and go away before her husband got back; or perhaps the months of isolation, of being denied company and the opportunity to make friends, were taking their toll on a normally loquacious person.

"When he went to prison the first time I took my children and went back to España and he came out of prison and came after me." She was speaking faster and faster but Dennis was reluctant to ask her to slow down in case the story stopped. "He get the law, he get us, me and my children to come back to Australia, I didn't want to go, but he say I write his signature to get the children out of Australia and they say I go to prison and I come back here and he went to prison again but they pay for my children to go to good schools, good boarding schools, they say I have no worries, they say I get job, they find me job, I can be okay, when he come out, they change his face, it cost a lot of money, mucho mucho, but he is more happy, but still they want more jobs, he never get free … and he go and do jobs they ask … "

"Who is 'they'?"

She hardly seemed to take the interjection on board. "He sets fire to a warehouse, he says it was a piece of cake, always piece of cake, and they give him some more surgery, you know, on his face—"

"When was this?"

"Two year ago, maybe not that much. But they don't catch him this time. Maybe do more jobs the same. They want him to do the hard work, like they make money and he goes out at night and he comes home and smells all the smoke and his clothes … "

"Who sends him to do jobs? Danny Halpert?"

"He never tell me, he say I must stay stupid, I must say I don't know, and they believe me, always they believe me. I am just 'ousemaid, just clean … "

"So who did you work for when he was in jail?"

Afterwards Dennis said to Fiona he wasn't sure but he thought she said "Norma Oyster". He could see she was frightened, that she wanted to speak very quickly then have him go away and not come around again, and he felt he should not prolong his first visit.

"Norma Oyster?" Fiona looked at him with puzzled eyes. "Well, I suppose there *might* be people called Oyster but I've never met any."

"She got pretty hard to understand, speaking so fast and with a strong Spanish accent."

Her face seemed to clear. "Oh! Then I think—it wouldn't be Oyster. In Spanish they don't pronounce their aitchs. And J is said like H. So it would be … Hoyster?"

"Norma Hoysted! Strewth! No wonder they knew about this bloody house! She lived in it for two years."

"So you're saying Mrs Albini worked for Mrs Hoysted?"

"If I've understood … but I don't know where it takes me."

"Then leave it for now. The kids have been looking forward to spending time with you—"

It was after nine, with the children in bed and the house grown quiet with Fiona laying the table for breakfast and listening to a radio program, when he found himself back pondering on Mrs Albini. How trustworthy was anything she had told him? Surely she would not have said that about the fire if she was afraid the police would follow up. Or did she think a cop here would just let it all go by? And should he try to go back next time her husband was out? And then he said "Uh oh! I'm a brainless idiot!"

Perhaps the reason Danny Halpert had bought the house in Buckton and put some paintings in it was the obvious one after all. Sooner or later there would be a fire *here*. The house and its contents would go up in smoke. It didn't matter that Halpert had paid over the asking price. He would get back the much larger amount. And the art work, if it was bought from laundered money, would come back to him in a nice squeaky-clean cheque from his insurers …

But was there any way to tempt them out into the open? Or would he simply get a ring one night to say the house was burning? And by the time Buckton's one vehicle and its little group of volunteers got round there it would be too late. So sad … but nobody's fault …

He went out into the corridor and sat down by the phone. Daniel would not want to be rung at home but it wasn't likely he'd be in bed yet. It didn't make him sound pleased to hear Dennis's voice. "You want a what?" he said grumpily.

"I want a trace on Albini's phone. I'll give you his number but there's a good chance he's also got a mobile I don't know about—"

"Oh, for crying out loud, Dennis, forget all this stuff about someone's ruddy art collection!"

"I've just had a tip-off that Graeme Albini hasn't been keeping his nose clean since his last time inside, that he set up an insurance scam by burning down a warehouse two years ago. It would make sense of him coming here. Burn down this house, an electrical fault, he and his wife appear to live in the couple of rooms next to the laundry, nice and easy to get out, no professional fire brigade, just a couple of old plods, probably a different insurance company to the last scam—*and* in a different state."

"You'll have to come up with something far more specific, Dennis—"

"Conspiracy to commit a crime, fraud, whatever, who says we have to wait till they strike again." Daniel finally said he would think about it tomorrow. But after he'd got rid of Dennis he put his jacket on and went round to the station again. There were only the two young constables, Hussein and Atkinson, in and he ignored them and went on into the CIB office, yawning, but prepared to set the wheels in motion. It took him a while to get a mobile number for Graeme Albini and even then he hesitated. "What the heck am I supposed to be doing," he said to the empty room.

The answer, when he reluctantly formulated it, was a simple one: because I would be mad to reject out of hand what Walsh is saying …

Sam Hussein came to the door and said, "Like a coffee, sir?"

Daniel looked up and considered asking the younger man if he would peg his career out to hang from one of Dennis's hunches or tip-offs. Sam would probably say yes; Sam was pretty sure Dennis mostly got it right. In the end he just shook his head. "I'll be gone in five minutes."

Dennis did some deep thinking, could he possibly smoke something out, though he didn't think Albini was the sort of man to panic or let down his guard, and then he lifted the phone again and rang the Albini household. He let it ring three times, hung up, then rang again. It just might be a little more likely to bring Mr Albini to the phone. A voice said, "Yeah, Gray here."

"Mr Albini, Dennis Walsh here. Just a word of advice. Make very very sure that that house doesn't burn down. Goodnight."

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In the morning Dennis said to his junior, "I wonder if we can find out whether either Albini's taken out a policy—or whether Talbot's policy is still in effect. He just might've taken out home and contents with Farm & Life." This was the company the Bank of the Darling Downs ran as an agency. "Duck over and ask to see Kyle Risby, bloody Talbot's more likely to have discussed it with him, not over the counter, he looked down on young women except for you-know-what … if Talbot didn't insure with Farm & Life he just might've discussed it with Risby—and it's just possible Albini's come in to discuss a policy."

Kelly was back in twenty minutes to say Mr Albini had never been in to the bank but that Mr Talbot had told Mr Risby that he had everything insured with Colonial Mutual. "Good lad, so let's see if we can get anything out of them." A couple of minutes later he got on to the regional office who kept him waiting but came back to say that Mr Talbot had had the house and contents insured with them and that, yes, a Mr Daniel William Halpert, same address, had taken out a home and contents policy with them only a month ago. They said they couldn't give out details of the amounts—

"It doesn't matter. But has he got the contents itemised?"

He didn't mind to wait; at least he could now be certain that there was a current policy, not that he had ever doubted there would be. The woman came back to say yes, everything was separately listed.

"And that includes artwork?"

"It does. Colonial furniture, some electrical goods."

"The paintings—are any by Aboriginal artists?"

"It would certainly seem so."

"And is there anything there by an artist called Christoph Hidoyono?"

She was obviously looking at long lists of items but at last she said, "Yes, here we are, three paintings by him." She hesitated then said, "Can I ask what the police interest in this is?"

"I've just heard that Mr Halpert's caretaker probably burnt down a warehouse in New South Wales two years ago, a similar scam most likely. And by the time anyone got near the paintings who was to say they were the genuine thing and not just a bit of wood and canvas going up in flames."

She sounded unfazed as she said, "Well, thank you for telling us."

"D'you ever go out and actually check that the contents tally with what's on the policy?"

"We can, though it's not usual. We can also ask for photographs or documentation."

"Then I would suggest a visit to Buckton without warning just might be worthwhile. If nothing else it puts them on notice."

He took time out from this to send Brent Kelly out on two calls and ask him to drop into the newsagents to get more envelopes and more paper on his way back. Then he took a long breath and drew over his memo pad with a few questions jotted on it and put through a call to Fraud at HQ in Sydney and asked to speak to their insurance expert, whoever that might be.

*

Brent Kelly had not expected to be involved in what he called 'big' crimes in Buckton. A stolen bicycle maybe, missing animals, careless drivers, but he listened to Dennis's points and then wrote them up with a kind of secret enthrallment. "It's nearly as good as … well, as James Bond."

"Except it's still mostly guess work. But I simply don't believe the connection between Halpert and Albini and the Hoysteds is coincidence. So any spare time keep digging for anything on any of them or on Hoysted Holdings—and if they're anything like Sam Hoysted they may well have

dozens of other small companies they could offer as front companies … and keep an eye out for this thing called The Art Trust, seems a few questions have been asked about it."

Dennis hadn't been able to tie down the possible warehouse fire enough for DS Peter McEnroy, about two years ago and possibly in or near Sydney wasn't good enough—and if it hadn't been seen as arson then the police involvement might not have been much more than checking that surrounding properties were safe.

"And another thing—those owners that got bashed both made it sound like revenge attacks. I think we might discount that for the moment. I think they might be lying. I did wonder if the galleries themselves were laundering money—but maybe we're missing something."

"Such as?"

"Why d'you need to launder money?"

"Well, if you'd made a lot from drugs—or maybe porn—or burglary—"

"So maybe the galleries themselves are a point of distribution. Here you've got some guys start up a nice little business, quite classy, people come along to openings, glass of sherry and all that, but not a lot of money in it unless you're handling the really big names. So someone offers you a loan through The Art Trust, all sounds pretty good, genuine art lovers, know their stuff, but somewhere down the track you find there are strings attached. Maybe you go along for a while. But maybe you start to feel you're out of your league, you'd like to opt out. But you can't opt out. And even hinting at it—round comes our Mr Albini with his tyre iron and you have six months of stitches and headaches and trying to regrow your hair—plenty of time to realise there's no easy way out."

Kelly hung on this with growing tension. "So you go back to work—and it's business as usual?"

"Pretty much. But our Mr Halpert is a man of many parts, or so it seems. He doesn't just want some paintings to look good on his walls. They've got to be making him extra money along the way. He doesn't mind to burn them if that'll bring the money rolling in. That maybe worked without a hitch—so, sooner or later, he's going to try it again. I can't second guess just how his mind works because I've never set eyes on the moron but I'd say he's overlapped with the Hoysteds somewhere, maybe realised that for all their big talk they're not good with money—and Bryce Hoysted is the sort of pathetic little creep that probably thinks it's the high point of his life to hobnob with some crime bosses, that's the sort of useless git he is. He knows his uncle made a lot more out of growing cannabis at Japana than he ever did out of cattle so there's just a chance he's thinking he might dabble his toes in that pool … "

"So what should we do?"

"Just go on with a bit of quiet digging—"

The bell on the door tinkled and Mary West came in. She lived a couple of blocks over and was in her seventies. Her family had run a little corner shop but finally felt that with age and the problem of competing with the supermarket it was time to retire. "Help you, Mrs West?" Dennis said as he pushed a pile of papers to the back of his desk.

"I think it's Artie, I think he's been making a nuisance of himself again, scraping away with his chisel on our windows."

"Brent," Dennis turned to him, "you'd better handle this." The young constable had not been able to get Artie Kees to admit to messing round, scraping window sills outside the surgery, but neither did he feel Artie was completely innocent. Like Dennis and other constables before him he faced the problem of trying to follow Artie's thought processes. "And check whether Mercers have sold him any chisels lately—or sold anyone else any chisels lately."

Brent Kelly went out and walked up the road with Mrs West asking her when she noticed the scrapes and how long she thought they might've been there. Mary West was an excellent witness because she was an overly keen and industrious housewife and without the shop to keep her busy she put most of her still abundant energies into keeping everything neat and nice. "I washed the windows only a day ago. I go round every week." Many people in Buckton only cleaned their windows once or twice a year. Unlike the doctors who had 'just happened to notice' Mrs West could give him a very precise timeframe in which the damage had been done.

"I'll see where Artie was during that time."

People rarely wanted Artie punished. He was intellectually handicapped. But they did want him warned off. Sometimes it worked. But this time Brent found Artie had an alibi. He knocked on the door of the old cottage but no one came. Finally the old man who lived next door came out and said rather feebly, "It's no good knockin', young man, Artie's not there." His expression suggested he was quite pleased to have Artie gone.

"So d'you know where he is?"

"Went to Winville yesterdee mornin'. An' with luck he won't be back for a few days."

"And what's he doing in Winville?"

"Well, he's gettin' his waterworks checked over, that's what I heard. That Sister Martin took him to the hospital there."

"And he hasn't come back?"

"Nope."

It wouldn't be hard to check, he could ring Sister Martin, but it would mean Artie couldn't have been out scraping the Wests' window sills. And if not Artie—then who? He couldn't come up with even a guess. One of the young delinquents round town; maybe a schoolkid. Even, perhaps, someone who didn't like the doctors or the Wests.

He went on down town and went into the Mercers' hardware and toyshop on the corner. It was an old-fashioned not very well organised shop but it did have the advantage that the family ran it and knew virtually every customer; it wasn't like having casuals on checkouts.

James Mercer said it was quite a while since Artie had come in. "I hate to lose a customer," he said with rather ponderous humour, "but Artie is the one I can do without."

"Anyone else buying chisels—or maybe a set of screwdrivers?"

Mr Mercer mulled on this and then he said, "Yeah, there was someone. That young fella that's Don Binnie's grandson. He said he was buying a set of chisels for his Pop's birthday." There was a faintly disbelieving edge to Mercer's statement. He hadn't pegged Rowan Burchall as a youngster likely to even remember his grandfather's birthday, let alone come down and buy him quite a nice present.

"And where does Don Binnie live? Is he any relation to Eve Binnie?"

"She's Malcolm's granddaughter, so related certainly, but," he tried to think how the family fit together, "… uncle, would it be … or cousin." He gave directions on how to find the Binnie household and after Constable Kelly had gone out he found himself trying to work out just what relation Eve might be to Don … because Don must be Malcolm's nephew which would make Eve … possibly first cousin once removed … but he thought he would run it past his wife later, she was better on how local families fitted together … No, Don was Malcolm's son, one of them, but someone had told him Malcolm had said 'he's no son of mine' and he wondered if that was meant to be taken literally. Probably not. And, this being Buckton, Malcolm might not have said any such thing anyway.

Constable Kelly had a much more immediate problem as he knocked on the Binnie household's front door. How to ask the key questions … He got a surly-looking teenager who said, "Yeah, what is it?"

"I came to see about the chisels you bought for your granddad's birthday. Can I see them?"

Don Binnie came out into the small hallway behind his grandson and stood there, wondering what this visit would prove to be about. Young Rowan only said, "Don't know what you're talking about."

"You bought a set of chisels, telling the shop you were buying them for your granddad's birthday. I'd like to check them."

"Buying chisels for my birthday!" Don suddenly burst out with.

"It wasn't me. Shop's got it wrong."

"I don't think so, son." It gave Brent Kelly a particular kind of pleasure to call Rowan 'son'; as though he felt he had in some way grown up, matured, in these last few weeks.

"And my birthday's not till January." Don Binnie came and stood beside his grandson. "Or am I going to get stolen goods?" His question came out sharp and strong. Because it had come to

him as he heard the doorbell and came out and saw Constable Kelly that he shouldn't need to be wondering about the police coming round. He had lived a quiet and largely law-abiding life. When he looked around the clan he felt he could say the same thing for most of them.

And now he knew people whispered about his grandchildren being delinquents in the making. He could blame Dennis Walsh for getting on to them—but at some level Rowan stopped being a 'police problem' and started being his problem. The thought made him feel his age.

"Okay, where are the chisels? I haven't got all day to stand around." It was the first time Kelly had felt able to say that, but Dennis said it, and it was often pretty effective in getting some action. The only trouble with this was that Dennis Walsh was a very different personality.

Rowan clearly didn't take Constable Kelly very seriously; his grandfather though was a slightly different problem. He would be certain to have something nasty to say later. "Why d'you want to see the chisels?" Don Binnie finally said as his grandson showed no sign of responding.

"Someone has been trying to dob Artie in, doing damage to look like what he does."

"So? Sure to be Artie. He's a total moron," Rowan looked more cheerful. "Doesn't even know what day it is."

"Except that Artie wasn't in Buckton when the damage was done. No good blaming him." He didn't think of himself as very good at reading body language but he knew now he was on the right track. Rowan Burchall had just assumed Artie would be around because he was 'always' around. A readymade scapegoat. Brent Kelly didn't know about young Burchall preferring to get other people to do the dirty work but he knew those particular chisels were responsible. His difficulty was the very minor nature of the damage done—but if someone had set it up so Artie would be seen as the culprit, and he didn't for one minute really think this kid would find much fun in scraping someone's window sill, then there must be more to it.

"Are you saying," Mr Binnie burst in, "that my grandson made some damage to look like Artie Kees messing around?"

"That's what it looks like."

Don Binnie didn't even wait for Constable Kelly to leave. He simply turned to his grandson and whacked him across the face with his open hand. "You think I've got nothing better to do than pay for the messes you make! Well, you've got another think coming!" A middle-aged woman and two more children came into the hall and stood watching the unexpected scene. "I've put up and put up with your nonsense year after year—your stealing and smart alec stuff, damaging other people's things—and all because I felt sorry for you all! And this's how you re-pay me for a home here? Well, answer me?" But Rowan showed no sign of answering this. Don Binnie hardly seemed to notice because he charged on. "By dragging our good name in the mud! By making people talk behind our backs! By bringing the police around! By having people think I didn't bring any of you up right! Well, that's all going to change round here! You shape up or you ship out! And that goes for the lot of you! I'm sick of all your lying and cheating and treating me like some old fool too senile to see what you're all up to! So you can get busy and pack your bags. I don't want any of you here—" He was getting breathless by the time he delivered his ultimatum.

"But—Dad—we can't leave, we haven't got any money!" Mrs Burchall looked angry and upset.

"Then it's about time you went out and made some. So go on! Start packing. I want the lot of you gone by the end of the week!"

Brent Kelly wasn't sure whether he should intervene. But no one was listening to anyone else. It was turning into a free-for-all, everyone trading insults and the younger grandchildren saying they never wanted to be here anyway—

In the middle of it all, Rowan turned and slipped away. His grandfather and his mother didn't even seem to notice his absence. Constable Kelly said, "I will have to do a proper interview with Rowan. See that he comes down to the station tomorrow."

"Oh, he'll be there," Don Binnie said loudly, "even if I have to drag him by both ears!"

By the time Kelly got back to the station he'd grown rather worried. Would his boss believe that far from resolving anything he had just apparently split a family up? And what had he said to precipitate everything?

Dennis listened to his account and finally said, “Good work. And don’t worry about the family. They’ll either sort it out or she and the kids’ll move out. It would probably be the best thing for them all. I think they took advantage of the old man just after his wife died and he was feeling a bit lonely and lost. But that Rowan is a right little thug in the making. He probably dared another kid to do the actual damage. But I wonder what their plan was. I don’t think he’d be satisfied with just getting Artie into trouble.”

“A genuine break-in maybe?”

“Could be. It’s still a bit up in the air but write it up and we’ll see if young Rowan does come in tomorrow.”

*

Rowan Burchall and his grandfather came in late the following afternoon. They were both obviously in very bad tempers. “Right,” Dennis said grimly, “come on in and we’ll record the interview.” He ran through Rowan’s details and then asked him to describe how he came to buy the chisels.

“Just went in and bought ’em. No big deal.”

“And you told whoever sold ’em to you—what?”

“Nothing. Didn’t tell ’em a thing.”

“And then you went where?”

“Home.”

“And what did you do with the chisels?”

“Nothing.”

“How much did they cost?”

“Thirty-four dollars.” So not on special …

“And the thirty-four dollars—how much pocket money d’you get a week?”

“Two dollars.”

“So you saved for how long?”

“A while.”

“Which is—how long?”

The longer this went on the more uneasy Rowan seemed to become; possibly because he saw it as a prelude to Walsh suddenly pouncing.

“About ten weeks.”

“So at two dollars a week—that’s twenty dollars—”

“I got some money for my birthday.”

“How much?”

“Dunno. Twenty maybe.”

“So, given that you spent no money on anything else, didn’t buy anything at the show, nothing like that, you’ve got enough for some chisels. Why did you want to get some chisels?”

“Just thought they might come in handy.”

“So you saved for two and half months plus your birthday money—just for something that *might* come in handy?”

“Yeah, well, I sometimes save up.”

“And when was your birthday?”

“March the tenth.”

“So you’ve been saving every penny since March the tenth?”

“Pretty much.”

“And what have you done with the chisels since you bought them?”

“Nothing much.”

“Well, name one thing.”

“Can’t think of anything.”

The unease was almost palpable but Rowan was clearly determined to tough it out.

“These chisels were so special that you’ve hardly spent a cent on anything else in three months—and now they’re just sitting round your room gathering dust. How come?”

“Just thought they’d be good to have.”

"To do what?"

"Just to own—not to do anything special."

"So what d'you do with them now you own them?"

"Nothing."

"You must do something."

"Can't think of anything."

"Lend them to other kids? Take 'em out and show 'em off?"

"No."

Dennis continued on, apparently completely unworried about the time it was taking, but both Rowan and his grandfather were increasingly tense. It was Don Binnie who finally stood up, shoved the chair back, and roared, "Just tell him!"

"Tell him what?" Dennis said with only the slightest emphasis on 'him'.

"Nothing." Rowan almost seemed to feel his grandfather had somehow broken the terrible tension and that he could now relax and treat the questions as mere mozzie bites.

"That you came home and boasted to your brother that you'd got Liam Billings to go round to the doctors' house of a night!" Don Binnie bent forward and yelled the words in his grandson's face. "That's the sort of grandson I've got! A sneaking lying little hooligan!"

"So you knew what was going on, Mr Binnie?"

"Only now—I didn't know what was going on then—"

"And if you had—you would've been straight on to the phone or round here?"

There was a long silence. Then Mr Binnie said gruffly, "Probably not."

Dennis let the silence draw out. Then he stood up and seemed to loom over grandfather and grandson. "Now you know why you've got a sneaking lying little hooligan, Mr Binnie, so I would suggest you get straight round to the Wests and to the doctors to apologise and this time the money for re-painting those window sills better come out of that two dollar per week pocket money. And I'll be watching you, son, because you haven't told me the truth about what's going on." He went over and clicked off the tape-recorder and said to his junior, "Label it and put it in the safe."

It was a chastened Don Binnie who said, "Is he free to go now?"

"Till next time."

After they'd gone out Dennis said wearily, "Don't know if we've headed them off at the pass—and I'll guarantee he didn't save up that money."

"You mean—he stole it?" Brent wasn't sure what he'd expected.

"Probably. But most likely from his mum's purse or the phone jar. Anyway, tidy up now—"

"I've found a phone number for that Cameron De Witt."

"Okay, see if he knows anything about Danny Halpert or Graeme Albini—particularly Halpert's business interests."

But Brent Kelly had no luck, only scoring a message to say Mr De Witt was unavailable; in the end he left a message just giving his name and the phone number here but without mentioning that it was the police trying to get in touch. He wasn't sure why his intuition told him that maybe Mr De Witt might not be keen on contacting the police. Something to do with the case losing him his job maybe … and a more nebulous fear: that if Cameron De Witt was now firmly on Danny Halpert's radar screen then Halpert just might've found a way to keep tabs on him. It wasn't only the police who tapped phones …

Case No. 5: Squeaky Clean?

Buckton Police had an unexpected visitor on Monday morning; a smartly-dressed woman of about thirty-five with sleek dark hair and a briefcase. She introduced herself as Katelyn Gerber and said she worked for Colonial Mutual and that she had just been around to visit Mr and Mrs Albini to see if their policy checked out. "I told them I was visiting various clients in the district, which I am, and that I wanted to check their policy against the art works there and see if they wanted to raise or

lower the values. Mr Albini said most of the stuff here was just rubbish in his eyes but he was only paid to mind it, not to like or admire it."

"And did it all tally with what you'd been given?"

"No. Nothing did. He said Mr Halpert changes things around, sends some paintings to galleries, sells others, it's constantly changing. For very cheap paintings that would not matter, things for a couple of hundred dollars that you'd bought to liven up your dining room. But they've got paintings valued at up to sixty thousand dollars on their list. For that sort of money we need to know exactly what we're insuring. I asked him to fax me an up-dated list." She accepted the mug of tea Constable Kelly handed her. "But I think you're right. I think someone's setting something up to pull a fast one. We now share a clearing house of information with other insurers. I will be looking to see if either man comes up as a person making a sizeable claim anywhere else."

"And keep all your itemised lists. I think there might be a different kind of scam going on as well."

"Something you can tell me about?"

"Well, an Aboriginal artist in North Queensland was reportedly paid two thousand dollars for a painting which was said to be going to Indonesia—and then it turned up in a Sydney gallery only a month or two later with fifty thousand on it. Now I don't know if they simply diddled the artist out of forty-eight thousand—or whether it was priced at fifty thousand to help someone later claim that amount if anything happens to it."

"I see." She made a note. "Can you give me the details?"

"No. But there's a long time art buyer called Charles Jensen. He's based in Brisbane but he's on the road most of the time. If he's not listed in the phone book ask—" and he scribbled Inspector Spicer's number down and handed it over.

After she'd gone out again he said to his junior, "Maybe some coppers'd get more active if their failures hit 'em in their hip pocket. I'd say Mr Albini is probably on the phone to his boss right now … "

"And I wonder how she got in? D'you think she climbed the gate?"

"Quite likely. She looks a resourceful woman." Though it would've been a struggle in a pencil-slim skirt and high heels … and Graeme Albini's trip away that past evening was apparently to pick up yet another dog. Now three large dogs did the rounds of that yard. He hoped Ms Gerber was being well paid by her company …

*

While Dennis had, briefly, the attractive company of Ms Gerber, Fiona was sitting in the garden of the house next door with Maurie Smith. Norman Jennings had sold his farm and moved into what had been the old police house behind the station, and between the station and the Walsh home. Maurie had lived with Norman for some time and helped with the cooking at the Coolibah Hotel. He felt he had gone to live with Norman and his cousin Marguerite as somewhere to live when he first arrived in Buckton and because Marguerite felt guilty that her father had probably killed Maurie's great-uncle. But Maurie had not been very enthusiastic about moving with Norman and even less enthusiastic about living so close to Dennis and all the trappings of a police presence.

Maurie was one of the 'Stolen Generations' and he had mixed feelings about police, mixed feelings about Dennis … and a vaguer feeling that maybe it was time he was moving on. But he had helped Norman move. He had moved in himself until he could decide what to do next. Norman was full of ideas on how to change the house to suit his 'kinks' and had Winston Pounder coming round to re-paint several of the rooms. But Maurie, when he wasn't at the pub, simply sat in the little bush garden Dennis had put in and seemed to be lost in some kind of reverie …

Fiona understood that Maurie felt unsettled and not very happy about the move. She didn't want to influence him one way or another but she felt it would be damaging to Maurie to move on; that he would very likely drink more and find it difficult to settle in and make new friends in a new place … He looked his age. There was always something a little unkempt and down-at-heel about him. And he didn't have a lively outgoing articulate way about him …

"I would be very sorry if you were to move, Maurie. Have you got anywhere special in mind?"

"Just hit the road," he said vaguely.

"Not Winville?"

"Probably not." He dropped back into a long rather moody silence. She didn't try to get him to talk any more. The garden was almost bereft of bird sounds but the first of the wattles were just coming into flower. It was nice just to sit.

At last he said in a slightly different voice, "It's nothin' to do with you. I'm grateful to you an' your mum for helping me find me mum an' everything. But I can't forgive 'em, I never will, those bastards, the way they took everything from me … even me name … an' now nothing seems to matter all that much, just puddle along an' die an' be gone, an' there'll be no one. They took everything, what was left o' me mob, the way I never belonged anywhere, nobody cared two pins what happened to me … an' all for what?"

She nodded without saying anything. 'And all for what?' Yes, what had Maurie ever done to deserve to be dumped in a boys' home as a baby and simply be treated all his life as a nuisance; as someone who didn't matter to anyone—when his mother who had loved him had died still grieving and still not knowing what had happened to her little boy. As she thought about it and thought about her privileged life she felt tears well up in her eyes. 'There but for the Grace of God go I' … But she had been born white, born into a comfortably-off family with every advantage.

Maurie turned to her and said drearily, "Don't cry, love."

She managed to smile through her tears. "Sometimes, I *want* to cry, Maurie, when I think about your life. It seems to sum up so many things which are wrong with this country … all the ways people's lives were damaged and no one wants to say sorry … or give you compensation … if you *can* compensate … I'm sad but I'm angry too … and I wish there was something I could do."

Maurie had always, since he was old enough to go into a pub, tended to drown his sorrows in a glass with a good collar of foam. And now, unexpectedly, he felt tears in his own eyes. His first response was to try and blink them away in sudden embarrassment. And then, for the first time in sixty years, he simply let them trickle down his seamed brown face.

Fiona stayed quiet and simply let him cry. That little boy in a dormitory with dozens of other frightened lonely little boys had probably never been allowed to simply burrow into his pillow and cry his heart out. She felt it was probably something which might give him a fleeting sense of ease. At last she put an arm round his shoulders.

"I wish I could say I was clairvoyant, Maurie, and could see something wonderful round the corner still waiting for you … " It was difficult to associate Maurie with success, with happy accidents, with the sort of unexpected nice things which happened to some people. "But this is just a thought. When I went to Ali Deane's wedding at the little church in Winville I know they have services once a month for the local Murris and I thought it would be rather nice to go one Sunday … I don't really want to go on my own … but I wondered if you would like to come with me?"

He didn't rush the unexpected suggestion. "Not much of a one for church, y'know." He might equally have said 'what did churches and religions ever do for me?' But at last he said, "Would you take the kids with you?"

"They might want to come—but they might not find it quite what they had hoped for—having to sit down and sit still for a while … "

"I don't mind."

Fiona knew Maurie well enough to know that this was a tentative yes. Later she rang old Mr Higgins at the Parrvilla Home in Winville to see if he knew which Sunday was the Aboriginal and Islander service. Jasper Higgins had been the Uniting Church minister in Buckton until his retirement and she still occasionally managed to make time to pop by and see him in Winville. He was increasingly deaf and forgetful but she felt he was a man of quiet and wise concern. He might like to introduce Maurie around a bit in Winville …

*

DS Wang turned up the following morning and suggested that Dennis drop everything and come out to Japana with him. "Well, hold on a minute, mate. I'll have to get Brent organised. Make yourself a coffee."

"No. But don't be long."

Dennis was tempted to return something sarcastic but DS Wang struck him as being very much on edge. Maybe it was what thoughts of Japana did to him. He turned to his junior and ran through the things to be done this morning. Constable Kelly might still feel embarrassing things for Fiona but at least he was shaping up as a hard-working sensible young man in other ways. The station should be safe with him.

On the road, Dennis said, "Any movement on the case? And how d'you want to run your interviews?"

"That wasn't why I asked you—or only partly. We caught Albini talking to Halpert last night—" Dennis looked at him in surprise; from the way Wang had responded he had accepted that nothing was going to happen on that front.

"I didn't want to have all that trouble—but I do give your hunches *some* credence—"

"Wasn't a hunch, mate."

Daniel ignored this comeback. "And I had a ring from a bod in Sydney, a Peter McEnroy. He wanted to know if it was officially our case or whether you were some sort of lone maverick. I said it looked like becoming our case, worse luck. He said he'd found that fire, Danny Halpert has or had a big warehouse on a property he owns back of Windsor. He'd put in air conditioning and a de-humidifier as he was storing some valuable stuff in the barn. They said it was an electrical fault and the insurer paid up. But when they looked at Albini's early life they found he had trained as an electrician. Simple to get a reputable firm in to do the installations and wiring—and then have Albini mess with it."

Dennis simply nodded. He didn't doubt that both Albini and Halpert were crooks. Just how the Hoysteds and, perhaps, some Indonesians got into the mix he still wasn't sure. "So did you get an actual conversation?"

"We did. They were both on mobiles, looks like Graeme doesn't trust his wife not to listen in—or you not to take a squizz at his normal phone bills, and it isn't only Prince Charles who gets his calls picked up. Sydney did it for us. McEnroy said they know Halpert's suss, they just haven't been able to pin anything down—and he has good lawyers. They got Albini saying the insurance company was sniffing around and to hold off on 'things' and to fax an up-dated list of the artworks directly to the insurer. And then he said, and this's the part you're not going to like, that it might be worth taking out the nosy copper they've now got in Buckton. Something about them being sold a pup there. I don't know how we should interpret 'taking out' … but I don't imagine it's something you'll want to share with Fiona." And the 'pup' being more hands-on policing in Buckton instead of half-asleep Sergeant Bosch?

Hence the quiet conversation in the car.

"So it was Albini who said the bit about taking me out?"

"Yep."

"Is that enough to bring him in for questioning? He's already got serious black marks on his record."

"Well, if he comes into the station wearing an overcoat—run for it," Daniel said with something close to a snigger. "No, but seriously, just back off for a while. We'll continue to monitor his conversations with his boss."

"Okay. When we get back I'll get Brent to run you off a copy of all we've got. It doesn't necessarily add up—but I'm absolutely certain there's a Hoysted connection."

"Don't tell me," Daniel Wang went back to doom and gloom. "We've had that Duarte guy nosing round. He didn't approach us but I heard he'd been out to the airfield."

"Yep. He's going to go public. I don't think he knows whether Sam is innocent or not. But he's going to say that Towner and Whittaker and Hull all should have publicly acknowledged their link to the Neurand Trust and that it paid them very well for being trustees. But it isn't your worry. They would've offered you money if you'd been in charge then. I assume you would've said no."

It was a fraught area but although Dennis thought that Daniel might've taken too much of DS Garcia's worldview on trust he didn't think he would accept a bribe.

Daniel turned slightly to his passenger then back to the road and said quietly, "Garcia offered me money—to lose some old files and forget about some of the stuff I'd read … I said no."

"How much did he offer you?"

Daniel hesitated. "Fifty thousand."

"Yeah, well, I *can* see the temptation." Though whether Garcia really had that sort of money to spare … and someone only had to take a tenner to be compromised …

"I could've bought a house. But it wasn't the money. It was other things. I didn't have any real mates there. Greg's okay but he's not interested in my life and I didn't like some of the stuff some of the guys come out with. If it's not racist then it comes pretty close. And I lost count of the times Towner called me a 'clever dick' in a sneering sort of way. Garcia understood all that stuff because he'd been through it when he joined up." Dennis could see that this degree of empathy in a small and not very friendly and inclusive country town would be seductive. "I tended to follow his line, not query things, because I didn't want that feeling of being out on my own."

"So how did you deal with it?"

"It wasn't me. It was Adey. He called a meeting of everyone and just said we all shape up or we ship out—and that includes how we behave in the station as well as how we treat the public. And then he starts running down a list of stuff he'd overheard. He was an easy guy to overlook, he was so quiet, and it was amazing how much he knew about what was going on—either that or he had bionic ears." Dennis gave that a grin. "Hassell said something to him about how they didn't want political correctness to take over out here—and Adey said something about expecting courtesy from every officer at all times. Maybe he was asking for the moon. You can't blame people for letting off steam sometimes. But it did make a difference."

"And did you tell Adey about Garcia's offer?"

"No. Maybe I should've—but I just couldn't bring myself to dob him in." And with nothing in writing Garcia could as easily have claimed it was all a misunderstanding, if not total bollocks.

"I wonder where he was planning to find the fifty thousand if you said you'd take it?"

"I don't know."

But they left it at that as Japana showed up in the distance; the dull brown haze that was evidence of thousands of hooves shifting the fine dust, and the lines of silos.

*

Daniel took over the main office at Japana and called the men in one by one. Wilson Rabey, the current office manager, had given Daniel the names of the men who had left but he said he couldn't provide forwarding addresses. "Once the men finish their contracts, you know, they're off our screen." Maybe. Although Dennis was inclined to think that some of the men would know—at least where the missing ones intended to head for next.

Daniel went over the same ground with every employee: how well had they known Oliver Hone, where were they on the day he disappeared, what did they know of his past life and his plans, had they taken part in the butchering of an animal while it was still alive, had they helped themselves to Hone's photographic equipment. The answers were almost word for word what they had each offered up last time. But Wang thought it did make a slight difference having Walsh sitting, large and immobile with his gaze fixed on the interviewee; that it somehow undermined their confidence in what they were repeating so glibly.

To get through the entire workforce took them more than three hours. "And that isn't the lot, is it?" Dennis said when Daniel finally yawned and stretched. "There's still men over the railway, the other side of Dinna."

"I asked them to have everyone here. How many do you think we're missing?"

"Well, we haven't seen this Eddie Diefenhalter that s'posed to make the final call on which cattle go to the abattoir."

Daniel turned and called Wilson Rabey back inside. "That isn't everyone."

"It's everyone who's in today."

"Where do we find Diefenhalter then?"

"No. He's not here any more—"

"Bloody hell!" Daniel's frustrations boiled over. "Then why isn't he on your list!"

Rabey said defensively that it wasn't up to him. Daniel made an angry comeback to that. Dennis intervened to say, "Whittaker tells you who goes on what lists?"

"It's not up to him either." But Rabey didn't sound convincing.

Gavin Whittaker was a Winville lawyer who did the legal work for Japana. Dennis got up and beckoned Daniel to come outside and then he said quietly, "Tackle Gavin today. I get the impression he's getting pretty fed up with the Japana work. He just might be willing to stretch a point on this. His daughters are in their teens and I think he would disengage if he could." Maybe he was reading more into it than it warranted but Dennis Walsh felt he could understand better now how a father might well try to distance the most unattractive aspects of his working life from his children's lives …

Daniel agreed without much enthusiasm. He had had to question Whittaker several times when cases came up with legal ramifications and he always came away with the feeling that Whittaker had got the better of him.

"Okay," Dennis went on, "mind if I ask Rabey a couple of questions?"

"Be my guest."

Wilson Rabey when asked if Japana had sent letters of condolence to the families of Constable Wrightson and Oliver Hone said no, not as far he knew. "They died on your premises, because of things Japana had done or had not done. So why not? Don't you feel any responsibility?"

"Not up to me."

Dennis turned to Daniel. "Has *anyone* been in touch with Hone's family?"

"They got an official letter, I suppose from the embassy … They'll cremate the body eventually but they don't want to do it till they get someone for his death." This was a discreet way of saying "until they know how he was killed".

"And post his ashes back? Has anyone suggested to them that they should be taking a civil case out against Japana? After all, Hone lived and worked on these premises. Japana had a duty of care towards him, same as if he was in some army barracks or a boarding school or … whatever." Dennis turned back to Rabey. "Did letters come for Oliver Hone after he disappeared?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Well, who sorts the mail and distributes it?"

"Now I do."

"So Jimmy Hove used to do it? What did he do with Hone's mail?"

"How would I know?" Hove looked like a nonentity but certainly didn't behave or sound like one; Rabey both looked and sounded like one, a mere pen-pusher, a man who would do as he was told but who would never take any initiative, not even to take it upon himself to decide what to do with letters addressed to Oliver Hone …

"Then you'd better do some hard thinking, Mr Rabey," Daniel said calmly, "because you worked every day only this far," and he spread his arms slightly, "away from James Hove—and James Hove is in deep deep shit. It won't be hard to let a little of it splash on you."

Wilson Rabey's response was to put on a mulish expression and clamp his lips together.

As the two men got back in the car Daniel Wang said, "You see what it's like."

"Yep. But pursue Diefenhalter and Whittaker—and I'd say it would be worth digging up Rabey's background—"

"You think he knows more than he's saying?"

"Greg found himself in big trouble because people said how could he work at the next desk to Doug Towner and not know Towner was corrupt. I think it had more to do with Greg, it genuinely never occurred to him to ask whether Towner was corrupt rather than just incompetent. But I don't think Rabey's that kind of personality. He may not ever go out on a limb but he doesn't seem to've had any trouble stepping straight into Hove's shoes. I'd say he knew exactly what was going on in this office every day. Whether he knew more than the ins and outs of running the place … "

"I see what you mean." Each time he had come out here he felt overwhelmed by the place but having Dennis along somehow brought everything down to a few manageable lines of enquiry. "And there's the other side of it—did Oliver ever write home to say someone was giving him a hard time or he hated the place or whatever."

"Even if the Hones—well, not Hones, whatever their real name is—"

"Homan-Mortlake."

"Yeah, them. Even if they've had an official letter—I'd say it would be a good idea for you to write them a nice letter. Bring them up-to-date, ask them if Oliver ever mentioned anything, ask them if they're thinking of coming to Australia to collect his ashes, the usual guff, and do another search of Hove's possessions—"

"He's had plenty of chances to get rid of stuff. Whittaker couldn't get bail but he did get permission for Hove to go back there and clear out all his things so they could put someone else into the caravan."

"Japana put in an offer for the house that Halpert bought. They apparently offered sixty-something-thousand. They would've got it if Halpert hadn't turned up. Might be worth asking Gavin about that too."

Daniel thought of saying something sour about 'anything else you'd like me to be getting on with?' but he didn't. He still had no sense of anyone's guilt or innocence but he knew he had got bogged down in those two strands: hoping against hope they could still tease some material evidence from the corpse and hoping against hope that one of the employees would do something, say something, give something away …

He took great care and thought over his letter to Oliver's parents and he set DC Ali Deane to work on sussing out Wilson Rabey's personal history. The sense of doing something seemed to re-invigorate him. It was Greg Sullivan who said to Deane later, "Looks like Dennis has got Daniel stirred into action and I ask myself—is that a good thing or not?"

Ali Deane hadn't found her time in the CIB as ever easy but she had managed to retain a very positive outlook on life and work. "It's good, Greg, it's what Dennis does best—but when Daniel cracks the case he'll still get the kudos and feel it was mostly his work—" And then she realised that probably wasn't the most tactful way to present it to Greg who was the same rank as Daniel but had been passed over as head of this little branch …

*

Janice Low looked cheerful and optimistic when she ran into Fiona and the children browsing in Mercers' store one evening. Fiona remarked on this and Janice said breezily, "Oh, I am. I've got the position in Winville. It'll mean working under Brian Collyer again but I think I can manage. And it will give me a real chance to see whether Ramón and I and Sophie can work as a family. So wish me luck."

Little Sophie Lefroy's mother had gone to jail for child abuse but would be out in a few months. Rumour had it that her sister had come from the USA and was urging her to join with her and take out a case against their father for incest and abuse. Sophie herself still lived with two registered foster parents, the Wyeths, just outside of Winville.

"I thought you didn't like Sophie," Fiona dropped her voice although her children were engaged with choosing something for Robbie's second birthday. As well as his wrapped presents they had got him a gift voucher so he could come in here and make a choice of his own. He didn't really understand the amount of money he had to spend but Elise was happily steering him away from the things which were too expensive.

"I didn't." Janice was nothing if not honest. "I really thought she was a nasty little brat. But she is a different child now that she's away from her mother. I wonder if that would've been the case even if all that stuff hadn't been going on behind the scenes?"

"It's an interesting question, isn't it? Would any child have a different personality, a different way of relating to the world, with a different set of parents?"

"Oh, I think so. If I took your kids and sent them round to, say, the Mackies or the Maxwells or the Porters or even my Mum and Dad—they would be different."

Fiona smiled at that. "Well, they'd certainly be in their element out at the Porters." The Porters loved horses and now that her own children had an old pony borrowed from Harry Kuhl they were discovering the fascination of ponies. "But are you looking forward to living in Winville?"

Again Janice dropped her voice. "Definitely. Home isn't the nicest of places since Mum discovered that Dad was carrying on with Dolly Parton." Dolly Parton was the nickname some locals had given to Suzette Waller while she worked on the Co-op checkout; she had packed up and

moved a couple of weeks ago—but too late to save Mrs Low from the embarrassment of learning about her husband's discreet visits. "I'll have Travis probably coming round wanting to borrow money but, brother or not, I'm going to tell him I've got better things to do with my income."

"Like Ramón wanting to spoil Sophie?"

"A bit. But I do understand his feelings, as though he wants to make up to her for those lost years. But the Wyeths I think have convinced him that what she really needs is friends and activities and lots of love and hugs that have nothing sexy about them. She'll go to kindy there next year but she's started going to a playgroup and she's having ballet lessons and going to visit several other kids in their homes and that kind of thing. It's all made such a difference." It wasn't a full size happy ending; Sophie's mother would be out of jail in the not-very-distant future and it was anyone's guess whether she would immediately try to get Sophie back. Equally Ramón was still on a temporary visa. They could refuse to renew it at any time.

Then Janice dropped her voice, "And I heard that new constable went out to warn Boyd off bothering Eve."

"Yes, I heard that. Do you think he's stayed warned off? It's hard to think of Brent making a very powerful case to him—"

"Well, the funny thing is—Boyd does seem to have backed off. Eve thinks it's because Kelly's Irish."

Fiona blinked. "And that's significant?"

"In some way. I don't exactly know how. Maybe because it was so unexpected?"

"Maybe he's planning a trip to Ireland—or he's got some business connection to Ireland?"

"Time will tell," Janice said rather drily. "But at least she can relax a bit now, it was really getting her down … "

After Janice had paid for her purchase and gone out she found herself pondering on that other question. Children. One set of parents. A different set. How much difference did it make? It was a pity that Elise had taken after Dennis rather than Fiona and had gingery curls and the sort of very fair skin that freckled at the slightest chance. But she still thought their children were very lucky—that although Dennis and Fiona seemed such an ill-matched couple on the surface they had still managed to give their children something which seemed more than the sum of its parts. She wasn't quite sure what she meant. Ramón was worlds away from Dennis although she did not doubt that they both shared something of a chauvinistic view of the world. Yet it was difficult, now, to imagine Dennis without Fiona. She even suspected that Dennis needed Fiona more than Fiona needed Dennis. Perhaps in that was a lesson to be drawn on …

Fiona as she took Robbie's choice over to the counter, a set made up of ball and small bat and wickets to play French cricket in their backyard, had a rather different sense of revelation. Was the reason the little boy was making such heavy weather of childcare to do with Elise?

She had rung Kate Brumby to see if her little boy Kai might like to come and play with Robbie some time. Buckton actually had two Kate Brumbys, (and two Jess Brumbys) one a young mother and one just finishing school. This one sounded a bit startled and uneasy. She probably pictured herself sitting chatting with Fiona while the boys played—and the panicky sense that she couldn't conduct a conversation with a former bank manager—or she would leave Kai there and treat Fiona as a kind of baby-sitter—except that she couldn't see herself using an ex-bank manager as a mere baby-sitter either. She finally said awkwardly that she was rather busy at the moment. Fiona did understand, both the busyness with a toddler and the underlying sense of discomfort, and didn't take it to heart.

She had had a different experience when she set about finding a regular baby-sitter for the nights when she had a Council meeting and Dennis was still out. She had thought of asking one of the Thomas girls who were all nice girls and responsible and sensible.

But Dennis had suggested asking Mrs Tripp. Her first thought was that Mrs Tripp who was in her fifties would be offended at being offered what was usually seen as a job for teenagers. But he'd said he thought she was missing Russell and would enjoy time with their children. Russell was a bit slow on the uptake but he was careful and kind-hearted, and probably more than any other young man around town he thought the sun shone out of Dennis, and he had got himself a job at the

nursery and was doing well at it and he had married Karina Barry and was, according to his boss Tony Thomas, blissfully happy. But Russell and Karina now rented their own home and were busy with their own lives. Russell's mum missed her last little fledgling.

Mrs Tripp sounded startled, understandably, when Fiona rang. Then she said rather cautiously, "I s'pose I could—if you were really stuck—but I'm sure you'll find a young woman if you keep asking around."

"I haven't asked anyone else, Mrs Tripp, but Dennis thought you might enjoy it occasionally. So I just wondered if you'd like to come round to have afternoon tea with us one day." The afternoon tea hadn't happened yet; not because Mrs Tripp was particularly busy but because she thought she needed time to get used to the idea …

Now Fiona found herself thinking over the way the two children related. Elise was more than a big sister; at home he had her attention, her support, her help and teaching. Elise might be human enough to enjoy the lion's share of the attention but she didn't see her brother as a threat to her position and was very good with him, patient and cheerful and kind, as she taught him the things she reveled in or they both shared in the chance to learn some dance steps or went back to doing a little Russian with Anya Mackie.

Yet, as soon as they turned in the gate at the childcare centre, a separation occurred. Elise was encouraged to join with the older children in their games and stories; Robert was assumed to be like other toddlers, needing naps and more carefully supervised play with the other young ones …

She wondered how useful this insight might be and how she might gently encourage Rob to remain close but a little less dependent on Elise …

*

Cameron De Witt rang Brent Kelly late one evening to ask, rather brusquely, "Who are you and why do you want me?"

It took Kelly a moment to remember where De Witt might come into things, then he said rather diffidently, "It's the problems with Danny Halpert and Graeme Albini. I'm with Buckton Police and Albini is now living in the house Danny Halpert bought here. We heard you knew something about Mr Halpert."

"You mean—you want me to help the *police*?" He said it in such a way that it suggested something quite unheard-of. Brent Kelly wasn't sure how to respond to the amazement and sarcasm in De Witt's question. Perhaps De Witt felt the police had something to do with the failure of his case; that police buddies had not been prepared to come forward and stand behind their information when he was sued for libel.

"Is there a problem with that?"

"A problem! What planet d'you live on, mate?" Then he seemed to take pity on Kelly. "I assume you're a new kid on the block?"

"Well, I guess so. I've only been in Buckton a few weeks. And we wondered what it was that you'd dug up on Halpert—"

"We being?"

"My boss, Dennis Walsh, and me."

"Sounds like Little Ireland there." The sarcasm was back in full force. "And you'd be mates with Ron Maguire, would you?"

"No, I've never met him. But we were told he investigated the bashings of those gallery owners—" Kelly wasn't sure how much he should share with someone who didn't sound in the least sympathetic or interested. Yet Dennis, too, had put a vague question mark beside Maguire's name; he might simply be busy, not want to have the case come back to him, might even be seriously incompetent, but there was the other niggling possibility that he might be closer to Halpert than anyone knew …

"Investigated? Well, I guess that's one name for it."

"He said he was disappointed that Albini didn't do more time."

"Yeah, he would. But then Albini's only a bit of muscle. And there's no way he was going to heavy Albini to find out who set him up to take the fall."

"You mean—you didn't know Albini and Halpert were connected?"

"Oh, I knew the bastards were connected all right. But proving it was another thing. Montpelier told me Halpert's behind The Art Trust but when I went looking there was no sign of him. The phantom trustee. I felt like taking to Montpelier with an iron bar myself. But he's scared shitless so it wouldn't do much good."

"You know Albini's been having treatment to get rid of his birthmark?"

"No. But it doesn't surprise me. He's lying low now, is he?"

This put Brent Kelly in a bind. He could just say yes and brush it off—but if De Witt had useful information—though if he said 'no, we think he's going to set up another scam' that might be giving away too much. "It seems he was behind the burning down of Halpert's warehouse near Windsor two years ago—but we can't prove it."

"Was he now? Halpert got a million dollar pay-out just by saying he had some valuable stuff stored there. Who was to say the valuable stuff didn't go walkabout the day before?"

"There is that … "

"So what d'you bods want from me? Or are you offering something?"

"We'd like to know what you know about Danny Halpert. But I can't offer you anything without checking with my boss. You could come and see Albini, I s'pose."

"Oh, I could, could I? Thanks a bundle! And where the hell is Buckton?"

Brent gave him detailed instructions on how to find the town. But he didn't really believe that the journalist would turn up. If anything, he thought De Witt wanted to forget he had ever so much as heard about Halpert and Albini. And when he repeated the conversation to Dennis he realised he had no idea where De Witt had been ringing him from.

"Depends how hungry he is for a story," Dennis said thoughtfully.

"And should we tell him anything?"

"Mmmm … a tricky one there. But he said he couldn't link Halpert to this Art Trust thing?" Kelly nodded. "Okay, well, we won't waste time on it. And he said he got some of his material from this Montpelier bloke?"

"It sounds like it."

"So did Montpelier deliberately mislead him so his case wouldn't stand up when Halpert took him to court? Or did Montpelier lose his nerve and not give De Witt enough to make the case stand up? And was he definitely suggesting Maguire was corrupt?"

"That's what it sounded like."

Dennis pondered on this a while. "I thought Maguire just didn't want to shift his lazy carcass enough to get me some more info … but maybe he wanted me off his back. And those gallery owners that didn't respond to us … what was going on there?" He sat in silence another minute then he burst out with: "I hate this business of trying to solve things in this hands-off way! I've got leave end of September so maybe I should take a quick trip to Sydney—except I'd be a fish out of water trying to go round bloody art galleries … "

"I wonder if McEnroy is corrupt? Or that man you spoke to about the business in Artarmon?"

"Let's hope we've struck lucky. But I think the ball's in De Witt's court now. If he's interested enough—but losing a defamation case's probably put him off trying to get the low-down on Halpert—and maybe he's not game to publish anything more on him."

"And if he does turn up—all he can do is park outside that house and hope that he gets a glimpse of Mr Albini."

"True. But we've left someone out of the loop. These kids of his—where are they—and what do they know—and how do they feel with their parents stuck in Buckton? And maybe we need to get hold of the article De Witt wrote. And is that why Montpelier got bashed—or did the article come later? I've given Daniel a copy of our stuff but ring him and tell him about De Witt's call and see if he can get us the article and the details of the defamation case. We haven't got a date but I assume it was news at the time."

*

It was not Cameron De Witt who turned up a week later but an unknown man in a Jaguar saloon. The car, if not the driver, aroused considerable interest in Buckton when he stopped at the local pharmacy to ask for directions to the police station. Mrs Dalby came out on to the street to

point the way—only to find at least half a dozen people looking at the car. It was probably ten years old or more but that didn't stop it being an exotic beast on Buckton's streets … they hadn't seen a Jaguar since Mal Christiansen had swanned round town in his E-type …

Several people going into or coming out of the Bank of the Darling Downs also stopped for a brief stickybeak before going on with their business. But if they debated the unknown man's business with Dinny Walsh and young Kelly it was unlikely any of them came up with a likely scenario.

The well-dressed man with silver hair came into the station after a moment's hesitation. It probably was an absurd thing to hope that this little town, this little brick box probably containing a couple of unsophisticated plods, could rescue him from the abyss. And even getting here had required considerable sleight-of-hand; a proposed week on the Gold Coast to shake off a persistent cough and touch of pleurisy, a day out from his hotel after collecting brochures on the sanctuary at Currumbin and other local tourist venues … Perhaps no one was taking any notice but he had schooled himself to believe that nothing he did went totally unnoticed. And seeing the group of people here collect round to stare at his car was a reminder that it was a mistake. He should've put it in for repairs of some kind and hired something that no one would take any particular notice of …

He went in and found a man on the phone, a very big man going grey and probably around fifty, and all his fears about rednecks and people who would ridicule his private agonies came back in full force; the sort of man, maybe, who reaches for his gun when someone mentions 'culture' …

Dennis looked up and said, "Be with you in a tick," before telling the person at the other end to do another drive around, cows didn't usually disappear into thin air, "and don't forget to check the park there." His caller obviously wasn't too pleased with this brush-off but the sergeant hung up and said, "Okay, so what's your problem?" Talking to Ken McLaren about his wandering stock always left Dennis in a bad mood.

"My name is Henry Montpelier. I believe you e-mailed me."

"We certainly did. Come in here." Dennis came round and opened the door to the small interview room. "Can you do with a cup of tea?"

"Coffee, if you have it."

Dennis hoped his constable would turn up in time to hear whatever Mr Montpelier had come a very long way, physically and probably psychologically, to share. If people like Fiona looked out of place in Buckton, Mr Montpelier looked even more of a fish out of water. He was offering his visitor a biscuit when Kelly drove in and parked and came in looking rather down in the dumps. But when Dennis inclined his head towards the interview room and said, "Leave everything, we've got Montpelier here," his mood changed dramatically. "You can take notes," Dennis went on as he went back into the interview room.

"Okay, mate, you've come to help us nail Danny Halpert? Is that it?"

"I … really don't know. I don't think anyone can do that. I have considered suicide but it would distress my wife."

"In that case, maybe you'd best start at the beginning and just talk."

"It's hard to know where … but … a friend and I had a small gallery, we leased it from something called The Art Trust. It makes loans and grants to people like us, to artists, for bursaries and travel overseas and bringing exhibitions here. My friend decided to go back to England and we gave up the lease but I thought I would try on my own if I could find a place I liked. I saw the gallery in Artarmon and it had a very comfortable flat and my wife liked it. This is nearly twenty years ago. We didn't have a lot of money. We discussed whether to just try and get by on commissions from local painters and craftspeople or try to get some big name artists and get our name on the map. And we went back to The Art Trust to see about getting a bridging loan. It was very easy and the repayments were very small. But things went down, what with Keating's recession 'we had to have' and a couple of other minor problems, and we got behind. Someone came round from the trust and said it wasn't a problem but maybe we should think about having a really 'commercial' exhibition just to make money.

"We had staked our name on finding good young artists and helping to launch them—and suddenly they wanted us to take on this Indonesian guy with his folk scenes. Don't get me wrong,

they were good paintings of their type, but they were just miles away from what we wanted to do. I turned them down and they said in that case as we had a bit of storage space maybe we could store a bit of stuff for a couple of artists who were going overseas. We said that wouldn't be a problem if it was just a couple of crates."

He sat back and drew a long breath. Dennis said, "And you looked in the crates?"

"Not immediately. Lou and I were busy. We just let them sit there. Someone came and collected them and then about a month later, they brought a couple more. This time we did get curious. If they were art works worth storing were they things worth having on our walls. So we opened it up."

"Like Pandora's box?" Constable Kelly said suddenly. He had been jotting Montpelier's words down with intense concentration.

"Probably. But it wasn't immediately obvious. There were paintings in the crates all right. We took a couple out and some did look like Hidoyono's work though they weren't signed—but others were just total rubbish. A ten-year-old could do something better. We really didn't know what to think. We put them all back but Lou said 'what's that white powder on the bottom of the frame? And we took the painting back out and saw that there was a panel in the frame. You wouldn't know there was anything there if it hadn't shifted just a crack. We opened it up and found it was full of small plastic bags of white powder and one had leaked."

"Uh huh. So what did you do?"

"We closed everything up again, made it look like it was untouched, wiped the powder off. And then we said to each other—is someone using The Art Trust? Or is The Art Trust itself … We still owed about three thousand dollars. It wasn't big, we thought of selling some of our furniture and Lou's jewelry just to get out from under. We thought of contacting the police but there would be all this bad publicity just when we were starting to get a good reputation—and we had two really good exhibitions teed up. We didn't know if they'd take it in their stride or cancel. We were still going round and round the mulberry bush when someone turned up and took the crates away. We could still tell the police but it would only be our word against theirs. But then two days later—that man came in and bashed me and put me in hospital for months."

Montpelier briefly put his head in his hands.

"So you think they knew you'd opened the crate?"

"I'm sure they did. We'd levered the top off. It didn't sit down quite level when we put everything back."

"And which painting was it that you found the powder in?"

"One of the Indonesian ones."

Dennis just nodded his head slowly. "And the crates kept coming when you got back to work?"

"They did. I don't know which was worse. Being scared of that thug coming back or another one like him—or knowing we could now be seen as accessories … "

"So where was your wife when all this was going on?"

"She was there but she hired a woman to mind the gallery as she was spending so much time at the hospital. She sold all her jewelry, even her engagement ring, and paid off The Art Trust, hoping to get them off our backs once and for all, but the crates kept coming, just one or two at a time, and usually just there for a week or two."

"And the man who delivered them? Any idea who he was?"

"He never gave a name. A fairly ordinary sort of guy of around forty. I have the feeling he might've been local. A couple of times I thought I saw him there on the street but I wasn't certain. When he came he had a moustache but the man I saw on the street didn't … so I couldn't be sure."

Dennis nodded again. "We haven't got a shot of Bryce Hoysted but bring in a shot of Sam Hoysted, Brent. In the filing cabinet under Hoysted."

Constable Kelly got up and went out and a minute later brought a couple of photos in. The Hoysted family didn't have any major distinguishing marks. Sam was quite a good-looking man with blue eyes and brown hair with a slight kink in it. Bryce, from what they'd heard, was pretty

similar. Montpelier considered the photo for a while before saying carefully, “I suppose he was something like that.”

“Okay,” Dennis turned to his junior, “ring Edwina, she’ll be at the shop, but see if she’s kept a photo of Bryce. It’s not guaranteed, seeing she wants to divorce him but she might have a wedding picture.” Constable Kelly went out again.

“I … don’t understand. Do you think you know the person who kept bringing crates around?”

“Possible. I won’t say more than that yet. But Albini’s wife went to work for Norma Hoysted while he was in jail. She was this Bryce’s mother. I don’t think Bryce would knock back some quick money even if it’s pretty dirty. And he lives a couple of blocks over from your gallery.”

“How do you know so much?” Montpelier was starting to look tired. The drive. The tension. The knowledge that he was in the process of putting a metaphorical noose around his own neck.

“Something strange happens on my patch—I like to know. And some wealthy bod in Sydney sending his ruddy *art collection* to Buckton is strange with capital S.”

Montpelier dredged up a slight smile. Perhaps there were times when hicks saw things very sophisticated avant garde people would simple take as normal. “So why did he come to Buckton?”

“The Hoysteds used to own the house Halpert bought. They’ve still got cattle interests on the Downs. I’d say Halpert is gearing up to have another fire and another insurance claim. But what we need to do now is get you to Winville and into safe custody while all this gets investigated, then you’ll be charged. Where is your wife now?”

“She’s gone to France. Her father is dying.”

“Okay. So what’s the situation with your gallery at the moment?”

“I closed it for a week. I told people I wasn’t well and wanted some Queensland sun for a few days.”

“So first we need your vehicle off the street and into a garage where it won’t create any more curiosity. Then I’ll get Constable Kelly to drive you to Winville. With luck we can get a warrant today and go into the house but it might take a day or two. How long are you booked into your hotel?”

“On the Gold Coast? Three more days.”

“Okay, so straight round to the service station, tell Noel Barnard there that you’re having problems with the brakes, that’ll make it look like a good reason to stop over in Buckton. Get your bag if you’ve got one and go on from there with Constable Kelly. Brent, drive into the station and get the tank filled, that’ll look normal, then just do a swap over.”

The simple operation went without a hitch. Noel Barnard said he should have time to look at the brakes later. He caught Constable Kelly’s wink and nodded slightly. It was only when the police Ford with Kelly at the wheel was well on the way to Winville that Montpelier said, “He didn’t muck around, your boss, *and* he took me seriously. It all seems very strange.”

Kelly nodded. “But we thought you got bashed maybe out of revenge for turning down that exhibition.”

“No, Hidoyono and a couple of other Indonesian artists got in somewhere else without any trouble. And they must’ve known they weren’t my cup of tea anyway.”

“And did you have that painting in your gallery, that Aboriginal painting that they said was a con, that Charlie Jensen?”

“No, I don’t normally exhibit Aboriginal art. It’s a whole different field of expertise and knowledge … and I don’t feel I know enough.”

“But you call your gallery Woolami? Isn’t that Aboriginal?”

“Well, I guess it is. But the Wollami pine grows in hidden valleys just outside of Sydney. We were thinking of that rather than something specifically Aboriginal and we just changed the spelling.”

*

Dennis got on to Daniel Wang as soon as the other two were on their way. “Can you work fast? We’ve just got a tip-off that Halpert might be carting drugs round in picture frames. I haven’t linked him specifically to it—but what may’ve been heroin was found in a frame round an Indonesian painting—and there’s s’posed to be some Indonesian paintings over in Albini’s house. I

don't know if we can link everything up. But it's worth a try. Kelly will bring a bloke called Henry Montpelier to you in about half an hour. Keep him safe. Maybe charge him and get him into the watch house might be best. He's our best chance to bust this whole thing wide open."

Daniel Wang's first impulse was to say, "No, it's still not enough, Dennis," and then he thought, 'what the heck, if I can't get anyone for Hone maybe I can make a major drug bust—and then again maybe I can make a prize fool of myself … '

"Deane, come and help me put some quick material together to get a warrant. Then we'll know if we can finally make anything add up."

It took Daniel and Deane half an hour to work up the material from what they already had and for Daniel to ring over to the court to get himself on to Kelso's list before he packed up and went home. "But keep it all quiet, don't put me actually on your list," he said to Kelso's clerk, "I don't want them to get the slightest whisper."

It was nearly another hour before Daniel had heard the gist of Montpelier's story and gone on over to the courthouse. It wasn't jealousy, he didn't think, he didn't want Dennis Walsh's life or job. But somehow Dennis put together things which didn't obviously fit and made them sound like sense. Although, in this case, it didn't necessarily mean there was anything to be found at that house. The visit by the insurance assessor might've got the wind up Albini and he might've sent some paintings away—and that was another question: how did he organise the art work when there weren't any obvious vans coming and going. Or were there more crates of stuff in the garage or something and he could simply swap over … or he occasionally went somewhere low-key and simply got a few new boxes to put in his boot …

It was nearly seven o'clock and the chilly winter night had closed in when Daniel Wang, Ali Deane, Brent Kelly, and Jake Moss turned up from Winville. Dennis had been keeping a discreet eye out in case Albini left the house but all seemed calm and quiet. Two squares of muted yellow light suggested Mr and Mrs Albini were sitting down to dinner. If there was anyone to tip them off then maybe they had worked fast enough and quietly enough to beat the stirrings of gossip …

"Climb the gate, cover all doors, there's two at the back and one on the north side, then knock," he said quietly. "Looks like they're both in. Don't take any notice of the dogs. They bark but don't seem to bite."

Daniel took this with a grain of salt. They might not bite Dinny Walsh but then it would be a brave dog … Still, it all went off quietly and calmly, to Wang's profound relief, with Walsh keeping a close eye on the caretakers while the rest of the team went over the house and looked at the frames on more than two hundred works of art. Maybe Danny Halpert was a very clever man—but he hadn't taken one precaution. He had left his stash of unknown white powder in his 'Indonesian' paintings. And yet it was so well done the naked eye would not pick up that there was a sliding panel on the wooden frames and a slim cavity behind.

They did on purpose what Montpelier had done by accident: they shook the frames. They tried to slip slim blades in between the joins. They compared weights of similar frames and paintings. By eleven o'clock that night they had almost three kilograms of white powder. Young Constable Kelly said with undiminished excitement that he was happy to drive to Winville with one or both of the caretakers plus the bags of mysterious white powder. Dennis finally saw the two cars off again into the starlit night and came into the station to write up the evening's drama.

It might not be enough to send Halpert to jail, he would undoubtedly expect Albini to act as fall guy again, but Dennis thought it should do the trick …

It might or might not be enough to see Henry Montpelier do a deal and walk free but Dennis thought he had a good chance of walking out the front door of the watch house some time soon …

It might not help anyone unravel the links to the Hoysted family and the more nebulous but possible links to those Indonesian properties in North Queensland but at least it might make a few people get off their bums and look at what was happening to the Djuturri clan and whether those deaths *were* from natural causes …

And this was a very different matter—but getting Brent Kelly wrapped in his work might finally be enough to get him to stop blushing and getting tongue-tied every time Fiona, with or without the children, dropped into the station. That in itself would be a useful step forward.

And he might, just might, drop a hint that Iris Hitchener was a lovely young woman just going to waste there at the hospital and with her occasional outings with Nelson L'Estrange; a pity that she was considerably older than Brent, a pity she wasn't a Catholic, but he thought it would do the young man's limited confidence good to simply walk into a restaurant or a function with a beautiful woman on his arm …

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Kaylee Williams came round some weekends to work on the Walsh backyard. Kaylee ran a small organic market garden the other side of Buckton; it had been hard going to get her ideas accepted and she felt reasonably sure that her growing clientele were influenced by the freshness of her produce not its organic-ness. But she still had to take on various kinds of other jobs to make ends meet—and her favourite kind of other job was something like this: the creation of an interesting, child-safe, child-interesting, productive garden which incorporated fruit, vegetables, herbs, sand-pit, swings, a small meandering goldfish pond with only a small sliver of it open to the sky with several waterlillies, some Japanese iris and trailing water cress; the flags cantilevered out over the water to provide coolness and protection for the fish and tadpoles.

Fiona had lots of ideas, such as a low rock wall with niches and pockets in it for wild strawberries and small clumps of herbs, but Kaylee and Dennis felt that keeping it wet enough in Buckton's regularly water-restricted seasons would be a challenge. They were currently looking at ways in which the house's 'grey' water might be enlisted in small below ground plastic pipes to deliver just enough through the interior of such a wall to keep its plants viable. Both Dennis and Kaylee, for not widely differing reasons, didn't want Fiona to have the disappointment of having to give up her idea …

Fiona had found from Jasper Higgins that this Sunday was the Aboriginal service and had gone off with the children and Maurie, leaving Dennis and Kaylee to look at ways they might combine seepage from the small pond and a low but wide wall to curve round and take from the kitchen and bathroom but leave the laundry water for the main vegetable patches. Dennis had wondered if he should urge Fiona not to get too involved in Maurie's life, that she couldn't change him, not now when he was beyond sixty, and that sooner or later he would probably move on. But in the end he felt that she probably knew and understood Maurie better than he did …

Although it was a temptation to ring Ali Deane to see if it was a service she would be coming to, Fiona had resisted. Ali had a very full-on life and quite likely preferred to keep her Sundays for housework and relaxing. But they had just pulled up near the weatherboard church and lifted the children out when Ali and her husband 'Sam' Hussein turned up. Jasper Higgins only took services now in an emergency and it was a younger man, the Reverend Neil Waterson, who conducted it. He obviously wasn't Aboriginal yet it was a different service to any that Fiona had ever attended. The Bible reading linked back to ideas and issues of interest to the Aboriginal community, the sermon drew on aspects of Aboriginal spirituality, and the hymns were steeped in a connection to the land, 'We're standing on holy ground', as well as water, trees, rocks, and other natural features of the earth rather than the symbolic lands and 'green hill' and rocks she was accustomed to. She felt it might not hurt non-Aboriginal churchgoers to sometimes sing some of these hymns …

The notices included details of the regular Elders' Lunch and the minister came up afterwards to meet Maurie and introduce him to some of the local Elders. Fiona hoped they might feel able to invite Maurie along. Of course he wasn't a member of the Woorbidgeree clan, now scattered and decimated, but then Winville also included several people who had moved in from further west, including Ali Deane. They probably had just as many disagreements and factions as any other group but she felt there was a nice friendly relaxed feeling about the service and this might be something which flowed through into their various related groups. It might be just what Maurie needed.

Ali and Sam came over to say hello and ask if they would like to come round for lunch. Fiona had planned to take Maurie and the children on to have lunch at The Steak House or somewhere. Now she said, "There's rather a lot of us and you've only got a small place—"

"It doesn't matter. It's quite warm. We can spill out into the back yard." This was true. Ali and Sam lived in one flat of an old house which had been divided into two. So they had the use of a

rather scruffy yard as well. But Fiona's concern went beyond the practical. Maurie was not terribly comfortable with police and now he would have two as his hosts.

She said only, "It's very kind of you but I'll have to see what Maurie thinks. This is sort of his outing although I have been thinking of coming for quite a while, just curiosity perhaps, but I go to see Mr Higgins every now and again."

In the end they all went round to the flat and had a simple lunch and Sam showed them round the little flat and the bird bath they had put up in an old and rather scabby lemon tree and the couple of garden beds he had started digging in his spare time. Fiona felt that Ali was probably a far more casual housekeeper than anyone Sam was accustomed to; he had been waited on hand and foot by his mother and sisters and although it hadn't spoilt him—or if it had his time in the police having to look after himself had brought him thoroughly down to earth again—so living with Ali had undoubtedly involved quite a lot of compromise. But it was obviously the sort of house Maurie felt comfortable in.

It was only on the way home that Fiona felt she could ask the question which had been hanging fire: "Maurie, was it something specific Dennis did or said that upset you—or was it just Dennis being Dennis?"

He didn't rush to answer this and she went on, "You know I won't be offended if Dennis said something to upset you. He was quite rude to me the first time we met too."

"It wasn't that," Maurie finally said. "But he wanted me to dob Norm in … that he was going to visit Alice Traube … and I … well, yeah, it did upset me … I saw Norm as a mate an' I knew he'd be upset if he found out it was me. I don't think he ever knew … but that only made me feel more of a sneaky bugger … "

"Yes, and all Dennis could see was wanting to get someone for the death of that young woman. He probably didn't stop to think about the position he was putting you in. And all the time you live with Norm you're thinking about that … I don't know if it's any comfort but Norm told Dennis he never felt the same about Alice after he found out it was her relatives that dumped all that stuff in his dam. He couldn't help thinking maybe she knew about it too and was maybe laughing up her sleeve at him. I don't know if she really did know but I think it was always going to be a relationship with no future. And maybe what you told Dennis did help them find out who had killed that young woman … "

She wasn't sure if Maurie was finding any comfort in this. But he seemed quite cheerful and said vaguely he might 'go again' some day. She drove on into her own yard and Dennis, down in the tool shed, came to see how they'd got along, if the children had enjoyed their day out. "They invited Maurie to come to their Elders' Lunch," Fiona said as she lifted Robert out of his car seat.

"Oh sure! And if Maurie goes I'll eat my hat, the old sod." Dennis probably understood perfectly that Maurie had got a quiet buzz out of being invited—but it didn't mean that he was likely to stir himself and actually go along.

Nevertheless Maurie surprised not only Dennis but everyone who knew him well by tootling off on Thursday morning, leaving Bill Borrie to cook lunch for a couple of people, and Fiona and the children had all the fun of asking Dennis which hat he was planning to eat.

"I think I'll get Jim White at the Bakery to make me a chocolate hat," he said to Elise. "That way you can help me eat it."

*

No one was around when Cameron De Witt noisily berated himself for not getting back in touch with Buckton Police. Instead of hearing about it all eventually, with the pack, he might've got a scoop when Graeme Albini came up, virtually unnoticed in court in Winville, on charges of possession of a banned substance and tried to tell the court he wasn't responsible for what artists from 'fucking Indonesia' might be up to—and that Danny Halpert was a respectable businessman and a decent bloke. Police and courts in Sydney might not have managed to tie Graeme Albini to anything larger than himself, apparently seeing him merely as a loose cannon, but then they might not have tried very hard. Police and courts here didn't buy that idea and began proceedings to have Danny Halpert extradited to Queensland …

But it was Bill Carboni who ran a little Italian restaurant in Buckton called Domenico's, the only smart place to eat the town could boast, who summed up a lot of people's thinking. "You know, I always wondered why he never came in for a meal. I never met an Italian till now that didn't like pasta, not even third or fourth generation … "

Privately Dennis was glad of that. He didn't want nice but naïve people like the Carbonis dragged into the mess. But he did think it was all a bit hard on Mrs Albini who probably hadn't understood that she had innocently married into a web of intrigue and criminal acitivity but maybe she would finally get some sort of life together—and if nothing else Danny Halpert had apparently paid for their two sons to get a good education …

And there was always Bronwen Applegarth and Vera Hopgood to come to her rescue.

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Notes: The Djuturri clan of Mt Gregory is fictitious. Indonesian company Bakire and Brothers had the lease on 1.9 million hectares (8 properties) in the Northern Territory around the time of this story.

Country Casebook: Book Thirty-Two

Case No. 1: What To Leave Behind

Sergeant Dave Bishop had been the incumbent of the small one-person-station in the Darling Downs town of Garramindi. But being the lone upholder of law and order there had never been much to his taste. He longed to be part of a larger team again; not least because it would remove some of the solo decision-making he found so agonisingly difficult. He had always appreciated being able to toss options around with a group of colleagues. He had finally heard that his transfer to Rockhampton would be coming through quite soon.

He rang Sergeant Dennis Walsh in the nearby town of Buckton one evening to tell him the news and to say, "I've been getting everything sorted out and tidied up. And I came on an old case file, a whole family got wiped out fifteen years ago, and they never got anybody for it. I thought I might just have another crack at it and I wondered if you'd have time to go through the material too. You got a result, I heard, on a ten-year-old case when you first came to Buckton."

Dennis, always busy, didn't immediately say "Great! Send me a copy of everything." But he did understand that feeling of wanting to bring justice where there hadn't been any. Sometimes, of course, people felt it might be best to leave well alone and the few rumours he'd heard over the years about the Savage case suggested it was an in-house crime, possibly the murder/suicide of a whole family. At last, he said non-committally, "Just run me through it and I'll ask around."

"The Savage family, people here mostly peg them as some sort of pretty rough hillbilly family, 'Savage by name and Savage by nature' was one response I got—the father, mother, and three of the boys were shot. The oldest boy Frank was working away from home, on a citrus farm near Gayndah. I don't know if he was just picking oranges or employed there permanently but his employer was contacted and said the youth had been there all day and couldn't have come back to Garra. The youngest boy had gone to the store on his bike. There was a little general store and a garage and a very small primary school at the junction then. Everything's gone now. It was a Saturday morning. The kid came back and found everyone lying dead. He rode back to the store, as the family didn't have the phone on, and the storekeeper phoned the police. The kid

was about twelve. They brought in the Winville bods who said it was the father, he'd shot everyone then himself, as the gun was lying beside him. But the coroner was suspicious. The gun was very smudged and it wasn't lying in the right way to have been dropped by the father. And all the family were in the house. No one had tried to run away. That also seemed a bit odd. But I can't honestly say I think Winville did a very good job."

"Who was in charge then? Towner or Blinco?"

"Towner had just taken over, I think. But I found Blinco's name on something as well."

"That guy is like a ruddy ghost, never stops hanging round haunting the place." Dennis sounded sour. DI Douglas Towner had been given the benefit of the doubt over a wrongful conviction in Mt Isa. The investigators had apparently done a deal with the victim, one Jurgen Harmer, by which his slate would be wiped clean, no longer registering his conviction and prison sentence in return for him not seeking compensation. Dennis wasn't happy about it. An innocent man, in his book, was an innocent man. But Harmer had reportedly accepted the horse-trading involved with a kind of philosophical calm.

Towner was still under a cloud but Dennis had been told before Christmas that the investigation was winding down. If anyone wanted to challenge Towner's investigation which sent Sam Hoysted to prison for the murder of his wife then they would have to find a way to mount an appeal or bring a civil case. Hoysted now had John Duarte working on his case so something might happen. Duarte was a hard-working lawyer and he was convinced Sam had not got a fair trial. Towner continued to live out his retirement in a mansion on the Gold Coast; probably smirking to himself as he came out on to his balcony of a morning and enjoyed his lovely view of sea and sand. Or so Dennis Walsh believed …

"So what happened to the two boys who survived?"

"The older boy just went on with his work on the citrus place. The little boy went to live with his grandparents. There wasn't a will. But when everything was signed off on the farm was sold and the money put in trust for the two boys when they reached twenty-one. It wasn't much of a farm. It's in that light scrub country about twenty k's north of here. They'd cleared a bit but the house was only a shack and someone said the sheds were falling down. I've got some photos that were taken then and it certainly doesn't look like paradise."

Still, there was paradise and paradise. Dennis Walsh found himself remembering back to his visit with his wife Fiona to the man people up that way called Billy the Lad. It too wasn't 'much of a farm'. But Billy had struck him as a happy man, serene and content. He found himself wondering how each of the Savages had regarded their farm. Had the stresses of poverty and failure and poor seasons got to them? Or was it a family which had always been at odds with one another; a tragedy waiting to happen?

"What kind of rifle was used?"

"An old .22, single barrel. That was what puzzled me. Why did the family simply stand around and wait to be shot?"

"They couldn't of been dead already, could they?"

Bishop seemed to find this a surprising suggestion but after some thought he said carefully, "It's possible. By the time Towner and his team got there it would've been anything up to eight hours after they'd died. And the gunshot wounds were hard to miss. They may not have done proper tox reports."

Dennis was tempted to say they might not have done proper-anything reports.

"Okay, send your stuff over and I'll have a browse and get Brent on to it. Maybe we can come up your way for a picnic on Sunday and see what's there now." It wasn't really picnic weather but they might get a nice day.

"The house has gone now. The land was bought and incorporated into a neighbouring property. And they've cleared most of it, just a bit of scrub along the creek now. It's hard to picture how it used to be."

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"Dave Bishop'll send some stuff through. It's a cold case but you can go through it and see if any ideas strike you. Dave'd like to go out on a big win, it looks like."

Dennis had not really come to terms with some aspects of his young constable. He was used to the sort of women round town who did a lot of work for their churches, running things, cleaning and repairing and visiting and helping and preparing, but a very pious young man such as his new constable, Brent Kelly, was rather hard to slot into that kind of churchiness. Brent never missed early mass and went round frequently to the presbytery to discuss, to … Dennis didn't know exactly what he did there, but he certainly had quite a few of his meals there. He sometimes thought that young Brent had missed his vocation and should be training for the priesthood. But so long as he did his police work, and he had grown a lot keener since the Albini case, and so long as he didn't embarrass Fiona, and his initial and embarrassing thing, perhaps passion wasn't the right word, for her seemed to be fading, he didn't much mind what the young man did in his free time.

"We can't spend a lot of time on it but if someone *did* get away with killing five people then I'd like to see them brought to book."

Constable Kelly agreed. And the idea of succeeding where others had failed … He was not immune.

Dennis jotted down a few steps they might take including talking to George Hickman who put out the little local broadsheet, the *Buckton Bugle*, and having a chat with DS Greg Sullivan in Winville and Dr Wittenbach, if he had done the autopsies. It wasn't very likely that Buckton's people would have had any involvement. Merivale Junction, where that store had been, was still marked on the more detailed local maps but it wasn't somewhere where people went, not unless they had relatives there. He added 'Who were the Savages? Local?' to his list.

But George Hickman when Sergeant Walsh got on to him said, "He could well have been one of those soldier settler farms. When they got rid of the prickly pear up that way—they got a few of the World War One johnnies on to some of the land that had been out of production for fifty years. It wasn't good land but they put it up in a land ballot scheme and did a deal to give servicemen first pop out of the barrel. Sometime in the thirties, I would think, but most of the farms were hardly a living. Just a government wanting to get unemployed veterans out of their hair, I'd say."

"So that would be, or could be, this Joe Savage's father?"

"I'd say so. And I think he went to the Second World War—but don't quote me on that. When I hunt out anything I wrote about the murders I just might've put in some background as well."

George's wife May said rather unenthusiastically, "It sounds like another of Dennis's horrible cases. I hope he doesn't take them home and dump them on Fiona." May was a nursing sister at Buckton Hospital but it rarely garnered anything very bloody or traumatic in the way of cases. She was fond of Dennis and Fiona. But it didn't stop her thinking that Dennis was over-casual in the way that he brought some pretty dreadful stories up over dinner or into more everyday and domestic conversations.

"Well, that's our Dennis. But in this case it was actually Dave Bishop who asked for help, I gather."

May nodded and thought back to anything she might have heard at the time. "I think some of the nurses in Winville weren't very happy with the way the autopsies were done. I don't remember exactly but I think they felt that Fred should've been given some extra help, that asking him to do five in one day—or whatever it was—wasn't fair. He had a very good sister assisting him, I can't just remember her name, but he should've had more help. I think she said he basically dug out five bullets for comparison and that was about it. And they did say they had all come from the one rifle … "

"Well, we maybe should try to find out that nurse's name and pass it on to Dennis. I'd back a good nurse any day to notice if anything wasn't quite hunky-dory."

May was too modest to see this as applying to her in any way.

*

Constable Kelly took the photocopied material Sergeant Bishop sent over very seriously, poring over it of an evening. "You *are* allowed free time, other than for work and church, you know," Dennis said drily.

"I know, but seeing I don't have a girlfriend or family responsibilities or anything—"

"Then it's high time you did. How about asking Iris Hitchener out to something? I know she's not Catholic but she's a nice woman." Brent simply turned and stared at his boss, a beautiful *older* woman like that? It wasn't very likely she'd say yes. "And you won't know if you don't ask. And how about the rugby club? They're always desperate for new members. And Freda and Lyn are setting their farm up as a riding school. You could learn to ride a horse. Or get involved with a local charity. Or join the reading group at the Library."

The Library now had a full-time librarian but she hadn't exactly got everyone on side. Muriel Bennett. She had come with excellent credentials. But she was also an old-fashioned style of librarian who expected people to talk in hushed voices and wasn't keen on giving over time and space to small children or school groups. She knew her resources but she was calmly determined that the two computers there for patrons would not blossom into dozens. She was firmly a book person. Many Bucktonites, a little nervous with the IT revolution, were sympathetic to this view. The trouble, several people said behind her back, was that she simply wasn't the sort of person to make you feel passionate about books. She was more reminiscent of an old-fashioned schoolmarm. Fiona felt that it was good that she was more knowledgeable than Maria Preston and it was nice that she was happy to see the Reading Group continue—but somehow there was the squeak of slate pencils in her essence.

"Perhaps we will like her more as we get to know her better," she said one evening to Naomi Duggan.

"Yes, she doesn't seem to have made any friends." Naomi taught English at the High School and had recently married Jon Dundas, the Council's building inspector and surveyor. "Except I've heard she goes in and has dinner with Betty Cronk some evenings."

Ms Bennett had decided to rent the little flat behind the house where Betty and Mervyn Cronk lived. It was a pleasant little flat. Betty knew the district well and the fact that she was a sanctimonious gossip probably wouldn't bother Ms Bennett. Nor did it worry anyone else except … "Which means," Fiona said wryly, "she is probably getting the worst spin possible on just about everyone in the district."

"Yes, Betty could make a major scandal where I'd see a mere storm in a teacup. She's probably painted us as scarlet women—and the town with hidden depths of depravity."

"I hear Mervyn is going to retire. I wonder how they will go as a threesome." Mervyn had been a shearer's cook for many years and often away from home. "Muriel might see Betty as company but she might not be wild about Betty's brother sitting in on their gossiping. Mervyn is not exactly … a class act."

Of course there were people who didn't regard Fiona's husband as a class act but Naomi thought this had more to do with the fact that Dennis didn't mind to yell at people and call them names. Mervyn, on the other hand, was slowly turning into a dirty old man. Muriel Bennett might start thinking about other accommodation if Mervyn let his hands wander …

"Yes, I don't like Betty but in a way she is very loyal to him, she'll never hear a word said against him, and I doubt if he appreciates her loyalty."

But Muriel Bennett had a quite different question at the next Reading Group; she had heard, possibly from Betty, that the police were re-opening the Savage case and that she had heard that five 'hillbillies' had shot each other and did it really matter? "When old things get dug up—sometimes people get hurt."

George Hickman was a founder member of the Group and he said cheerfully, "True enough. But I don't think it's as specific as that. Young Dave Bishop over at Garra is just wanting to tie off some loose ends. I don't imagine anyone is going to be exhuming bodies or anything like that." The conversation then moved on but as George went out with Fiona and Naomi later and stood a minute talking on the footpath he said, "Did I head her off, d'you think? I don't like the way she is all cold and distant to library patrons—and then as soon as some gossip comes her way she gets all avid and sharp-eyed—it's almost as though she's longing to unearth scandals, maybe to bolster her own sense of her self."

"I think it's Betty's influence." Naomi sounded definite. "But I suppose we can't expect to get people who are both good at the job and nice into the bargain all the time."

"No-o-o," Fiona hesitated over it. "And yet it wouldn't *hurt* her just to make that little bit of extra effort … " And after George had turned right and she and Naomi had turned left she said carefully, "I wonder if I could train as a librarian, what it would involve."

"Go for it," Naomi said cheerfully. "You would be excellent—and by the time you qualify the kids will be off to school. And I'm sure you know more about computers and that area."

"I don't want to put her out of a job, woman alone, and all that."

"Still, she is in her fifties. She's probably starting to think about retirement."

At home, Fiona took a few minutes on the Internet to see what she could find about careers in this area. Dennis had put the children to bed and he came in and said "What are you looking for?" After she had put the tentative idea to him and he had thought about it he said simply, "If you think you'd enjoy it—go for it. We'll manage."

"I know. It just depends if I can do most of it by correspondence."

"We'll find ways … "

She smiled up at him. "I'll do some more looking tomorrow."

"And would you like a trip out to Garra at the weekend? I know it's not very exciting—"

"Let me guess. You'd like to have a chat with Dave Bishop?"

"Spot on. But we could do something more interesting for you and the little monsters as well."

*

Before going to see Sergeant Bishop Dennis wanted to find the time to go into Winville to see an elderly farmer, Terry Mitchell, who had been in a nasty collision out at the Burleigh turn-off a short while ago. The other driver, a Gresham's man bringing a load of cattle to the feed lots at Japana near Dinawadding, swore black and blue that "this old guy just shot out of that side road without looking. I tried to stop but I still touched him and his ute spun—" Dennis was dubious about this version of events but Winville's traffic investigator, Sergeant Aidan Hassell, had said it looked like the old man was at fault.

Mitchell had cracked several vertebrae in his neck and had been under heavy sedation for several days but the hospital said he was now up to being questioned; though with the rider 'he may not remember much about the accident'. Dennis didn't think Hassell had done a very thorough investigation at the scene and that Hassell felt more comfortable heavying an old farmer than tackling a transport company …

It meant going to Winville in the evening and he didn't relish the long drive but the alternative was to let the matter go, let Mitchell's insurance pay up and have Hassell query the old man's fitness to continue to

hold a licence. Still, he thought he would ask around and see if any of the nursing sisters remembered the Savage case …

Terry Mitchell was sitting up in bed with a support around his neck; the old man looked grey and tired and rather down-in-the-dumps. But he seemed to cheer a little when the big burly figure of Sergeant Walsh loomed up in the distance. For some people, a sight of Dennis Walsh was a very good reason to quietly vacate the scene. For others it seemed like a beacon of hope in a dim world. If nothing else Dennis stirred passions.

"Well, I see you're up to it, Mr Mitchell," Dennis came over and sat down beside the bed.

"Sort of." Mr Mitchell didn't manage a smile. "I s'pose you've come to charge me? That's what that Hassell fella said."

"For what? Driving too slow?"

"He said I was drivin' too fast."

"And were you?"

"Course not. I was just goin' my normal speed, just off to see John an' Dora." Dennis knew the old man was best mates with John Binnie and went round there now and then for a meal and a game of cards or draughts.

"Were you taking them some eggs?"

"No. I'm down to three chooks now. And I didn't have Rex. He's been a bit off his feed lately, gettin' old, same as me."

"So just run me through it."

"Nothing much. Just goin' maybe thirty up to that corner. No sign of anyone, then just as I started to turn out I saw the truck in the distance but I reckoned I had plenty o' time." The old man closed his eyes as though he couldn't bear his thoughts. "I'd swear to you he was too far back."

"And what are your eyes like?"

"Got new glasses last year. I only need 'em for readin' the paper."

"And—d'you remember anything beyond that?"

"Well, I know he hit me, that's what they're all sayin', but I just have this sort of confused thing—that I couldn't believe he was on me that quick."

"And you're sure there were no other vehicles, either behind you or on the main road?"

"Not that I saw."

Dennis left it there. "Okay, take it easy, I'll have a nose round."

"I've never had an accident in me whole life, only that time those kids come round that corner and into me—an' there wasn't much I could do."

As Dennis was going out two middle-aged women were coming along the corridor; Dennis had an idea they might be Mr Mitchell's daughters. He said without preamble, "You Terry Mitchell's family?"

They agreed that they were and one of them said, "I'm Mrs Creighton. How d'you think Dad's bearing up?"

"Well, it's not looking good for him. Only his word against the other driver—"

"But you know Dad," she said earnestly, "the way he just putts along. The other driver *must* have seen him turning out. I just can't believe Dad would turn out right in front of one of those big semis. He'd be more likely to just sit there at the turn-off if anything was in sight. He usually only drives to the store there so he's got more and more cautious as he gets older."

"But he does go to Buckton and Winville occasionally."

"But he always goes on quiet days, not Fridays, not calf sale day, not when there's something on."

Dennis thought this was most likely true. "But he goes to see the Binnies of an evening. Maybe his eyes aren't so good when it's coming into dusk?"

"It would make him drive even more slow and cautious. And he left earlier than usual because Dora was going to have dinner early and go into town for a meeting."

"Well, I'll see if I can find a witness but I can't guarantee anything."

As he went along to the nurses' station he was pleased to see Sister Uniacke with a clipboard talking with a younger woman. He didn't precisely *know* her but they had had several interactions over the years and he found her practical and knowledgeable. He stopped and waited for her to finish giving some instructions. Then he said, "Mr Mitchell, the guy with the sore neck—d'you think there's a problem with his eyes?"

"Not that I've noticed."

"Well, can you arrange for him to have an eye test before he goes home, make sure that his vision is okay for when it's getting on, late winter afternoons. I believe what he's telling me—but I'd like to be sure his eyes aren't a problem."

She agreed. “It’s been getting him down, knowing they’re saying it was all his fault and that he might lose his licence.”

“Trouble is—it may come down to his word against the word of the semi driver—and I s’pose Gresham’s get behind their men?”

She obviously hadn’t considered this aspect of it. “Maybe they do. But surely the crash will tell you something?”

“It won’t tell us if Mr Mitchell judged his turn well enough.”

“No, I suppose not. Well, I’ll make him an appointment with Mr Kingsmill.”

“One other thing—not to do with this—were you here at the time of the Savage case, fifteen years ago?” He judged her to be about late forties but he didn’t know if she’d spent all or most of her nursing career at Winville District Hospital.

“I was. But quite junior. I didn’t start my training till I was in my late twenties.”

“Any particular reason?”

She hesitated but then decided she didn’t want to talk about it here. “I’ll tell you some time but not now. As for the Savages, I’d think it was Sister Robbins who assisted Dr Wittenbach. We were short-staffed and there was no other senior doctor to help him, just young Dr Murray and he spent more time flirting with us than getting on with his duties. She was very good, probably better than some of the younger doctors,” she gave her statement a slightly cynical twist, “and she wasn’t happy about it but I can’t tell you more than that. She didn’t gossip with us.”

“Just because you were junior to her?”

“No. Because she was a very private sort of person. She didn’t socialise much with other staff. There was a rumour that she was having an affair with Dr Wittenbach but I never believed it. You can’t keep things like that hidden around a hospital. And it didn’t fit.”

“So where is she now?”

“I’m not a hundred per cent sure but I have an idea she moved over the border, Tamworth I think.”

“To nurse there?”

“Oh, for sure. She wasn’t the marrying kind.”

“Meaning?”

As they’d been speaking Sister Uniacke had been quietly but persistently moving away from the nurses’ station. Now she seemed to judge they were out of earshot because she said, “Oh, I’m sure she was a lezzie but it wasn’t the sort of thing you went round advertising—at least not out here.”

“So she might’ve started the rumours about her and Fred Wittenbach herself, maybe a sort of smoke screen?”

She obviously hadn’t considered this but she finally shook her head. “No, I don’t think she would do that to him and his wife. She used to go round and have dinner with them sometimes and I think she liked them both.”

“So even if she didn’t talk about the Savage case here—she might’ve discussed it with Fred and his wife over dinner?”

“It’s possible.”

Fred Wittenbach was gone from the hospital at this hour, leaving most of the night time emergencies to two younger doctors. Dennis considered ringing him at home but left it. It was Dave’s case and he wanted to get home to his own family and his own dinner. When Fiona later said something about him going to sort one thing out and coming home with some other useful information he said, “Yeah, my mum called it ‘improving the shining hour’, we were always s’posed to be improving the shining bloody hour when we were kids, just don’t ask me how.”

“It obviously worked—if not exactly the way she meant.” Fiona rather liked her mother-in-law Janet Walsh but she could see that she would not have been the easiest of mothers on a small child; she didn’t think that Janet would have looked kindly on any sense of ‘frittering’ … Janet and Jimmy Walsh had remained behind in Scotland after they had all traveled there last year. Dennis’s brother Terry had now taken over the station north-east of Normanton. But how long the old couple would choose to spend in Scotland was anybody’s guess; Dennis said, “Until they strike a really cold winter, then they’ll come scurrying home,” but Fiona thought it would take more than that to bring Janet back. She was one of those emigrants who could never settle and truly see Australia as home; some connection, some thread, still linked her too tightly to the place of her childhood. After the few weeks they had all spent together on Jura Fiona could see something of the magic it might have wrought in the soul of a little girl. Perhaps too it was an insight into an Aboriginal sense of country; the link might stretch but nothing could completely break it.

"I'll ring Dave later, see if he wants to go and see these people … and if I leave Brent to handle the stuff on Saturday arve we can maybe go out and just have a look at where the Savage family lived, get an idea how long it would've taken a twelve-year-old to cycle to the store and back."

"So do you want a picnic basket or shall we eat somewhere in Garra?"

"As the café and the pub there didn't treat you or your mum very well I'd say a picnic might be nicer."

She came over and sat down beside him on the sofa and he put an arm around her. It was, as so many of his things came to, work with a side component of pleasure. He understood her sometimes wry comments and tried to make their journeys a pleasure, playing games with the children or telling them stories or encouraging them to sing the songs they learnt at childcare or from Mrs Tripp who, if nothing else, was a fund of little rhymes and ditties. Fiona sometimes thought they had learnt more about Dennis's childhood in the car than anywhere else …

*

Constable Kelly was a soccer rather than a rugby fan but he had accepted that when in Buckton it was wise to share their passion. He had got quite knowledgeable and interested in their team. Which wasn't the same thing as being cheery and sanguine about keeping everyone under control if they didn't agree with the umpire's call. But Buckton was small beer compared with some of the on-field and off-field mêlées he had seen as a youngster.

"Ring me if there's a problem," Dennis said before heading out. Though all he would be able to offer would be advice.

The landscape was very dry. Already people were talking gloomily about poor spring crops. But Fiona had paid to get all the windows of the Magna tinted; now it gave the faint illusion that things weren't quite as bad as they seemed. And as they drove along the family sang 'This Old Man' and other such songs at Fiona's urging, even Dennis and Robbie joining in, although Robbie only knew a word here or there.

"I always knew you had a good voice—if you just took the time to let it rip," Fiona said to Dennis. "Does it run in the family?"

"All those psalms my mum liked to sing—but that's not got anything about having a good voice. God knows what her family was like. I remember her brother, my uncle in Townsville, but he was a sour old cuss, and I didn't hear her brother that we met last year on Jura do any singing." Janet Walsh had come to Townsville in the 1930s to help her oldest brother as his wife was dying, leaving him with four children, but the kids grew and Janet had met Jimmy Walsh. The unpleasant thing about it, Fiona thought from the little she knew of the family, was that Douglas had brought up those four children to have a spite against Janet, that she had 'abandoned' them, left them lonely and motherless. It would probably have been better for everyone if Douglas had remarried. But not every woman would have wanted four children and a rigid-minded and intolerant husband. Janet had some of that same rigidity but in her it had been softened by her life, her family, by the cheerful easygoing blarney of Jimmy Walsh …

Dave Bishop welcomed them to the small station and said he'd made some soup as it was a chilly day and that he had arranged to go and see the Wittenbachs next week. His house already had some signs of his impending move, boxes, piles of books and excess kitchen stuff. Dennis had thought of taking the family for a picnic down by the waterhole just east of the town, not a wonderful picnic spot but better than nothing. Now Bishop said, "I've set the table. I thought you might like to stay for lunch. It's not very nice down in the park at the moment, dry's a bone and hardly any water."

Dennis turned to Fiona. "Suit you?"

It was just as well Brent Kelly wasn't present to hear the offhand question; he was convinced that Dennis didn't give Fiona the consideration she deserved. But all of Buckton, or nearly all, was agog. Brent had taken Iris Hitchener to dinner at Domenico's last night. This was Buckton's only restaurant and although its food was unremarkable the ambience was pleasant and Bill and Anna Carboni were good hosts. They had adopted two little children from an orphanage in Roumania and the children as they got more proficient in English and more comfortable in a strange place were beginning to help out with little chores. Perhaps the children had been intrigued by the way that Brent and Iris had engaged in a long serious inward-facing conversation over their meal but it was more likely Bill or Anna or one of the other diners who had spread it around town that 'they only had eyes for each other' and several people had speculated on the content of their murmured conversation: did it have to do with problems at the hospital and they had chosen to meet and discuss things in this more private way?

Fiona smiled her agreement and brought the children and the picnic basket into Bishop's house. He had obviously made a bit of an effort, perhaps to repay Dennis for helping him out with the case, setting the table nicely, turning on the heater to warm the usually untenanted room as he mostly ate in the kitchen or down at the local café, and boiling a packet of cheerios to eat with barbecue sauce in the belief that all children still loved the little red-skinned sausages. She added the things she had packed, a quiche, wholegrain

sandwiches, sprouts, fruit and walnut cake, some Winter Cole pears … Dave Bishop didn't give much attention to his health and couldn't help showing his surprise that Fiona had been able to persuade Dennis to eat things like mung bean sprouts. As he was packing up later and seeing Dennis off he said under his breath, "How did she get you to eat *sprouts?*"

"Always willing to try something new." Dennis had ceased to see his more varied diet as an issue. He was also tempted to say "They'll put hair on your head" as Dave was going a bit thin on top but he wasn't a shining example of the secret power of sprouts … yet he did seriously believe his health was better since he had married Fiona.

But over lunch Bishop told them he'd heard the new man coming into the station was married so "he might feel more settled here—if he's got kids to go to school here, that sort o' thing." It didn't necessarily apply; a discontented wife and family stuck in a one-horse-town could exert pressure on the incumbent to move on. But Dennis hoped that Garra would strike lucky. It had not had a family man in many years. "Who was in this station when the Savages came up?"

"I thought it was Stadler but I looked back and it was just before he came. A man called Harney, another old bachelor, he used to keep all kinds of poultry out the back. The sheds and runs are still there. But I don't know that he did much on the case, just handed it over and went on with the small stuff."

"Okay, well, we'll take a run out to Merivale but you'll have to tell us just how to find the farm. What did they grow there?"

"Melons mainly. Watermelons. Some pumpkins and jam melons. And they ran a few cattle in the scrub there. I'd reckon it was a struggle to rear five kids on it. All the kids left school as soon as they could. The oldest was on that citrus place, the next two helped at home and did jobs round the district, and the two youngest were still at school. They came in on the bus. The old guy that used to run the store at the junction there lives in town now. He's about eighty. He reckons the family was always at each other, always fighting and arguing and at each others' throats. He says that the youngest went to his grandparents and he thinks he later changed his name but he doesn't know what he might've changed it to."

"People quite often change it to something that was already in the family. If he lived with his grandparents he might've changed it to a granny's maiden name, something like that. D'you know which set of grandparents it was?"

"He thinks it was the dad's, that the granddad had something wrong with him and he lived here for a while and then moved. Maybe the granddad needed more serious health care."

"So it could be worth getting a death certificate for the granddad and working back from that."

"There wasn't a lot of publicity. I was surprised. I thought it would've been a major talking point. But it was almost like people didn't want anyone to know it had happened in the district. And when they said later it was probably the dad people just sort of said 'that'd be right, he was an old so-and-so'. It was a ten-day-wonder, I'd reckon. But those two boys must still be around."

"And you think it was one of them?"

"Beginning to look like it. I don't really buy the mysterious stranger bit. Not if any of them were shot after they had died from some other cause."

Fiona took the children and their empty plates out to the kitchen and showed them Bishop's two little blue budgies in a big cage; it was always the way when Dennis got into a conversation about a case: he might start out with euphemisms and general chat but it always seemed to get more graphic as he went along. She felt the children weren't old enough to handle talk of shooting …

The budgerigars were far more interesting than any talk of the unknown Savages and Elise wanted to know why they had bells and mirrors and lumps of cuttlefish and all their other little 'entertainments'. In one way it was nice that Dave had their company and he obviously looked after them well—but in another way it made his life seem limited, that he had accepted that two budgies was the best that fate could offer. She hoped his move would bring him into the company of some friendlier and more empathetic people …

Merivale Junction still had a couple of abandoned buildings half-hidden in the re-growth of the trees. A couple of rusting bowsers marked out where the store had once stood, along with several lumps of concrete and the remains of a tin shed, a few sheets of tin lay piled up against an old pepper tree, a few nameless bits of ironmongery suggested the remains of ploughs or other agricultural uses. Fiona found the place rather sad but Dennis only said, "It's life—and faster cars and all the rest. So now if we just get an idea of how long it takes to get to the farm gate … if I try and drive at a set speed I can convert it into what a twelve-year-old on a bike most likely would've done."

"It does seem strange that they didn't have a phone. By then I would've thought most people did."

"Someone might know if it was just the cost or they had some other reason … "

A ten-minute-drive brought them to the gate of what had been the Savage farm. Dennis stopped the car and got out after checking the time. It was hard to envisage how the farm had been then. Now it was virtually

all cleared, the front paddocks ploughed, and a deep gully with a simple wooden bridge taking the farm lane towards a few distant sheds and yards. Had the gully always been here or had it deepened as they cleared more? And were the sheds the original ones or had the place had a bit of a makeoever? He hadn't seen a photo of the Savages' house but he had seen a map of it showing the location of each body and it suggested an old style cottage with a central hall and rooms on either side and, probably, a bank of windows or louvres along the front. And it had stood in front of the sheds and with several pepper trees; possibly the same pepper trees which showed up greenly against the grey-green of the more distant scrub.

Robbie said he wanted to do a wee-wee and Dennis unstrapped him from his seat and lifted him out. He was getting reasonably adept at handling flies and directing his stream safely into the dry grass of the verge. Dennis squatted down alongside him and got a child-s eye view across the farm. It would've taken the boy say three minutes from the gate to the house on this lane but a bit longer if it had been rougher. This was lighter country than the black soil plains of Burleigh and west of Garra and he tried to picture it still largely timbered between the gate and the house.

But as he secured his little son in his car seat again a quite different thought struck him. Nowhere had he seen any mention of how the ammo for that rifle had been found. Was it still in its original box? Loose in a drawer or other container? Had any fingerprints been found? The rifle itself showed some of the father's prints but unexpectedly smudged. And in a family like the Savages probably all the family down to their twelve-year-old knew how to shoot. He took a minute to jot himself a note before turning in the gateway and driving back towards Garra. Elise wanted to know why they had come all the way out here just to turn around and go back. He gave her a potted version, sterilised but probably not as sterilised as he would do for a different three-year-old. Elise was too sharp to want to be fobbed off with stories of 'just looking around'. It was always a fine line: trying to express some of the value and interest in what he did without bogging her down in the grim details. And if he didn't always get it right at least Elise was quite capable of saying that something was bothering her …

He said he would just like to pop in and see Arnie Low on their way home. Arnie farmed eight hundred hectares of prime grain country just the Buckton side of Prickly Creek and his was the only house close enough to the road to run a chance of seeing that semi coming along here that day. It didn't mean that Arnie, who was getting increasingly vague, had been this side of the farm or taking much notice but he thought it was worth a try and it would give him a chance to see how Arnie's hired man, Sean Piggott, was making out. Mr Piggott had got himself into trouble a few months ago.

The two men were over at the machinery shed as Dennis drove into the big open space between sheds and yard. It was quite a pleasant old house with leafless grapevines twined around the verandah and an orchard with several dozen hens sharing it with the peach and apricot trees. Arnie looked up in surprise as he saw Dennis get out, then came over wiping greasy hands on a rag.

"What brings you out this way?" He couldn't think of anything he or his brother Wylie had done lately. Both of them lived conventional law-abiding lives.

"That crash at the Burleigh turn-off." Dennis didn't waste breath on the day or the season. "You didn't happen to notice the semi as it came through?"

"Yeah, we did." There was a long hesitation before Arnie said this. He didn't offer anything more. Dennis couldn't guess at the reason for his reluctance to mention it.

"And?"

"Hooting along. Why?"

"So why the guilty look?"

Arnie seemed to mentally shrug, he should've known it was difficult to hide anything from Dennis, then he said simply, "We were burning off there along the roadside."

"Without Council permission?"

"Yeah."

"Up to the Council … so long as you made sure the fire was out."

"Yeah, me and Sean came down to check. But it's not like there were logs there to smoulder, just those bloody foxtails getting a go on along here."

Dennis nodded. He had noticed them himself. "And you'd asked the Council to clear them before they spread?"

"Well no, we just waited for them to do something … then we thought, what the heck, and got stuck into 'em … "

"So the truck came right past you?"

"That's about it."

"But you didn't come forward because of burning off on public land? That it?"

"Didn't know you wanted people to come forward." That would probably be the case. It was very unlikely that Arnie would've taken any notice of any public call for witnesses. "But if you want us to say he was hooting along … "

"Any thoughts on his speed?"

"I wouldn't like to say. But it was fast. Don't know if he was behind schedule but I wouldn't like to send cattle with him … if I had any cattle … "

"He's blaming Terry Mitchell—that he shot out of the turn-off there."

"Terry!" Arnie looked at him in surprise. "Last time Terry shot anywhere was fifty years ago. My mum said it was a shot-gun wedding if ever there was one."

"Don't think we need to bring that up. But if I square things with the Council—would you be willing to be a witness?" Arnie didn't treat this as the sort of offer he couldn't refuse. But at last he said, "S'pose so. I couldn't bear to see that stuff get a go on. I remember years ago when there was just a couple of bushes of lantana this side of Toowoomba and the lazy sods there just left it to spread. They could've wiped it out in an hour if they'd got straight on to it."

Dennis left it at that. He didn't think it would be difficult to get the Council on side; after all, there was nowhere much for a fire to escape to and Arnie was saving them some work. But when he later told young Kelly what they would need to do he got an astonished look and the diffident query, "He was burning *foxtails*?"

"Not foxes' tails. Foxtails are what people here call a useless kind of grass that can take over if you aren't careful. I don't blame them for wanting to get rid of it. But how good Arnie and that Sean character will be as witnesses—hard to say. But it might be enough to get Gresham's to back off. And I wouldn't send my cattle with some of their drivers either … if I had any cattle."

"And what about the Savage case? Did you get anything?"

"It's all changed up there, the house is gone, cleared land. But Dave thinks the little boy might've taken a different name when he went to live with his grandparents. He's going to get me the names of all the grandparents. Something just might ring a bell … "

"It would be a hard thing to live with, that notoriety."

"Seems the Savage family didn't have a very savoury reputation locally but Dave says none of them had a record so it was probably minor nuisance stuff." Unless the simple fact that someone regularly got away with more minor misbehaviours played a role in that final murderous rampage …

Case No. 2: Dust Cloud or Smoke Screen

It was DS Greg Sullivan who rang to say he'd just got a date for the trial of James Hove. "Still a bit iffy but they're going ahead. He refuses to roll over and confess, still bleating on about it being an accident."

"That guy doesn't have accidents," Dennis said grimly. "Just plans." James Hove had been manager of the Japana feed lots near Dinawadding at the time Constable Craig Wrightson was shot there while attending a fracas; Hove continued to maintain that Wrightson had got in their line of fire as they tried to tackle several escaped steers. Dennis, on the contrary, maintained that it was a careful cold-blooded set-up to get rid of Wrightson before he could find out what had really happened to a missing employee.

"I believe you," Greg had been involved with the interviewing of Mr Hove and didn't see the man as the innocent abroad he tried to position himself as, "but I'd still like something a bit more definite. And as soon as Japana's big shot lawyer hoes into the Walker boy he will collapse."

"Yeah, very likely. D'you know who Gavin Whittaker's found to run the case?"

"A guy from Brisbane called Noah Spencer. I looked him up and he doesn't pull his punches from what I can gather."

The case depended on a lot of small things to build to a sense of Hove's guilt; nothing open and shut about it and young Aidan Walker was a key witness for the Prosecution—but also a teenage boy who had been in and out of trouble through his teen years. Dennis made a mental note to review all his own evidence carefully. It might come down to the case he could make.

When he sat down with Fiona after the children were in bed he told her when the trial was due to start and about the latest big-name lawyer to be recruited on Japana's behalf. In response, she said slowly, "Noah Spencer."

Just something about the way she said it …

"D'you know him?"

"I did. Long ago. He was at uni with me but a year older. All the girls were crazy about him."

"Including you?"

She didn't answer immediately, leaning back against the comfort of his enclosing arm and seeming to send her mind back twenty years and more. Then she said candidly, "Yes, I was. I was an idiot. But he was very good-looking, clever, ambitious, wealthy, someone you knew would go places. It *was* very seductive, that aura of power and success. You knew he would be getting big cases and making big money even before he got to thirty. Just something about him."

"You went to bed with him?" He didn't mean it to sound so blunt but he *was* curious.

"Mmm, just one of my many mistakes when it comes to men. I suppose I was flattered. And he was so much the sort of man my mother had brainwashed me into thinking … into choosing … and it was so awful, really. And I overheard him talking about me afterwards … "

Dennis tightened his arm around her. "The bloke must be a moron."

"I suppose it was partly me, well, not just me but all the girls who sort of threw themselves at him. I suppose you can't blame him for taking what was on offer. But it didn't excuse the way he treated his partners afterwards … "

He hesitated to ask for more details and yet he knew anything about Noah Spencer might be useful to have to hand; not his sex life precisely but his way of relating to people. "Tell me anything you'd like about him. I won't pass it on."

"I don't suppose it matters now. But he was the first man I'd ever slept with and it was so … disappointing. I think he almost enjoyed hurting me. Some macho thing maybe. Or maybe he wanted to make sure I wouldn't want any sort of commitment. But some of the girls did, I knew that from seeing them and hearing them. A kind of masochism. No matter how badly he treated them they would still come back for more—and then he would laugh about it. But I just decided that I was going to find someone off-campus and keep my private life really private. So I went out with a man who had a small painting business. He was kind and decent, just rather dull. I could never get very excited about paints and mixing colours and the state of people's houses. He didn't really have any other topic of conversation."

"So you ended it—with Noah I mean?"

"It's hard to say, really, because he didn't invite me out again but equally I made a point of avoiding or ignoring him. It was easier for me because I wasn't in the law school. But even after I'd graduated and got the position in the bank I would still sometimes see him in the CBD or hear about him from some of the girls I knew. In a way it was good to move right away from Brisbane and be able to forget him. You always want to have nice memories of your first time making love, not the feeling that you want to sink through the floor, and knowing everybody knows … male students used to joke about the chicks lining up to go into Noah's ark, things like that … "

"And if it'd been me—would you have liked that?" He didn't usually speak about very intimate things.

She turned and smiled at him and put both hands up to his face. "Que sera, sera, but I would never want to have taken Norena from you … and when you were twenty and getting married I was only ten. I was still playing with dolls and reading Enid Blyton." Norena had been Dennis's first wife. And Fiona was too tactful to suggest that Dennis at twenty probably hadn't had much technique or understanding of women when it came to sex …

"So how would you sum him up now, d'you think?"

"Still very ambitious, still hoping to become a judge before he's fifty. I think you'll find he's a man who likes to win and he might not be any too fussy how he goes about it. I'm sure he'll tear your investigation and your experience and your reputation to shreds if he thinks he can get away with it."

Perhaps.

It would be another week or two before Dennis discovered that this assessment, though perceptive, was only half right.

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Dennis was called around to the hospital next morning. “It’s Mrs Maxwell,” Sister Martin said quietly. “She says she’s been raped.”

He couldn’t hide his surprise. “Strewth! Did she say who by?”

“Yes. She says it was her son.”

“Johnny?”

Sister Martin nodded. Johnny Maxwell rarely left the farm and was intellectually disabled. He had been to court for assaulting one of his younger siblings. Dennis regarded him as a walking time bomb and was sorry they had not been able to find a way to get him into some form of care. But both his father and his mother were what local people called ‘tough cookies’ and other less flattering descriptions and there was a belief in the psychiatric community that hard physical labour on a farm was probably one of the better options. Up to a point this was realistic but it still meant that Johnny was left to mind his younger siblings on the farm quite often while his mother was in town at her cleaning job and his father, a fencing contractor, was away.

“Okay, lead on. I wonder if she’s prepared to have me lay charges?”

“Possibly not.” Sister Martin thought of the other five Maxwell children and wondered if they would need to go into care. She didn’t think she would want to leave children in the sole care of Greg Maxwell … “We’ve had Dr Lombardi around to take samples. But we all believe her.”

Mrs Maxwell was a big blowsy woman nearing fifty and she lay in bed in the women’s ward with a curtain round her bed. She didn’t look pleased to see him come in. Possibly she had hoped his new constable would handle everything. At least he wouldn’t be thinking back to the family’s previous troubles with the police. And she knew Kelly was a Catholic too. She had seen him at Mass. Though whether that would make any difference …

“Okay.” Dennis sat down beside her bed. “D’you want us to press charges against your son.”

“And my bloody husband!”

“He also raped you?”

Mrs Maxwell looked surprised. Possibly it was the first time she had heard it suggested that a husband could rape a wife. “Nah, the bastard just sooled Johnny on to me an’ held me down.”

She wasn’t backward about bringing out the whole sordid story—of Greg Maxwell saying that seeing their retarded son was never going to get any sort of normal sex it was up to her to let him have a go—and how they’d kept at her all night till she was so sore she couldn’t hardly walk.

But at the end of her angry recital she started to cry. Dennis Walsh found Diane Maxwell an unpleasant person to deal with and yet, in a strange way, he also felt a faint sense of pity. She always struck him as someone who, if she hadn’t married a lowlife like Greg Maxwell, if she hadn’t been brought up in a family which never did anything for her, might have made something, he wasn’t sure what, of herself.

“You didn’t consent to sex with your son?” Even if she had they might be able to bring a case of incest; he wasn’t sure how old Johnny now was but he had a file on him back at the station.

“Of course not! You’re not allowed to have sex with your kids. I know that much.”

“Okay, calm down now, so we can get something sorted out. I will go out and charge your son and I can charge your husband as an accessory.” He would need to check how that would work in legal terms. Was this a conspiracy to rape? Or deprivation of liberty? He wasn’t sure how best to tackle Greg Maxwell but he wanted to see him in the dock … “And d’you want to talk with anyone? Father Meagher maybe?”

She shook her tousled head. “He only thinks I’m an old slag. What good would that do?” She sounded resentful but also tired.

“I’m sure he wouldn’t. But it’s up to you.”

“Okay, he can if he wants.” She seemed to retreat into apathy. It was something Walsh had vaguely thought before now: many people saw her as tough, as strong, as someone not to mess with, but he thought she was also someone who had always been at the mercy of stronger-minded people in her life. He went back to the station, rang Father Meagher to ask him to drop around to the

hospital. Then he rang Winville for advice, after he'd pulled out Johnny Maxwell's file and opened it on his desk. "How should I go about the charges? The boy has gone to court for assault on his little brother and got off with a suspended sentence. I want to get him away from there. But I also want to get Greg Maxwell. What can I charge him with?"

Daniel Wang wasn't a trained lawyer but he had done various university courses and Dennis found him more helpful than trying to get on to John Brophy for advice.

"Just charge the boy with rape for the moment—and bring him here. That gets him out of the mix. But it's hard to imagine any husband doing that—"

"Not so hard if you know Greg Maxwell," Dennis said grimly.

"Maybe not. But I'll get back to you on him. And you know it'll be the same thing with the kid as before. They'll say he's got an IQ of sixty or whatever and doesn't know what he's doing is wrong—and he'll be back home before you can say Jack Robinson."

"It's possible he doesn't know he's doing wrong—but bloody Greg certainly does."

Maybe the Maxwells were the sort of family which would hang round his neck like a dead albatross until he retired—and not once would he feel he had actually got through to any of them that they weren't fit parents, decent citizens, safe neighbours …

But when he and Brent Kelly got out to the farm, and Dennis had warned his junior that the place always stunk to high heaven, he found Greg had gone supposedly on a three-week-contract to a horse stud near Kaimkillenbun, leaving Johnny in charge. Whether it was deliberate, Greg assuming the police would not take Johnny away and leave the younger children, or whether he simply assumed Diane would give some pathetic lying story to keep them all off the hook …

Dennis walked around the farm to see what animals the family had that couldn't be left; just a miserable-looking dog and a small flock of hens, then he came back and rang Winville to see if he could get the social worker, Mrs Willis, to come out to the farm. "All the children will have to be taken into care briefly. I'm arresting Johnny Maxwell for rape and the bloody dad's skipped. I can't leave the other kids here while their mum's in hospital." Two of the other children were in their teens but how useful and responsible they might be was hard to guess. He thought he would prefer it if Charmian Willis made that call.

And he thought the only thing to do with the creatures was physically remove them all from the farm. The chance of persuading a neighbour to come on to this farm to mind them was small. And Greg Maxwell was quite capable of accusing any such neighbour of pinching his stuff or some other unpleasant claim. It would mean coming back later to get the hens when they'd gone to roost.

Dennis formally charged Johnny and told him to pack a change of clothes. He told Brent to catch the dog, get its chain and its bowl (if it had one), and take it in and put it in the run behind the station. He would wait here until Mrs Willis came. "Come straight back and I'll get you to run Johnny to Winville later. He'll abuse you non-stop all the way. Just ignore him. I'll see what Mrs Willis suggests but the mum and maybe the two youngest kids might be able to stay at St Monny's while she recuperates … "

Mrs Willis when she came, looking rather wind-blown and weary, said she would prefer to try and keep all the children together if she could. She rang the hospital and spoke to Susan Denby, the current matron, about how soon Mrs Maxwell might be leaving hospital. "Not before tomorrow at the earliest," Ms Denby said briskly. "They've made a mess of her."

"Then is there any chance of getting accommodation at the hospital for her children—or somewhere near?"

"One of the units for the elderly is vacant behind the hospital. The new people are moving in in about ten days. We would need to get the Maxwell family to sign an undertaking they wouldn't do any damage. They have a pretty bad reputation around Buckton—"

"I think we'd better take you up on it. I'll need to arrange for all the children to have counseling. It seems that several of them witnessed their mother being raped by her son."

Susan Denby gave a mild groan. The Maxwells were only marginally her responsibility. But she could see that this family implosion was likely to spread out and draw in other people. And she hated to think what would happen when Greg Maxwell came home and found the family dispersed and their domestic animals removed. He was notorious for his violent temper …

Dennis and Brent were getting weary by the time they went again to the farm on dusk and brought all the hens in a crate back to Buckton and left them at the local vet to be checked over. Vince Bromby wasn't too happy to have more than a dozen hens suffering from stickfast fleas dumped on him. "Treat 'em all, Vince," Dennis said grimly. "Keep the eggs in your frig. Sure as heck, Greg'll demand you account for everything they lay."

Vince nodded gloomily. Greg Maxwell probably would. And the chance of Maxwell paying the cost of treating his poultry was very small …

By the time Dennis got home to a late dinner he felt it had been a long day. The only thing to come out of it all might be that finally the family would get looked at as a whole, rather than the piecemeal efforts to try to sort things out he and other people had made over the years …

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The trial of James Hove was, curiously, not much of a public talking point in Winville. The inquest on Craig Wrightson had handed down an open verdict. The committal hearing had gone ahead without arousing much interest. Perhaps people were tired of anything to do with Japana. Yet frenzied discussions *had* gone on behind closed doors between local solicitor Gavin Whittaker and James Hove and the owners of Japana, Neumann and Randall Hoysted; their concern: whether or not to try and get the case moved to Brisbane. It would mean a jury which would not understand the intricacies of Sergeant Walsh's evidence about the cattle there. Equally it might get a jury of vegetarians unsympathetic to anyone who would choose to manage such a business. A trial in Winville would mean that most of the jury would be familiar with Japana and many would know or know of Sergeant Walsh. It was hard to second guess just how this would play out.

James Hove, wrapped in what he probably regarded as a cloak of impregnability, had opted for Winville. *He* had only been doing his job. *He* had been acutely aware of the risks the escaped steers posed to everyone. *He* had followed company policy to the letter. *He* would never cease to regret that Senior Constable Wrightson had got behind one of the stampeding animals. *He* was sorry that the churned dust had made visibility poor … *He* deeply regretted Wrightson's death but he was not going to swerve from his position that it was all a sad accident …

As Winville was the largest town in the district it provided the main pool of potential jurors but farm people and folk from the smaller places nearby were also called up occasionally. The trial of James Hove opened with two jurors from Buckton selected. Although they were asked whether they had any relationship with the defendant he was such a nonentity in local life that everybody could say no in complete honesty. The trial had brought Justice Swanston and Geoffrey Hale back to Winville but few people could claim to know them either. And Noah Spencer and his junior were strangers and unknown quantities.

The medical evidence and DSS Atwell's firearms evidence were largely accepted unchallenged. They showed what had happened but not why. Mr Spencer had been briefed by Gavin Whittaker on what to expect from Sergeant Walsh; Whittaker laying the emphasis on Walsh's knowledge of cattle but mentioning that many people in the district continued to regard Walsh as a thug and a bully for his heavy-handed policing. "No give in the bastard," Whittaker said drily.

Fiona had been in two minds whether to come. She wasn't sure that she wanted to see Noah Spencer again and yet a little twinge of curiosity niggled. She was happy to support Dennis by her presence so long as he didn't feel she would be a distraction. In the end she came with Karen Dalton as support for Nicky Wilcox, Craig Wrightson's girlfriend at the time of his death, as she had never been in court before and wasn't looking forward to hearing the gruesome details but felt it was the one last thing she could do for him. Several of Wrightson's family were also there. But James Hove and his possible crime did not seem to have gripped the swivel-necked public, despite several articles in the *Winville Courier*, and there was only a sprinkling of local people to fill the body of the court.

Dennis made his ponderous way into the witness box and took the oath. Noah Spencer, like many people before him, had the passing thought 'all brawn and no brains'. But he knew the Prosecution's case largely rested on Walsh's investigation and Walsh's evidence. And Dennis was slightly hampered by the knowledge that they hadn't so far been able to get anyone for the related

death of Oliver Hone. James Hove remained adamant that he never doubted that Hone had simply walked off Japana, breaking his contract, and departing for who-knew-where … It tied his hands, the knowledge that that investigation was ongoing—or, more correctly, had run up against a kind of Cosa Nostra silence when it came to Japana's other employees …

Sergeant Walsh had done a very thorough chronology; times and actions down to the smallest detail. Most of it was circumstantial but if he could get it all on to the record then there was a good chance it could plant deep seeds of suspicion in the jury's collective mind. Geoffrey Hale for the Crown had seen Walsh in action before and knew that he did his homework, going out of his way to follow up slim and unlikely leads. He simply led him through the sequence of events, occasionally clarifying a point or asking for a little more explanation, mindful that not all the jurors had been anywhere near the monster maze that was Japana.

Noah Spencer could see that part of Walsh's resonance with the jury was that he spoke slowly and clearly, taking time before answering each question. He wanted to be able to fluster the sergeant but he wasn't sure yet which buttons to press. Most police officers in his experience were touchy about some aspect of their investigation. They always knew there was some part where corners had been cut, where suspects or witnesses had been heavied, where they were open to charges of discrimination or coercion … where assumptions had been allowed to harden into certainties and hearsay had come to be seen as Holy Writ …

"You alone of everybody involved had suspicions, Sergeant Walsh, but then it is common knowledge around the district that you have a private vendetta against Japana and its employees. So you will need to spell out very clearly for us just what those suspicions were."

It was sometimes dangerous to go back over the same ground, asking the arresting officer to repeat his evidence, but Spencer had found that it could also be very effective. It could show up discrepancies and contradictions. It could fluster the officer in question because police were in the habit of coming in, giving their evidence and being allowed to leave again; an officer with other work waiting could become careless and slipshod and hasty in his impatience to be gone. He had seen other police lose their temper when asked to slowly and carefully pick over the same ground. And he didn't doubt that Walsh had a temper …

And the alternative, to home in on a point, was risky in a situation where all the points Walsh had made were small. To query one risked suggesting to the jury it was larger than they had so far allowed for.

Mr Spencer was also well aware that several of the women on the jury had looked at him in a way that stopped just short of admiring. He thought there might be some mileage to be gained if he could be positioned as the barrister who made certain they all understood the case very clearly. And more so if Walsh began to show himself increasingly antsy and reluctant to repeat things.

Only Fiona was in a position to judge how well Noah Spencer had aged and she several times was conscious of a bone-deep sense of gratitude that her brief fling had gone nowhere. He was still a very good-looking man, beautifully presented, and certainly in comparison to his junior who sat with his wig slightly askew and his gown looking as if it had been left too long out in a blazing sun, and his court manner had an understated but perfectly timed sense of drama and emotion. No one doubted that he believed absolutely in James Hove and was doing his best to make sure that an innocent man walked free in several days time …

But she could see the tiny signs of too much good living; the faint sense of contempt that he felt for the people in the jury box and sitting on the public benches; his determination not just to counteract Dennis's evidence but make him look a fool in the process; and his failure to acknowledge the victim. Noah Spencer might be a good barrister, an effective one, but he would never be a great one because he had no empathy in his makeup …

Dennis carefully spelled out the road he had traveled in investigating that mob of cattle; their wildness, their non-existent trip from Texas to Wandoan and back to Japana, the checking of their brands, their horns, the surprisingly short time they had spent at Japana, insufficient to fatten, their use in a movie, several people hearing the sound of a shot at least five minutes before James Hove and Wilson Rabey came down from the office with rifles—

"I was puzzled as to how those two steers had jumped out of a race, out of a holding yard, out of a closed laneway—"

"Why? Cattle do occasionally get out of paddocks."

"These were heavy duty fences nearly two metres high. Cattle can jump from a standing position but they would need to have been remarkable beasts to clear those three obstacles. One of the employees later told me he had been instructed to open the gate into the lane and the gate into the loading area was open when I arrived—"

Spencer was aware that a young employee would present this 'evidence' tomorrow and he did not want Walsh to have a chance to implant it in the jury's 'brain' before he had the chance to take Aidan Walker apart. "As this is hearsay and not admissible from you, Sergeant Walsh, we will move on. That is—if you have any more speculations you would like to present as evidence."

Dennis was immune to the slightly sneering undertone and went stolidly on; reiterating the very high prices Japana had paid to get the ex-movie cattle from the Palmer Pastoral Co; the break-in and rifling of the safe in Wrightson's office, the attempt to set fire to both the station and the home of Wrightson's girlfriend … Again Spencer pulled him up, pointing out that this was not evidence of anything …

"You asked me," Dennis sat in the witness box looking grim, "why I was suspicious. I am telling you."

Fiona did not find Dennis at his most implacable terribly easy to deal with; few people did. But it didn't seem to trouble Noah Spencer to dismiss it all as unimportant, hearsay, speculation or fantasy. Yet if Spencer had hoped to rattle Walsh by consistently undermining or dismissing everything he said he was disappointed. The sergeant was well aware that the effect of his evidence was cumulative, not dependent on one decisive blow, and he continued to present his points calmly, like someone slowly putting down the edging to a garden bed …

"I later searched the caravan where James Hove lived at Japana and found a spent bullet in among the pebbles around a pot plant. As no one had been able to find the bullet which had exited through Constable Wrightson despite a very careful search I impounded that bullet and had it checked against the rifle used by James Hove and the bullets removed from the two dead steers."

"But you cannot prove that that bullet had anything to do with Wrightson's death, can you?"

"No." Forensics believed the bullet had been washed but that still was not definitive.

"Nor do you know when it was placed amongst those pebbles, do you?"

"No."

With two negatives Noah Spencer felt he could go out on a winning note. He would have been surprised to learn that most of the jury didn't see it as a win for the Defence. It was that sense of uncompromising honesty about Walsh, Martin Applegarth later told his wife (though being careful not to actually refer to anything specific from the trial), which impressed people.

As people left the court house in the late afternoon, coming out into a cold wind and scudding cloud, Fiona was conscious of being stared at; someone away to one side was unexpectedly interested in her. But as she turned she saw Noah Spencer apparently in conversation with his junior and several other men. Perhaps she was imagining it. After all, it wasn't very likely that Noah Spencer would remember her after all these years and from such a brief acquaintance …

As she and Karen took the long road home, Mavis Barnard had said she would go around and pick the children up from childcare and take them to the service station until Fiona got back, she could not know that Noah Spencer was asking Gavin Whittaker if he had any idea who the woman—and he described Fiona in some detail—was who had sat up the back with two other women.

"Probably Walsh's wife," Whittaker said without much interest.

"What is her name, do you know?"

"Fiona Greehan. She was a bank manager in Buckton before she married him."

Spencer allowed himself a slight smile. "I wonder what she sees in the big oaf."

"A lot of people have wondered that, possibly. Why are you interested?"

"I used to know her. A long time ago, of course. Still a slag, is she? Spreads her legs for anyone?"

Gavin Whittaker found his interest slightly piqued but he couldn't see that any of it was relevant. Dennis had finished giving his evidence; his wife was unlikely to be back in court tomorrow. "If you say so. Anyway I must get back to the office."

He walked away, feeling reasonably pleased with the way things were going. They had managed to keep the animal cruelty video out of evidence, to his relief. He was certain it had swayed people when it had been shown at the coronial inquest. It had been presented there as a possible motive for someone wanting to remove Wrightson from the situation. But it had been ruled inadmissible as evidence in Hove's trial. No one had come up with a link between Hove and several of the men at Japana butchering an animal while it remained alive. Quite right too, in Whittaker's opinion. Hove might be a cold fish, he was probably ruthless when someone got in his way, he had been an intelligence officer in the old Rhodesia and had probably ordered people 'taken out' at times, but Whittaker couldn't see him wallowing in that kind of gratuitous cruelty.

Spencer spent some time with Hove in the holding cell downstairs, before the accused was taken back to the watch house, going over tomorrow's list of witnesses. Aidan Walker was a negligible problem. He didn't doubt his ability to reduce the kid to a blubbering wreck if need be. Reginald Palmer was a different matter. But Palmer was only here for the Prosecution with the greatest reluctance. That sense of grudging the time might well play to the Defence's advantage. Two other employees from Japana had been called, along with Wilson Rabey, the deputy office manager who had been promoted to Hove's position. They would not be a problem. And Rabey was well-primed to tell the court how cut up he knew Hove was in the aftermath …

The Prosecution might be able to pick up a few little snippets to support their sequence of events but it was unlikely to be telling. Spencer finally sat down to dinner with his junior, Mathew Lindsay, in a comfortable frame of mind. It was only later as he was preparing for bed that an idea came to him. If Walsh's evidence looked like being the decisive part of the trial—then was there some way to negate Walsh? What if Walsh could be implicated not just in a general vendetta against Japana but in a more personal vendetta against James Hove? It would negate the strong impression he had obviously made on the jury.

Hove was in his fifties but was still a personable man with his mild 'Mr Chips' type of demeanour. He wasn't an unrealistic person to have an affair. He wasn't married so there were no complications of adultery on his side—and it didn't matter if there were any strict Christians on the jury to wonder what kind of dysfunctional marriage the Walshes had. But the sense of faint doubt would need to be inserted very carefully. Just the discreet implication that Dennis Walsh and the investigating police in general might have been swayed because James Hove was … had been … nothing so blatant as the hint of an affair … more the delicate suggestion of a mutual attraction …

If it went nowhere it didn't matter. But he could see how the planting of doubt in the jury's mind would be more effective than trying to come up with a clear sense of Hove's innocence. After all, he *had* shot a police constable. It wasn't possible to present him as Little Lord Fauntleroy. Just enough doubt that they wouldn't feel comfortable with a Guilty verdict. Just acknowledgement of a tragic accident …

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Dennis was flat out with minor problems over the next few days. Sister O'Brien and Nicky Wilcox's cousin went along to support her and Mr and Mrs Simpson from Dinawadding and Luke Molloy who was now employing Aidan Walker took time out to go along to support the youth. Kath O'Brien called into the station in Buckton on her way home and said, "Aidan managed quite well. I don't think he knew what had hit him when that Brisbane man got stuck into him. He got pretty flustered. But we all tried to look encouraging and I know you told him to just tell the truth without embroidery and he tried very hard to stick to that. I think the jury were quite sympathetic."

"And how did Mr Palmer go?"

"I think he went over quite well."

Fiona had wondered about going again but as neither Kath O'Brien nor Karen Dalton were free to go and it would mean leaving the children at childcare again she thought Mrs Wilcox would have to depend on other people. But Sister Hitchener rang from the hospital in the evening to say

Kath had told her about it and if Fiona would like to go again she was free for two days and had never been to a court case.

Fiona hesitated then said yes. She had told no one except Dennis that it was like laying an ancient and not-very-pleasant ghost to rest. "And yet, up to the moment you came home and told me who would be defending James Hove I had barely given Noah so much as a passing thought in years. And now I find myself passionately wanting him to lose the case. I really want to see him admit defeat. I didn't know I had this vindictive streak in me."

"Maybe it's also got something to do with wanting to see a nasty piece-of-work behind bars?"

"That too."

Iris Hitchener was a very beautiful woman; even when she dressed quietly and wore her hair scraped back she still turned heads. She came round to join Fiona just after breakfast and they set out on the long drive to Winville into a dry blustery west wind. Fiona did not know Iris particularly well but what she knew she liked and she was grateful to Iris for making the suggestion. The drive was a chance to get to know the nursing sister better. And although she had heard the local gossip about Iris and Brent Kelly going out to dinner she didn't see it as something to ask about. Iris could tell her more if she felt like it …

The Defence had put all their eggs into the one basket. James Hove. And it struck Fiona as she sat and watched Noah Spencer lead him through the confused sequence of events that it was a very good strategy. It was as though the Defence was saying 'we don't need all those people coming and going to prove anything. We *know* our man is innocent and he will convince you too if you just take the care to listen."

Fiona several times found herself looking over at the jury. It included Martin Applegarth and Iain Mackie from Buckton but she didn't recognise any of the other people. So what were Martin and Iain thinking? She barely knew Iain Mackie but she knew Martin would be a good and careful juror, weighing everything, making notes of the key points. It didn't surprise her that the other jurors had chosen him as their foreman. But what did they think of James Hove? Did they find him truthful? Did they find his sequence of events, when they deviated from the sequence the Prosecution had presented, more realistic?

If she could see inside Martin's mind it would be to see an increasing unease. At first he had thought that Spencer's discreet implication that Hove had a woman in his life was merely an attempt to make Hove seem more human. Juries, most people in fact, were more accepting of someone they saw as 'normal' rather than a loner. But as the trial continued he began to see it as somehow suggesting that Sergeant Walsh had gone after James Hove because he had a more private bone to pick with the manager … He wasn't sure if he had understood the nuances correctly.

James Hove had been in the witness box nearly three hours before Spencer seemed to move from vague innuendo to something the jury might better be able to grasp. Even so, it was too indefinite for most of the jury to read. Even Fiona, not knowing anything much about James Hove's private life, had not read into it what was making Martin Applegarth increasingly uncomfortable.

It was only when Geoffrey Hale got up to cross-examine Hove on his detailed testimony that he said, "You are suggesting, Mr Hove, that Sergeant Walsh's investigation was tainted by more personal considerations, that in some way he had it in for you, to use the usual expression."

Hove gave this apparently careful consideration. "It did strike me that way. Winville CIB brought in two men from the Murder Squad in Brisbane to strengthen their investigation but Sergeant Walsh continued to come out to Japana. His name was not on the list the CIB had given me of people who could gain access to the scene of the accident but he used other excuses to gain access."

"Such as?"

"He said it was a matter of workplace safety—and of health issues. I couldn't refuse to let him enter even though he disrupted our very busy work schedule."

"But you were aware that Walsh and Wrightson had been friends?"

"No. Sergeant Walsh had very little to do with Dinawadding. It was only Japana that he sometimes seemed intent on disrupting." No one except Fiona and Nicky Wilcox appeared to be aware that Dennis owned a house in Dinna.

"So you believe he had another motive for coming?"

"I find it very hard to be specific but, yes, I did sometimes think that."

"You *will* need to be more specific for the court, Mr Hove. What other motive did you think he might have?"

James Hove had strenuously resisted any suggestion that he might try to implicate Fiona Greehan or any other woman. He didn't like women and he wasn't sure he could make any kind of innuendo sound genuine. But as he had sat and listened to the various witnesses he could see that Spencer was right. It *was* Walsh's evidence which was the most damning.

James Hove suddenly contrived to look a little less cool and calm. "Japana is very much a male world, you have to understand that aspect of it, and I think we all are tempted to read more into our … our meetings with local women than perhaps the women themselves would. Like men on oil rigs we expand our dreams into something more exciting."

Martin Applegarth looked mildly surprised at the analogy. Japana was a five-minute-drive from Dinna and a twenty-minute-drive from Buckton—and certainly no more given the way most of the men there drove round in big powerful souped-up vehicles. It was hardly an oil rig. A number of the men regularly went to the pub in Dinna and others regularly went to Winville, if not further afield. And Japana had provided sex via, first, Eve Rogers and later Alice Henniger and there might be other women. Geoffrey Hale, not a local man, unfortunately did not query this image of women-starved men.

"Are you suggesting that you were attracted to a local woman, Mr Hove?" Hale said. He had the faint feeling of being drawn into an area which would take the court's focus off the death of Craig Wrightson.

"I am no different to most bachelors. I cannot help an admiring glance occasionally. That it might be misinterpreted … "

"Are you suggesting that one of these admiring glances had something to do with Sergeant Walsh?"

"I would not like to suggest such a thing. Nor do I know what goes on in Sergeant Walsh's mind. But people do occasionally come to erroneous conclusions on very little evidence. I saw it happen throughout my own career in intelligence. Some men are very swift in catching, as you might say, the wrong end of the stick."

A couple of jurors believing this to be a double entendre gave it a slight grin. And several jurors had heard stories of Dennis Walsh steaming into places on the slimmest of evidence. It wasn't hard to extrapolate …

Martin Applegarth admired Fiona Greehan—though he didn't think he had ever sent any admiring glances her way—for her talents, her character, her integrity, the way she had run the Bank of the Darling Downs, for the way she brought up her children, for the way she had worked very hard to understand Council business and pull her weight on the Council. It didn't stop her being a city person who probably found many things about Buckton and Bucktonites rather irksome and he knew some people interpreted this as Fiona thinking she was better than local people. But he genuinely felt she was a very nice person. And he deeply resented the idea that James Hove with his innuendo might succeed in smearing Fiona. Many people here would assume that what Hove said under oath was reasonably likely to be true …

And once it was all in the trial transcripts …

He wasn't sure of the etiquette of trying to stop this line of development. But he wrote on his notepad 'Mrs Walsh is in court' and tore it off. The young woman minding the recording equipment sat next to the jury box. He caught her eye and handed it over. She at first thought he simply needed to be excused for some reason but she read it and handed it up to Justice Swanston.

Geoffrey Hale was asking Hove when this secret attraction had begun. Most eyes were focused on him rather than the jury box. Hove clasped his hands and looked over into the court and said quietly, "I think since about last September."

Long enough for people to wonder whether admiration had moved on to something more concrete; and again no one queried that casual mention of September despite Fiona and Dennis still being overseas then. But it was Justice Swanston who was most puzzled by the message and Hove's

discreet words. He had seen a woman he took to be Mrs Walsh when he took the Annis Lefroy case here some time ago. He had seen no sign of that woman here today. He wasn't aware that the woman he had assumed to be Mrs Walsh was in fact Narelle Sullivan, DS Sullivan's wife. Now he wondered if the woman he'd seen was instead a relative or friend.

He rarely intervened in his cases, preferring to sit in remote and slightly forbidding splendour, but now he said quietly, "I understand this questioning is circling round the question of whether Mr Hove has ever had any form of relationship with Mrs Walsh, even simply admiring her from the other side of the road. As I understand she is in court this afternoon I would ask your client to point her out to me."

This was highly irregular. Noah Spencer opened his mouth to protest. Then he thought that it might be better kept as substance for an appeal if the verdict went against his client.

Geoffrey Hale, like Justice Swanston, had never met Mrs Walsh. What no one there realised was that James Hove also had never met her. He hadn't taken any particular notice of the people sitting on the public benches the first day of the trial but Spencer had mentioned her in passing when he put the idea forward as 'the woman in the blue dress, still quite attractive'. Now James Hove looked round the court. The most attractive woman in a blue dress was Iris Hitchener. Fiona, today, was wearing olive-green with a cream blouse. James Hove looked at his barrister then back to Michael Swanston and said, "The lady in the blue dress."

Iris stared at him, half astonished, half dismayed. Several people on the jury shook their heads slowly. But it was Noah Spencer who couldn't quite hide his sudden flush of annoyance. Geoffrey Hale's junior was local and he wrote on a piece of paper. "That is a nursing sister from Buckton Hospital. Mrs Walsh is sitting next to her." Hale took it and smiled. Mr Spencer might now wish that he had opted for a local person to assist him.

He said, barely suppressing a sense of quiet triumph: "As the lady in the blue dress is definitely *not* Mrs Walsh I would ask that Mr Hove's Counsel apologise and we can move on from this very unproductive and pointless excursion into total irrelevance. I think too we can take it that Sergeant Walsh does *not* have a personal vendetta against James Hove and that he conducted the investigation using normal police procedures."

Justice Swanston smiled slightly. If the lady in the blue dress was not Mrs Walsh then he was none the wiser. There were women sitting both sides of Iris Hitchener. He made a mental note to ask someone when the case was over. "Yes," he said calmly, "we would all appreciate it if the case could move on. If you will continue, Mr Hale."

It meant that Iris Hitchener didn't get an apology but Fiona thought she would much prefer to be overlooked and ignored. She was not a woman to draw attention to herself.

What neither woman, from their seats at the back of the court, could see was the expression on Jimmy Hove's face when he was facing his counsel. He had been made to look a fool and the sudden rise of anger into his normally mild and rather expressionless face was caught by the jurors who had been looking at him rather than towards the rear of the court. For several people it was a revelation. Maybe Mr Hove was not the quiet calm model-employee-type person they had seen for the last couple of days. Or not when something stirred him sufficiently—

The questioning of the accused went on till the court finally adjourned for the day. Swanston thought they could probably wrap it tomorrow. He also thought there had been a sea change in the mood of the court. It was hard to put a finger on it but he had presided over enough trials to know the feeling when jury and public cease to hedge their bets. James Hove and his team had squandered the degree of doubt the case had begun with. Just why he wasn't sure and he was still pondering on whether he should have been more proactive and stopped that line of questioning sooner. He was still pondering on this as he sat down to dinner with his assistant. But Spencer had inserted it very discreetly and very cleverly …

It was James Hove who had ceased to find anything about it discreet or clever. Next morning it was all round the court if not round the town that he had sacked Noah Spencer and Mathew Lindsay. So it was Gavin Whittaker who found himself yet again trying to deal with the fall-out from another crisis of what he'd privately begun to call 'the hell that is Japana'.

And if Hove got convicted then the police would come back to the workforce there with renewed energy in their search for the killer or killers of Oliver Hone …

Case No. 3: Moving On

Michael Swanston adjourned the case briefly. James Hove had told his solicitor he was perfectly capable of conducting the remains of his case and summing it up for the jury. But as conviction would see him do serious prison time Gavin Whittaker had asked him to rethink his position.

"Why do you think Spencer brought in that red herring about Mrs Walsh?" Whittaker had not been there to see or hear but various stories were going round town, some fairly accurate, others wild rumours about Jimmy Hove having an affair with Sergeant Walsh's wife.

"Because—" Hove was tempted to say 'because the man's a fool' but he merely said, "he wanted to 'get' Walsh by suggesting that he had a personal vendetta against me—and the only thing he could come up with was this ridiculous idea of Walsh's wife. Everyone at Japana knows I don't like women and avoid them."

Whittaker could see the value in casting vague doubts on Walsh's motivation but he could see that this way wouldn't work. It wasn't admiration for the man who had given him a lot of extra work and worry but he did believe that Dennis Walsh was remarkably free from any kind of jealousy, whether personal or professional, and he also knew that Dennis Walsh would not take kindly to Hove's team attempting to cast aspersions on Fiona Greehan. What Noah Spencer had almost certainly done was to make Dennis Walsh doubly determined to get to the bottom of the murder of Oliver Hone.

"I think our Mr Spencer has been guilty of some very unprofessional conduct," Gavin Whittaker finally said in a musing way. "He told me he knew Fiona Greehan was a slag, available to everyone. The image doesn't fit." He fell silent again. "So I just wonder if she turned him down at some stage. This is payback time and you were the—the means to hand. We can try to get a re-trial."

Mr Hove sat and mulled this over before saying quietly, "No, I think we have Mr Spencer over a barrel. He has crossed me. I think it is about time I look at how a double cross might work."

"Compensation? Money back?"

"No. Tell him he can conclude the case for me—"

"With the most powerful summing up any barrister has done for a client in fifty years?"

"That, certainly." Hove's whole face seemed to tighten till it gave the impression of being a mere mask. Then he only said "That will do for the time being."

Whittaker, too, didn't rush into speech. It had been a revealing moment. Hove had described his time in Intelligence work as being 'a mere pen-pusher' but now Whittaker wondered. The man who orders torture or execution doesn't expect to be disobeyed; more to the point, were any of the other Japana employees some of the men who had taken orders from James Hove in the past? He thought he might do a little quiet digging himself. Rumour said Oliver Hone had been poisoned though he didn't know by what substance or how reliable any evidence after the time Hone had spent in a makeshift grave might be. If Hove was the poisoner then he only had to order several of the men to dig that makeshift grave … and if several of them already had pasts they had successfully hidden from everyone here except James Hove … and certainly from Immigration …

Whittaker said mildly he would get on to Spencer immediately. "But you realise Swanston will probably give you a less impartial summing up?"

"If it's biased then you will have grounds for an appeal."

True. But Whittaker as he went round to see Noah Spencer (and found him packing his bags) felt he just wanted James Hove to disappear from his life. Perhaps it was increasing age. Perhaps the feeling that he didn't want his daughters to be tainted by his long association with Japana and its employees and the Hoysted family …

"He has agreed you can stay on," Whittaker said mildly as he came into the unit he had rented for Hove's legal team.

"Bully for him." Spencer straightened up.

"Why on earth didn't you make sure that he at least knew Mrs Walsh by sight?" Whittaker had never particularly liked court work but he had the sneaking feeling that if he had been in Spencer's shoes he would've done his homework more thoroughly.

"I was under the impression he did."

Whittaker was unimpressed by this. "He is considering making a formal complaint. I've talked him out of it for the time being. But you'll need to pull something extra special out of the bag when you sum up."

"I only came here as a favour to him—"

"You came here because the Neurand Trust is paying you extremely well for your time so don't go on about favours."

"I had to turn down other cases to come out here."

"Then do your best for Hove and you can be on your way home."

Spencer resented being spoken to like this by a mere country solicitor and said so.

Gavin Whittaker showed no sign of taking umbrage, only saying quietly, "She turned you down, didn't she, and you were unprofessional enough to hold a grudge." It came out as a simple statement. "Well, next time I go looking for legal muscle I'll be a lot more discriminating." He got up and went to the door. "You'd best go round and mend some fences with our friend James." The door closed behind him.

*

Iris Hitchener had gone to the last day of the trial to support Mrs Wilcox but also because her curiosity had been piqued; she wanted to know what the jury decided and how Hove and Spencer responded. She and Nicky Wilcox had dinner in Winville before taking the long road to Buckton; Nicky would now go home to Dinawadding but she and Iris called round to the Walsh home to pass on the news.

"I am glad they said it was deliberate, not an accident. I wanted to see that man suffer a bit. But it doesn't bring Craig back." Nicky was still in a fairly overwrought state.

"I know," Dennis said with some emotion of his own. "But a bit of justice is better than no justice at all. And it is better for Craig's reputation. It's very easy for the victim to get blamed."

Mrs Wilcox agreed with that and said rather tearfully that Craig's dad and mum had asked her to keep in touch. She said she and Jayden were going to go down and stay with them in Gatton in the school holidays. After she and Iris had gone out, Fiona said why didn't they have a game with the children; she didn't want Dennis to now dwell on the fact that he had got no justice for the deaths of his first wife and baby daughter … and they ended up having a happy game of Blind Man's Bluff, she and Dennis only allowed to crawl round the floor on their knees …

This was ended by the phone ringing. It was Greg Sullivan to say, "Don't know if you've heard the verdict, Dennis, but the bastard'll be sentenced tomorrow. So all your business with the cattle paid off. Brophy actually said you did quite a fair job there. He's not too keen on admitting anyone ever does a good job—except him. But the reason why I'm ringing is that Daniel says we need to go straight back into Japana while they're all feeling a bit vulnerable. I don't know what he means exactly—but if there's any chance Hove was protecting any of those guys or hiding their backgrounds—then I s'pose they might be feeling a bit jittery."

"Could be."

"And Daniel wants to know if you can spare the time to come."

"Let me think." He spent a minute calling their appointments to mind. "And don't forget to check the drivers that took those loads of Palmer cattle to Caboolture, as well as the actual employees, I assume they were all from Gresham's." Gresham's Transport was based in Winville and did most of the driving for the feed lots. He didn't have a high opinion of the way the company was run. There had been some talk that the Rev Eric Kramer was going to buy it but that apparently had come to nothing and, so far as Dennis knew, the company was still owned by a subsidiary of Hoysted Holdings. Eric Kramer had finally given up the Retreat Centre next to Japana and was

currently working as a Dutch Reformed pastor in Toowoomba for the small congregation there. He still came out to Winville regularly to consult with Gavin Whittaker as one of the three trustees of the Neurand Trust, the huge inheritance left to Neumann and Randall Hoysted by their mother.

Greg agreed. The drivers were mostly local men and were less likely to hang resolutely together in the way that many of the Japana employees, hailing from southern Africa, did. But whether they might have seen, heard, wondered about anything …

"Should be okay if you can go early, get me back for an appointment at eleven."

Greg said he and Daniel would try to be out soon after seven. "A bit hard to get going these cool mornings but we'll do our best. Or drive out and meet us and you can leave when you need to."

"Okay, I'll see about bringing Kelly. He needs to get a bit of an idea of what Japana's like. I've sent him out to Dinna a couple of times but he's only driven past the place. Oh, one other thing, Greg—did Bishop get on to you about the Savage case?"

"Yeah, worse luck. It looks like another of Doug's messes. But it was Blinco who was still there when the call came in. I think he left about two months later. He sent Doug out and Doug said it was a murder-suicide, end of case. Why does Bishop think it isn't?"

"Because the medical evidence doesn't seem to stack up. The sister who assisted Fred Wittenbach thinks at least one of the bodies was dead before it was shot. She's going to come up and see us as soon as she can find the time." It would need to be soon if Dave Bishop was going to get the credit for anything before he departed.

"Could still be suicide," Greg said without much conviction.

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James Hove would go to Brisbane to serve his time. He sent a message to Gavin Whittaker saying they needed to talk before he left. Mr Whittaker thought it was probably about appealing his sentence and Hove confirmed this as soon as the lawyer arrived.

"Even I could pick a dozen holes in the case he made for me," Hove said in his curiously neutral way. "And that bit about Mrs Walsh … " He shook his head. "See how they recorded it in the transcripts. It may come over as Swanston simply intervening wrongly. He never made it clear how he knew Mrs Walsh was in court. I think you'll find you've got him by the short and curlies."

Whittaker nodded cautiously. Hove was almost certainly right. "Who d'you want to run your appeal? If anyone?"

"Spencer. And I want the appeal in Brisbane. Get it all off home turf."

Whittaker nodded. "Are you sure you want Spencer?"

"Undoubtedly. He thinks he can forget me. He may find I'm a person who refuses to be forgotten."

"I'll see what I can do." But as Whittaker spoke one of the security men came into the room to say: "We're ready to leave, Mr Hove, soon as you are."

James Hove got up without showing any regrets about leaving Winville. "Mind the rest of my things," he said to Gavin Whittaker in a voice which brooked no argument. He walked to the door then turned back briefly to add, "Mind Rabey." Then he went out and Gavin Whittaker was left with that puzzling instruction.

Mind Rabey. He considered the command, turning it over in his thoughts. Meaning Rabey was a weak link in the chain? Meaning Rabey would stab them all if given half a chance? Meaning Hove didn't have a high opinion of his deputy and believed he would crack if put under pressure—either from the police or from the Hoysteds? He was still musing on those two words as he went back to his office and got busy on some of his normal bread-and-butter cases. They seemed surprisingly soothing. He even found himself pondering on the idea of a new partner now that Mitchell Lumb had retired; perhaps the sort of gung-ho partner who would look after Japana and the Hoysteds' empire while he merely dealt with conveyancing and people who wanted to sue their local supermarket because they thought their sausages were a bit 'off' …

Daniel, Greg, and Dennis knew nothing about 'Mind Rabey' but they thought that Rabey, no matter how close-mouthed Hove and the rest of the workforce were, must know more than he had so far shared. DC Deane had made a start on hunting out some background for him and had him arriving in Australia from South Africa eighteen months ago and at Japana about five months later.

She didn't yet have confirmation of whether he had spent those five months also with a Hoysted company and she didn't have anything of his previous history or whether he had known James Hove before arriving at Japana …

But as soon as the men went in with their list of employees to be re-questioned it was to find that some more men had left Japana, for places unknown … "It's bleeding bloody names," Wang said angrily. "How're we supposed to solve a murder when the suspects keep disappearing!" Rabey listened but didn't seem to see this as having any relevance to him or his management.

"Then maybe you can get the bods still here to dob in the bods that're gone," Dennis said grimly. "Unless they're ten foot under—we should be able to track 'em all down." He looked at the list Wang was waving around; another three names had been crossed off. "I'll go out and do a wander around while you two interview."

Rabey opened his mouth to protest then closed it again. He didn't want Dennis Walsh to think there was anything to find. And Dennis wasn't sure if he was looking for anything in particular or just updating his image of the place and looking at the current 'batches' of cattle.

It had a minor spin-off so far as Wang and Sullivan could see; it seemed to make everyone just a little on edge, as though they didn't want to have Walsh looming over them but neither did they want to let him completely out of their sight. Dennis simply strolled up and down the lanes, looked in some of the sheds, looked in the feed troughs, looked at the condition of the animals …

Quite a strong south-westerly was blowing and the dust rose over the complex and made him feel gritty and irritable. Unless someone had a crisis of conscience … unless someone dobbed someone else in … then they were no closer to getting a hint on Oliver Hone's death. Was he killed by someone he had annoyed? Had he been killed by a group of men, angry about him filming and passing on that animal cruelty video? Had he been killed or ordered killed by James Hove for reasons which had little to do with Japana and a lot to do with something which happened back in their shared homeland of Zimbabwe?

He took out his notebook and jotted 'Cameras?' It had always struck him as hard to believe, Hove's statement that all the belongings left by someone who didn't finish out a contract were automatically destroyed, including expensive cameras. Had there been something else, had someone *believed* there was something else on film in one of those cameras, and faced with two options—stealing all the cameras or killing Hone—that someone had gone for the jugular.

He finally came back and sat in on the last of the interviews. Wang and Sullivan didn't look as though they had achieved much; both looked glum and stoical as they continued through their questions. Wilson Rabey sat largely unnoticed in the background. Dennis hesitated then took out his notebook again and wrote: 'Don't say anything. Did Hone take any other compromising pictures? And can the Neurand Trust as a whole be charged for a failure to take due care of an employee?' He passed it to DS Wang.

Daniel read it through and nodded slowly, then passed it to Sullivan. It had the immediate impact of making everyone else in the room look slightly ill-at-ease. Had Walsh found … something? But none of the three officers gave anything away in their expressions. Wang finished up his present interview rather abruptly and gestured for Walsh and Sullivan to join him outside.

"We never found any sign of those cameras—and no sign of anything in the incinerator just out the back here. But they could be buried, pawned, flogged down at the pub, one of those bods that've gone probably helped himself … So why don't you want any questions asked?"

"If he bought them in Zimbabwe I wonder if anyone kept any paperwork … but the reason I didn't want you to say anything yet is they're all thinking the note's about something I maybe found outside. Get 'em a bit off balance."

"I don't see why the Neurand Trust couldn't be sued," Greg Sullivan sounded doubtful, "but you'd need a lawyer … "

"We could ask Gavin," Wang said sourly. "But I think you might be right. Instead of hoping an individual'll leap up and say 'it was me!' we can take the Trust to court, I don't think it would depend on the Hone family taking out a civil case, because the death clearly happened on their premises, like someone being killed because of careless work practices … even if we only charged the Trust with the unlawful disposal of a body … but can we charge a trust or would we need to

charge the trustees individually … or the Hoysted boys … ” It was a rather peculiar situation but it had its own interest.

“And the Trust could sue Hove and Rabey for not carrying out their duties in a responsible manner,” Greg Sullivan said slowly. “We would need to check what legal responsibilities the trustees actually have.”

“Well, as the owners they would be responsible for creating a safe working environment—” Dennis felt it wasn’t an area where he could contribute anything definitive. “So they’d be responsible unless they could prove it was simply two bods coming back drunk from the pub and coming to blows—and how would they prove that without dobbing someone in?”

“Except it wasn’t blows, was it?” Sullivan lit up in the hope a smoke would give him a sharper edge; it rarely did … “It was poison … or something … ”

“They’re still running tests.” Daniel sighed. “Anyway, let’s tell them we’re off and head out fast, it might rattle them. And I just want to get off this disgusting place, it’s worse than a piggery, and breathe some clean air.”

“Then get the Health bods in. It’s possible they’re still burying and dumping offal. I think the boiler might be a smoke screen—it’d be a lot more expensive to run than digging a few holes. They’ve got an excavator out by the silos there, wouldn’t take long to dig a decent sized trench.”

“And they threw Hone’s stuff in the trench?” Sullivan wasn’t sure where the conversation was going.

“You didn’t see a ditch?” Daniel turned back to Dennis.

“Didn’t go all over, it’s a big area, and there’s the other properties … ”

As Daniel said curtly to Wilson Rabey that they’d be back soon and went out Gavin Whittaker with ‘Mind Rabey’ still wandering round in his head put through a call to Brisbane. Noah Spencer’s secretary said he was in court and could she help. She sounded brisk and probably middle-aged; possibly Spencer preferred to keep his love life out of the office … or he had a jealous wife …

“Possibly. Tell him James Hove left for Brisbane this morning, that he wants an appeal mounted as Justice Swanston was clearly out of order, and that he wants Spencer to handle it.”

“I’m sorry but I don’t think that will be possible. Mr Spencer is fully booked—”

“Mr Spencer will just have to find the time, won’t he?”

The secretary had heard her boss fulminating against Hove, Swanston, Whittaker, Winville, and everything related; she had also heard him say he would never again accept a brief from Whittaker or the Hoysteds. “I’m sorry, sir, but I don’t think he would want to accept any more work from you—even if he wasn’t so busy.”

“Then Mr Spencer is going to have to wear a complaint to the Bar Council unless he rings me as soon as he’s out of court.” Whittaker hung up. Where did these prima donnas get off, he thought sourly. Swan in, swan out, do a worse job than some Legal Aid junior … He was in no good mood as he turned back to his own piles of paperwork …

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Dennis had a ring from Dave Bishop in the evening to say, “I think I just might have something for you.” Dennis was tempted to say ‘it’s for you, Dave, not me’ but he only said, “Shoot.”

“Well, I followed up on that John Savage, the granddad, and I found he died in Toowoomba. He had a heart attack but he also had Huntington’s chorea. I looked it up and it’s one of those inherited things. Apparently you can have your family and everything and it only shows up when it’s too late to do anything about it. I rang the hospital to see if they’d kept records back that far and they faxed me a bit of material. He died in 1990 but he was regarded as dangerous well before then, violent outbursts, several attacks against staff, full-blown dementia … so maybe his son or his grandsons … What d’you think, does it make it sound like suicide? That Joe found out too late that he had probably passed the condition on to his kids?”

“Sounds like a complicating factor. From what I’ve heard of the Savages they wouldn’t feel much sense of responsibility. Got some bloody syndrome, who cares? That sort o’ thing.”

“True. But you never know how it’ll take people, suddenly getting some news like that.”

"But you've still got an outsider coming in if Joe didn't kill his family, either another family member or someone who'd heard about the old man and understood what it might mean. A neighbour terrified that he might end up with a whole family violent and out of control—"

"Yeah … but none of this explains that business of shooting already dead people."

"Then I think it's time you got on to Fred Wittenbach yourself, ask to see all his notes, find out what the police said when the bodies were brought in, find out how long he took over each post mortem, find out if anything was ever queried. Find out if he'd heard any rumours about this Huntington thing, I don't know if it'd show up in a dead body."

"Okay." Bishop had been scribbling hurried notes as Dennis spoke. It seemed to crystalise the difference between them. Dennis always had ideas (or if he didn't it wasn't obvious) whereas he often sat looking at his computer screen rather blankly. The only thing he could do was put in a neat report and hope that something would 'break' … "And if I can't get a result before I leave—can you give the new guy here a bit of a hand?" The feeling of time running out was an odd one; until a few weeks ago he'd felt his departure couldn't come soon enough …

Dennis was tempted to say the new guy might like a few weeks to familiarise himself with his patch before being thrust into the grim past, the new guy might even dig his toes in and say it was a CIB case and he wasn't going to try and show them up, but it seemed simpler to say, "I'll do what I can. Any other news?"

"Well, I asked around about the phone—and they did have one but it was cut off about two months before they all died. He hadn't paid the bill. Someone said he didn't want a phone because people only rang up when they wanted money out of him. Maybe he didn't pay other bills. I don't know. And I've got Joe's wife's parents. She was Ethel and her dad was Frank Schuster, that's S-C-H … and her mum was Olga Weiss. You've got John Savage and his wife was a Bridget, so probably not a German family, but no one here seems to remember her. She left John when he left the farm and she went to live in Oakey. She had a married sister there. The boys were Frank who was nineteen, John was about seventeen, George was fifteen, Paul was about thirteen and a half and Tom just a couple of months shy of twelve. People here think that Tom was sent to Oakey."

"So he would've gone to school there? Try ringing the High School there. They would know if he was booked into school under Tom Savage or something else. Even if the school wanted to keep it all low key they probably kept a bit of an eye on him, see how he was coping maybe."

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Daniel Wang rang a couple of days later to say he had received a packet from Zimbabwe; that Oliver Hone's family had kept all his letters and had sent photocopies of everything. "Any clues," Dennis said in hopes; Hone had had dreams of becoming a poet so it might mean he also wrote long interesting letters home, not the sort of shorthand scrawls most people and certainly most young men dashed off.

"We've all been through them. Pretty strong stuff, some of it. I think he was getting pretty paranoid there near the end. He mentions several people by name including a man I'm sure we've got listed under a slightly different name. You remember the man listed as Sebastian Whitgreave? Well, he calls him Whitelaw. I suppose it could be two different men but it doesn't seem very likely."

Dennis agreed. "So anything on his background?"

"We're checking with Immigration. It's just possible he came in on a false passport—or changed his name."

"And you think Hone was pointing the finger at him?"

"No. I don't think you could read it that specifically, just that he seemed to think Sebastian was an out-and-out thug. Do you want copies of the letters—to go through at your leisure?"

Walsh was tempted to snort "What leisure?" but he finally said okay. If nothing else young Kelly could go through them. He was much closer in age to Oliver Hone and a stranger in a strange country; something might resonate.

"And I heard that Gavin had a right barney with that Brisbane barrister he got for Hove's trial, threatened him with being struck off." It still amazed Daniel that people here always seemed to know things like that. People in cities gossiped about neighbours, about things in the paper, about

shops and relations. But Winville always seemed to him like a giant whirlpool in which everything went in and got thoroughly mixed around and then got thrown up again. And how did anyone know about Whittaker's conversation in the first place? Presumably a secretary or a cleaner or even a waiting client. It did not occur to Daniel that it might've been Whittaker himself. That there were many secrets in Gavin Whittaker's life but there were also things he didn't mind to make public whenever he was chatting with some of his cronies like John Daly at the *Winville Courier*… and doing down Noah Spencer might be one of them …

"I'm not really surprised," Dennis said, "but there is something odd about it all. D'you think Spencer thought none of this would ever filter back to Brisbane, that he really was beyond the black stump and it was next thing to another world?"

"Maybe. But Hale's junior said he thought Spencer really hated Hove, and that Hove said to someone that 'everyone knows I don't like women' … I don't guarantee any of this … but even the stuff that's supposed to be confidential always leaks like a sieve."

"You mean Hove is gay?"

"Well, he may be homo," Daniel said drily, "but that's one bod that's about as gay as a long wet week."

"True. But does this mean he fancied some of the guys there? All those muscles and big powerful utes—maybe they were a turn on? Maybe he even fancied young Oliver? It's hard to picture him fancying anyone, man or woman, but I s'pose you never know. And what about Oliver and his pal, Chris Harper, anything between them?"

"You mean—" Daniel rolled this to and fro and couldn't decide if it might change anything, "Hove put the pressure on Oliver and the last thing he fancied was a sour old bastard like Jimmy Hove?"

"Well, I s'pose it's a possibility. Oliver was a better-looking bloke than some of those gorillas they've got there."

"And when Oliver turned him down—Hove got really vindictive—"

"Threw him to the lions? Yeah. It might fit. And it might explain something else—"

"Like what?"

"It looks like it was Hove who did the planning to get rid of Craig. He's the one with the brains and the contacts. Yet when you think about it—was he just minding his back as manager, maybe even wanted to do his best by the Hoysteds—but it would make a lot more sense if he knew it was his neck that'd be on the block if Craig did manage to suss something out. If he killed Oliver or had him killed—then he had the most to lose—if by any chance we ever got on to it. He only had to tell someone to dig a hole for some offal, then he brings Oliver out at night and drops him in and fills the hole."

Daniel considered this carefully. "It might fit." But the difficulties in proving anything were obvious. "He's not going to sit up and confess, Dennis, not when he's appealing his case. And he's gone to Brisbane. It's a bit hard to see Brophy telling me to pop down any time I feel like it to do another interview."

"I think … Jimmy Hove is a very tough man … but I wonder if he's tough enough to withstand the pressure if it ever gets around that he likes men better than women? He might be better to put his hand up for Oliver and get sent to max … he just might be a little bit safer."

"And how do I go about proving any of this?" Wang couldn't decide if this was the breakthrough he desperately needed or merely a pink herring …

"Search me." Dennis Walsh permitted himself a bit of a grin. "You're the expert."

Case No. 4: The Joys of Family Life

Fiona took the children round to Mrs Tripp's to be minded after leaving a note; but as she was in good time she ducked back home in the hope of finding Dennis in from wherever he'd been. He was standing at the kitchen table reading her note. "So Graham Low's going to resign," he said non-

committally, “too embarrassed after Beth found out about him and ‘Dolly Parton’?” Graham Low was shire chairman but his wife had discovered he was going round to visit the blonde bombshell local people had dubbed ‘Dolly Parton’. She had moved on but the arguments had probably continued in the Low household.

“Perhaps he’s hoping we’ll all talk him out of resigning. It isn’t nice for his wife but people do forget.” She picked up her briefcase. “And I’ll tell you about the phone call I had from your mate, Russ Spicer, when I get back.”

Inspector Spicer was a friend from Dennis’s time, years ago, in the Stock Squad. He had said to her, “So you’re his missus?”

“Yes. Fiona.”

“Well, he always says he struck lucky.” She thought it was nice of Spicer to say so but he was really ringing to tell Dennis his suspicions about the deaths of three Aboriginal men on Mt Gregory station in the Gulf might not be ill-founded. “Tell him they went to Pantapara station and came back sick and died a day later but there’s been no bugs going round there. I’d say they saw or heard something they shouldn’t—or someone wanted the whole clan to panic. There should’ve been a proper investigation but their families wouldn’t be too keen on autopsies and inquests either, any more than the new owner of Mt Gregory.”

“And why would someone want them to panic, do you think?”

“I heard it that this Hassan guy who’s been spreading his operation up here was furious when he found Mt Gregory had a Native Title claim over it.”

“So it may have nothing to do with those men being artists?”

“Oh, the blacks’d link the two things. They’d say we’re painting the Goanna Dreaming or whatever their local stories say—and this would prove a connection passed down from previous generations. An expert can usually pick up if a painting has a common local subject, the ones who move in to Townsville, say, tend to paint a bit different when it comes to the old stories.”

“I see. Would you like him to ring you when he comes in?”

“No, just pass it on. And I’ll get in touch when I hear if anything else comes up.”

As Fiona went to the door, Dennis said, “D’you want me to pick the kids up?”

“If you would, sweetheart. About eight. The novelty will probably be wearing off by then. I shouldn’t be late.”

It *was* a novelty for the children to go to Carolyn Tripp’s house rather than her coming round to mind them. It was an attractive old house for children with two frogs by the front steps and some sheep in the little paddock next door. That they were Dave Barry’s ‘killers’ for the butcher’s shop would not occur to the children, and the wethers camped peacefully in the small paddock gave no hint that their days were numbered.

Mrs Tripp also had her son Russell and her daughter-in-law Karina around for dinner. Things between Mrs Tripp and Karina were always a little tense. They were both nice people but Karina was still, in Caro Tripp’s eyes, the one who had snatched her son Russ. Somehow she had convinced herself that she and Russell would quietly and peacefully go on living in the old house, company for each other, until she died, and then Karina had come along and enticed Russ away. That Russ had been desperate to find a girlfriend never seemed to occur to his mother. She still saw Karina as the enticer and Russ as the enticed.

The children knew Karina as she was Nanci Coleman’s assistant at the childcare centre. And their presence, or certainly Elise’s extrovert pleasure in the evening, seemed to smooth the sharp edges which were sometimes present between mother and daughter-in-law.

It was just after eight when Dennis came round to take his children home to bed. Karina and Russell were doing the washing up, Mrs Tripp sat on the sofa with the children while they watched a video of ‘Beauty and the Beast’. Robert’s eyes were on the verge of closing but Elise was absorbed in the story.

He came in and took a spare armchair. “Behaved themselves, did they?”

“They always do,” Mrs Tripp said mildly. Whether she was always honest was another matter but she invariably said the children were as good as gold. This time, after chatting for a couple of

minutes about what she and the children had done, she said unexpectedly, “I hear you were asking round about the Savages. Is that true?”

“Just giving Sergeant Bishop a bit of a hand.”

“Well, I’ll tell you something.” Mrs Tripp was a big woman and she suggested something rolling around on a beach, a very large seal perhaps, as she suddenly leaned forward.

“You knew the Savages?”

“Of course not! People said they were dragged up and what could you expect. No. Definitely not. But I was in hospital in Winville when they said they were all there. My sister Joan came here to mind Russ.”

“And you heard some gossip?”

“Oh, there was gossip all right. I had to have an operation, see, and they said they was going to come and get me a bit early because Dr Wittenbach was flat out. I didn’t like the sound of that. I wanted him to give me proper care, y’know—not just be whipping things out and rushing off again. Sister Robbins told me it was nothing to do with me and not to worry, just that they had lost their middle doctor only a few weeks ago, and only had a young fella. She said I was lucky Dr Wittenbach could still find the time. I dunno if it was lucky or not but I was okay afterwards.”

“Good.”

“Well, the thing is, when Sister Robbins came round next morning to see me she looked like death warmed up. I reckon she looked worse than me. I said what was going on and she said it’d been the busiest day she could remember, that they had brought in five bodies from a place at Garra and the police were wanting the bullets and he’d had a burst appendix and a perforated ulcer to do as well and an accident near the turn-off by the silos. I don’t remember what I said to her, just how awful I s’pose … and she said something about that Detective Inspector, I can’t remember his name, standing over Fred while he was trying to work. He wanted the bullets, see, to get them to some expert they had. And then he said to the young doc that was there, I think his name was Murray, to finish up.”

“So Dr Murray finished the autopsies?”

“Well, that’s what it sounded like to me. But the thing is—Dr Murray had never done a—you know cutting them up and taking bits, the way they do on TV—he wasn’t like Fred. But I guess he could sew them up again.”

He wasn’t sure if there was more to the story or whether Mrs Tripp just felt vaguely important because she had been there on that portentous day. “And?”

She lowered her voice slightly though the children weren’t taking any particular notice. “She said, that Sister Robbins said that it never should’ve been allowed. Now, what d’you think she meant by that?”

“You think she meant the young doctor?”

“Well, I always wondered. But she had to go on and see the other patients that’d been in for ops so I didn’t get to ask her.”

“Would you remember her if you saw her again?”

She didn’t rush to say yes or no. Finally she offered a cautious “Maybe”.

And the post mortem reports would have gone out under Dr Wittenbach’s name even though he hadn’t done everything. And if people later queried their thoroughness he would’ve been put on the back foot. To ask a young inexperienced doctor, not trained in pathology, to do, or to complete, an autopsy without supervision—it probably wasn’t illegal but it might’ve made Dr Wittenbach defensive if anyone later suggested he missed something.

“Mrs Tripp, you’ve been a great help. If you think of anything else—”

“Oh, there’s more,” she said with greater confidence and complacency. “I heard some of the younger nurses talking about it all and one of them said that Dr Murray was pretty dishy but she didn’t think he was any good as a doctor and they all started talking about mistakes he’d made. They weren’t big things, I don’t s’pose, and they were laughing a bit, not like they were really worried. And one of them said something about half those bodies being stiff and cold before they even got shot but Fred didn’t see it because of that copper hassling him all the time.”

“So did the copper stay on while Murray was finishing up, d’you think?”

"Oh, I wouldn't think so. If it was that other man, y'know the one with the mad wife—"

"Des Blinco?"

"Yeah, I'd forgotten his name. He was always rushing round. He wouldn't sit round all that time, not him." No, it didn't seem very likely. He'd heard someone refer to DI Blinco as 'Mad Max' Blinco. And if Fred'd had DI Blinco breathing down his neck the whole time it probably wouldn't have helped him do the precise and careful work which had got him a good reputation.

"So it was the nursing sister, Sister Robbins, who had seen everything and didn't think the post mortems had been done properly?"

"Maybe. You'd have to ask her."

"And was Doug Towner in Winville then too?"

"I'm not sure. I think so."

"Doesn't matter. You've been a good help."

"They didn't like her, y'know," she said suddenly.

"Didn't like—that Sister?"

"Yeah, they said she was … I don't really like to say … she seemed nice enough to me."

"But she didn't like men?"

"Yeah, there's a name for it, isn't there. But it's like that, when she said anything, well, y'know how it is. They didn't take any notice, just her having a go at the men."

"So you think—maybe—that no one took enough notice of Sister Robbins—" He wasn't sure how this might play out. Plenty of doctors, plenty of police for that matter, didn't take a whole lot of notice of what the nursing staff might be saying. Doctors were on little pedestals above the milling crowd of sisters and nurses and aides …

Had an injustice been done simply because Sister Robbins' concerns had been brushed aside?

*

However interesting the Savage case might be, worrying even, Buckton Police had their own problems to deal with. They had a ring from the local hospital the following evening to say that Greg Maxwell had apparently come back and found his family gone and his wife holed up in one of the little units over behind the hospital—and that he appeared to be hell-bent on breaking everything on the premises.

"Bloody oath!" Dennis said wearily. Greg Maxwell was an unpleasant man to deal with at any time. Now, all fired up, with some unjustified sense of grievance—and at the end of a long day—tackling him didn't appeal. "You'd better come—and bring the spray. We may have to subdue the bastard." As they drove up towards the hospital it all looked peaceful but as they swung around the north side of the complex and up the usually quiet road past the couple of units which had been built as accommodation for the mobile elderly they could see and hear something of the trouble. Children screaming. Things smashing. The deeper voice of Mr Maxwell.

"Pull in. Go round by the back door. Have your cuffs ready. I'll take the spray and confront him. While he's squaring up to me you can take him out." He didn't doubt he would be like a red rag to the bull that was Greg Maxwell … it was the wife and children and whether they might be confronting a hostage situation which was the main concern …

The garden with its few shrubs and pots was already strewn with broken chairs and ripped blinds. In amongst the damage was a small child, half hidden under a shrub. "You okay, son?" Dennis said. Instead, a small girl, at least he thought it was girl going by the hair, crawled out. She had a gash on one cheek but otherwise seemed safe. "Go out to the road and stand beside the police car. We'll get you to somewhere safe in a minute."

The child stared with round rather unfocused eyes and Dennis wondered if concussion might also be a factor. Then she turned and scuttled away and he went on up to the open front door. He thundered on the door and stepped in. "You there, Mr Maxwell?" It sounded like a pointless question. Who else would be intent on reducing this place to matchsticks?

It was hard to take in the mess of the little sitting room, of Mrs Maxwell sprawled across a chair with blood running down her chin, of children cowering under the remaining furniture. But as usual Dennis didn't worry about the peripheral issues, simply saying in his big voice, "Gregory Maxwell, I am arresting you for assault—"

Maxwell didn't hesitate, simply charging forward like a maddened rhino. Dennis Walsh had not had a lot of experience with capsicum spray; it wasn't part of daily policing round Buckton, and he wasn't sure if he'd aimed it right. Nor did it stop Greg Maxwell. He swung a punch and he was a big man, fit from his outdoor work. The punch missed and he missed his footing slightly, enough for Brent Kelly to come at him from behind and get one wrist snapped shut. But Greg Maxwell merely whirled around, mouthing obscenities and went for the young constable, catching him with the swinging cuff and giving him a black eye.

It took them nearly ten minutes to get Maxwell subdued and restrained and by then both Dennis and Brent were puffing and bruised. "I'd like to get him to Winville tonight," Dennis said, "but I'm not sure if it's safe to send you without back-up. He's strong—"

Constable Kelly briefly pictured himself alone on the long deserted road with a maddened criminal and it wasn't a cheering thought. "Could we get the hospital to sedate him? Then I don't mind."

"Good idea. And they'll need to come round and decide if they want him charged with malicious damage to their property or whatever. I'll ring."

It was nearly ten minutes before Sister Martin, Susan Denby, and John Dooley, their gardener-handyman, came around. They surveyed the wrecked house in silence. Then Matron Denby said briskly, "Yes, of course we'll want to see him charged with this damage. We've got an elderly couple moving in next week and we may have to provide alternative accommodation for a week or two. He's got a farm and a job. He can't expect us to pick up the tab."

"Right. Well, we'll get pictures. Then we'll get Mr Maxwell to Winville. But I think it would be safer for my constable if Mr Maxwell was sedated."

By the time Greg Maxwell was removed from the scene and the rest of the family taken over to the hospital to have cuts and bruises attended to Dennis was ready to think longingly of his own happy, calm, sane family. But the awful thing here was that although the physical damage could be repaired, what was the invisible damage to these children? Was it something which would trail them into adult life and make their efforts to create their own families always teetering on an underlying quicksand?

Dennis also called up Charmian Willis, who said she would come in the morning, and Father Meagher who said he could come around in about twenty minutes. Finally Dennis walked home from the hospital. Fiona, as he came in, said, "Oh dear, you do look a bit knocked about." There hadn't been much time to think about himself but now he walked along to the bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror. Just as well modern handcuffs weren't the solid iron of a hundred years ago. He did look a bit bruised and scratched and a button had been pulled off his shirt.

Fiona came down the hall to say, "Would you like some old-fashioned iodine or some new-fashioned skin repair cream?"

"I think I'd better disinfect everything. It was Greg Maxwell. The bastard's sure to be covered in germs. I'll probably have rabies before the week's out." She felt if he could make a bit of a joke about it he probably wasn't in pain. "What a mess. He's wrecked one of the hospital's units … and I've just discovered that spraying someone with that capsicum stuff isn't as easy as they make out—or we've had it sitting round too long or something."

This was the side of his life she found difficult to deal with. At other times she felt he was the Caped Crusader, firmly on the side of right and justice, but sometimes when he tangled with people like Greg Maxwell or Craig Goodrick she had the disconcerting feeling that he almost enjoyed getting down and dirty in the pit with them. As though they provided him with the opportunity to let fly with some inherent belligerence which normally had to be kept tamped down firmly …

Perhaps it was a natural response but she felt that the more he dealt on their level the less attractive a person he became. The way to justice led through some very murky tunnels …

Or something of the sheer nastiness which marked out someone like Greg Maxwell seemed to rub off … A man is known by the company he keeps? Perhaps. But in his work he didn't get options. She was still musing on this—was this why some police became corrupt, why others abused their wives, or were some men always a corruption investigation, an AVO waiting to happen—as he came out and sat down to a late dinner.

"I wish I knew if there was some magic solution to that family," he said dispiritedly.

"Ask Nanci Coleman. She really tries hard to help the little Maxwell children."

*

Dennis was still in a fit of the glooms next morning. He had sent young Kelly round to take a statement from Diane Maxwell at the hospital. He had written up the time of last night's call-out, the charges had been laid, his scratches were barely bothering him (and he had stoically chosen to treat them with Dettol and iodine), he had re-checked the instructions on the capsicum spray, but the deep black mood remained.

The door to the station tinkled and he thought morosely, 'What'll it be this time? More trouble?' He looked over to see a tall well-built young man in a track suit. For a minute he couldn't place him then he said in surprise, "John! What're you doing here?"

John Applegarth had been his young constable when he first came to Buckton. John was keen and willing to work, but he had been undermined and misdirected by the then sergeant 'ol' Joe' Bosch. Dennis had heard on the grapevine that John had just made sergeant. Mr and Mrs Applegarth were very proud of their son.

"I thought you might've heard," John said with a grin. "I've just got the station at Garramindi."

"Well, I heard it was going to be a married man but I didn't bother to ask who, not thinking it was likely to be anyone I knew. So why did you want Garra?" Dennis got up and put the jug on.

"It's a long story and don't tell anyone, will you? Because it's about Megan's mum and Sally." Sally was John's sister-in-law and she was fairly seriously spastic.

"They're with you?" Dennis said in surprise.

"No. Heck no! That's the point. I'm escaping from them." It was hard to associate John with this kind of melodrama but he came in and took Brent Kelly's chair and said, "You know they followed us to Brisbane?"

Dennis nodded.

"And then they followed us to Gympie?"

"No. I didn't know that."

"It's all about getting Megan to look after Sally all the time. She doesn't mind to now and again. But we've got the two little kids. And it isn't fair on her. It's not like her mum is out at work or anything, she just wants to go out and enjoy herself at lunches and things and she's taken up golf and she wants to play bridge—so she just expects Megan to step in all the time. It's really been getting us down."

"So you put in for Garra?"

"Well, it wouldn't look like we were trying to escape. It would just look like I wanted to be closer to my family and friends here again. I'm staying at home till next week, then we'll move into the house at Garra."

"So what's going to happen to Sally?"

"I don't see why she shouldn't go to respite care or a sheltered workshop or something. I'm sure she'd be happier if she had that kind of support and maybe could make friends."

"Could be. So you think they won't follow you to Garra?"

"Probably not. It's even smaller than here. It hasn't got a golf course. And the police house is pretty small, not much room for them to be coming round, and we couldn't see any houses for sale in the town."

Dennis gave that a slightly wry smile. He thought apparently unsaleable houses would soon go back on the market if someone arrived with the money and enthusiasm to buy them … "And you know about Bishop trawling through the Savage case? D'you remember it?"

"I was in my teens. But I thought they said the father shot the family and then himself?" He looked faintly puzzled.

"They did say that. Or Blinco and Towner said that. But it doesn't look like that's what really happened. You can have all the fun of taking over from Dave and sorting it out."

John didn't look excited. But he said quite affably, "I hope I can handle everything."

"Dave knows his business, I guess, but he hated being the Lone Ranger without Tonto. He'll be happier in a big station. And you should be okay. You know the district pretty well—"

"And the new Super—I haven't heard any gossip yet." In a way he should be referring to their superintendent with all due respect but reaching sergeant had made the men above him seem just that little bit less intimidating.

"John Brophy's counting the days till he retires. With luck we'll get someone really prepared to keep an eye out for the small stations."

"And can I ask you—for advice, I mean—if I have any problems there?" John felt increasingly confident. But as soon as he walked into his old station and saw the big solid almost magisterial figure of Dennis Walsh something of his early doubts and insecurities re-surfaced; as though he was still the diffident junior waiting on instructions from 'the boss' …

"You can. But I may have to leave you to sink or swim. It's better now that I've got young Kelly here but we're still having to mind Dinna. Brophy sends young Hussein now and then but it's not good enough. Japana is just getting too big and those bastards think they can do as they like in the pub there and drive like maniacs—"

"Yeah," John said it with heartfelt regret, "we came past it on our way. It's more than twice the size it was when I was here … "

The phone rang and Dennis said, "Come round and bring Megan and the kids on Sunday arve. I can bring you up to date a bit more then." He picked up the phone as John nodded and turned to go out. It was Daniel Wang. "Dennis, we've found that Whitelaw guy on the Immigration list. Arrived eight months ago. Zimbabwe citizen. Brand-new passport—which sometimes means someone's leaving behind a suss record of travel. So I got them to dig a bit more. Seems Friend Sebastian was in the military there for a while, then got himself some work as a mercenary, first in South-West Africa just before it became independent as Namibia, then with a company which specialises in sending soldiers into 'hot spots'. He lost an eye and got pensioned off. A good chance he took up that offer, same as Hone and Harper did, pay ten thousand and get your wheels greased to get into Australia. It doesn't mean he took Oliver Hone out. But he would be made-to-order material for Jimmy Hove to use, and more so if he was hiding an unsavoury past."

"But you've only actually seen the Whitgreave passport?"

"I haven't *seen* it yet, he reckons he can't remember whether he gave it to Jimmy Hove to put in the office safe or not, apparently Hove usually impounded passports but Rabey says it's not in the office and it must still be in Whitgreave's room, but Sebastian swears black and blue that it's the only passport he's ever had—or ever will—and he can't understand why we're still banging on about this Whitelaw business. He's not a very convincing liar but we need hard evidence—"

"What about the eye business?"

"He was in an accident. He can't answer for Whitelaw because he doesn't even know the guy."

"Doesn't matter. There's still a good chance it might mean that Hone—or Harper—knew him or knew something about him—as Whitgreave—before they arrived here. Is Harper still around?"

"He's got a temporary job in Winville—at the big hardware place. We didn't want him skipping off too, not while we've still got nobody for Hone's death. And I'm looking into whether we can charge the owners of Japana."

"Good. So what're you going to do about Whitelaw?"

"We didn't pick up on that eye thing initially but most of them wear dark glasses. We got them to take them off. So I'd say he got round that by wearing those tinted lenses over an artificial eye. I just thought he was short-sighted, not hiding anything. But why he changed his name—and when—we'll have to keep going back over that and hope something breaks."

"Because he thought Hone and Harper might recognise his name?"

"Could be. But I was wondering about bringing him into Buckton, seeing it's closer, for a taped interview early next week—"

Dennis had the impression Daniel wasn't sure who he was supposed to be following up on—or even whether the two names belonged to the one man. Speaking for himself, he had no doubts, simply because he didn't believe that animal cruelty would faze most of the men at Japana. Oliver

Hone had been killed for a deeper reason. Mr Whitelaw *alias* Whitgreave probably had more to hide than a sadistic pleasure in seeing an animal suffer …

"That's fine—but you better make sure he doesn't skip before then."

*

John and Megan Applegarth and their two small children, Luke and Rose, came round on Sunday afternoon to have tea with the Walsh family. It took all of John's increased confidence to deal as a calm equal with his former boss. He had never felt truly comfortable with the uncompromising side of Dennis Walsh. It had made dealing with some other crusty old officers seem much easier, he was the first to admit, but it also had the unforeseen side effect that he felt uneasy with some of the sloppy work and fobbed-off cases he saw elsewhere. He had seen no limit to such laziness, such lack of public spirit, when he was junior to old Sergeant Bosch here.

But then, under Dennis's influence, and he hadn't found the first tough months with Dennis easy, he had gradually forgotten that they had ever treated the public as an unmitigated nuisance. It was a case of being reminded that there weren't many people like Dennis Walsh around. And now he could feel a bit of sympathy for Dennis coming into a station where nobody, it seemed, ever got off their backside to help anybody. Now he couldn't really blame Dennis for believing he was as much the problem as 'ol' Joe' had been …

Megan, too, felt a little nervous about sitting down to tea with Fiona and Dennis. She remembered Fiona as somehow remote from the town, and vastly senior in age and experience, if not polish and style. It might've been an awkward meal but for the impact of the children. Little Rose was just beginning to become mobile. Luke was fairly close in age to young Robert Walsh. And Elise was willing to look over them with the sort of curiosity and indulgent kindness of a vastly older cousin …

"So how d'you think you'll like Garra?" Dennis said cheerfully.

"Well, we know what we're getting into," John said cautiously. "And I've got some distant relatives there. We called in on them yesterday—and they're not really happy about Dave raking up that old story. They think it was best forgotten."

"Why?"

John had had time to forget just how blunt some of Dennis's questions could be. Fiona eased the moment by saying, "I imagine people felt upset but also embarrassed, as though it didn't reflect well on the district."

"I guess that's it, a bit, because maybe people just left the Savage family to their own devices, sort of avoided them a bit … and then later there was some gossip that the children had all been treated very badly and no one, no teachers or neighbours or anyone had tried to intervene. I guess it's always the way. People wonder if there was something they should've seen or done. And bringing it up again brings back all those sorts of questions. People would rather forget."

"And what good can it do?" Megan said rather diffidently. "Surely all the people responsible are … " she hesitated to say 'dead' in front of the children, "gone beyond … "

"Possibly. But you don't know until you look properly if someone is feeling very pleased—because he got away with a massacre."

"And you think there is someone out there?" John sounded cautious.

"Well, I'd bet my bottom dollar the two boys who survived know a lot more than they ever told anyone. But they weren't asked anything, just checked to see if they had reasonable alibis. No one seemed to want to know what had been going on in that family. Blinco made a mess of the case and Wittenbach was short-handed. If nothing else, when it gets signed off on this time, it'd be good to know that we've come as close to the truth as we're ever likely to get."

"I remember someone comparing them to the Maxwells one time. I'm not sure if it was anything specific, just that sort of family maybe."

Dennis considered this and finally nodded slowly. It wasn't a comparison to cheer him; not with the current state of the Maxwell family. "You think the father was violent—towards his wife, to the kids?"

"I'd say it's pretty likely."

Fiona, feeling they had talked enough on such a grim subject, steered the conversation away to Megan's plans for life in Garramindi. But later she said to Dennis, "Wouldn't that make it more likely the father was responsible?"

"Not necessarily. If he pushed the kids too far—pushed the wife too far … and they finally lashed out. And when the kid came home and saw one of his brothers still holding the rifle he took it from him and put it near his dad, because he wanted his dad to get the blame … maybe the brother shot himself and the kid wanted the dad, not his brother, to carry the can … "

"Yes, perhaps. Sometimes abused children break out and sometimes they turn inward, and sometimes they self-harm … "

It seemed to have in it messages for him, for his dealings with the Maxwell family; not to give up on the kids till he could be sure they were as safe as he could make it for them. Something along those lines …

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"D'you think he'll come?" Constable Kelly said on Monday morning referring to Seb Whitelaw. DS Wang said Whitelaw would come into Buckton at ten. It seemed to be putting a lot of trust into Whitelaw's probity. The man might be several hundred kilometres away by now.

"If he's skipped we can read it as him having something to hide. I'd like to get one of them for *something*—I've stopped being fussy about what. Just the pleasure of banging one of 'em up."

Daniel Wang when he came in was still reasonably hopeful that Whitelaw would show. "And if not we might be able to get him on false pretences or something. I'd like to nick someone from Japana for *something*—it gets my goat to see them all there smirking, thinking there's no way we can touch them."

Constable Kelly in the background smothered a grin.

Daniel came in and opened his briefcase and took out some papers. "He definitely came into this country as Whitelaw, no Whitgreave on Immigration's list but his Whitgreave passport is properly stamped so he can say it was Immigration's fault, and he's getting paid into an account in the name of Whitgreave. So with luck we can trip him up there somewhere—but do you want to have a crack at him first? See if you can find out how well he knew Oliver Hone?"

"No harm in trying." He had the suspicion that Wang was too cautious, too polite, to really get very far with some of the tough guys. On the other hand Japana was always willing to trundle out their lawyers and had the money to sue if they thought police had stepped over a boundary …

It came ten, then five past and then ten past. "How long do we wait?" Dennis finally said.

"Till a quarter past. If he doesn't show we head out there."

Constable Kelly hoped Mr Whitelaw would turn up. He wanted to see DS Wang in action. And if Whitelaw didn't come then he would find himself sent out on the morning's normal routine of small calls and he would miss everything.

A big black Toyota ute pulled in by the station. It gleamed in the winter sunshine. Its driver took his time getting out and coming up the path to the station door. From the interview room with its front window Kelly could see a big man, still tanned, and with a slow and rather deliberate way of walking. Something about the way he held his arms suggested he was more used to cradling a sub-machine gun in them than merely letting them dangle.

"I think this might be him," Kelly tried to keep his voice calm and normal. But he felt it even more strikingly than the others; the sense that the most dangerous gunfighter was riding into town.

"I don't think we'll bother with the cup of tea," Dennis said drily. "But we'll see if he'll agree to being taped. He'll probably say no, so have your notebook handy."

"Sebastian Whitelaw?" Daniel Wang said calmly.

"It's Whitgreave—"

"Come through. We're hoping you can help us with our enquiries so do you mind being taped."

"What is this? Do I need a fucking lawyer?"

"I wouldn't think so. Just helping with our enquiries. Not unless you want to confess to something."

Whitelaw went in with Daniel and sat down. Dennis came in and sat down beside Wang. Kelly brought a swivel chair in from the office and perched rather nervously.

"Tape on or tape off?" Dennis said calmly.

"Off."

Dennis slightly inclined his head towards Kelly who poised his pen in the hope that Whitelaw would continue to speak slowly and cryptically.

"Your name and date and place of birth?"

"Sebastian Paul Whitgreave. Born tenth of May, 1960, outside Bulawayo."

"That is the name on your birth certificate?"

"It is."

"We can check."

"Check all you like."

Dennis thought of taking the natural progression and pointing out that no one called Sebastian Whitgreave had entered Australia but he left that for Daniel. "You have worked for Japana for how long?"

"Few months. Forget when I arrived."

"And how did you hear about the job?"

"Guy there, said there were jobs going."

"His name."

"Don't remember."

"Then you might like to re-think that, Mr Whitelaw."

"Might come to me."

"When did you meet Oliver Hone?"

"I didn't."

"Try again, Mr Whitelaw."

"You've gotta understand what it's like there. I got to know a few guys. But most of them were just people you'd see once or twice, might say hello, but you wouldn't ask names."

"In that case you might like to look at his picture." Dennis got up and went over to take a blown-up photograph of Oliver Hone and hand it over.

"Yeah, could be. But that's not meeting, not knowing a name."

"Try again, Mr Whitelaw."

"I can't tell you more than that. Maybe I saw him around, maybe I didn't. Just looks like a pretty average sort of bloke, not someone you remember."

"Where did you lose your eye, Mr Whitelaw?"

"I'd say that's none of your business, sergeant."

"You're fast making it my business, son."

Sebastian Whitelaw sat in silence for several minutes; it wasn't hard to picture him thinking 'will I give them a few crumbs or just keep stonewalling', and then he said, "Mate of mine, didn't look where he was shooting."

"A mate that came here with you?"

"No."

"Oliver Hone wrote home to his family that you were giving him a hard time. He referred to you in his letters as Sebastian Whitelaw. It sounds like he knew you before either of you came to Australia. We can do some digging but if you had nothing to do with Hone's death then you might as well tell us."

"Course I had nothing to do with Hone's death!"

"You gave him a hard time—but you didn't hurt him?"

"Course I didn't hurt the bastard—"

"Now he's a bastard as well. When did you last see him?"

"I didn't see him! I keep telling you that, you cretins!"

It seemed to Dennis that they had managed to get Whitelaw thoroughly worked up and it might play to their advantage; but it also seemed to him that Whitelaw had become edgy before the bit about Hone's letters, that it possibly had something to do with the loss of his eye, with that

supposed mate, with the fact the mate didn't come … something else there playing out … or he didn't like being referred to as 'son' …

"Yeah, you did. You can't see all that well maybe—but you can see well enough to know Hone. So when did you see him?"

"Didn't."

"And what d'you know about those men butchering an animal alive?"

"Nothing to do with me."

"You knew about it?"

There was a long hesitation, then Whitelaw said, "Yeah, I heard about it."

"You knew Hone filmed it and took the film to the police?"

"Sneaky little bastard."

"When did you last see Oliver Hone?"

"I didn't bloody see him! Can't you get that into your thick heads!"

"Abuse'll get you nowhere. When did you last see Oliver Hone?"

It wasn't just the repeated question, Kelly thought, it was some other quality that Walsh brought to it, something implacable and unnerving. Whitelaw might be younger and fitter but behind the fitness and the bulging muscles and the macho stance there wasn't the sort of strength of personality he had come to associate with Dennis Walsh.

"I never bloody saw him! Or if I did I didn't know who it was. Okay!"

"Oliver Hone wrote home that you were giving him a hard time. You were treating him badly but didn't know his name? Why were you mistreating him?"

"I wasn't mistreating him. I never did anything to him."

"Who did?"

"How would I know?"

"Because just about *everyone* on Japana knows. He was killed, he was illegally buried, all his belongings were stolen. Oh, but they left you out of the loop! Mr Nice Guy? How come?"

Whitelaw opened his mouth then closed it again. The silence stretched out, one minute, two minutes. All three officers didn't doubt that Seb Whitelaw knew something but how much … and how to get an admission of any kind out of him …

"You entered Australia as Sebastian Whitelaw," Daniel took his nod from Dennis. "There is no sign of a Sebastian Whitgreave entering Australia in that time-frame. We can get you on Immigration fraud."

"No. You can't. If my name's been left off some fucking list that's not my concern—"

"Not left off, Mr Whitelaw. We will need to impound your passport until this whole matter has been checked. If you entered Australia under an assumed name or on a false passport then those are serious matters."

"You can whistle in the wind. I already told you I haven't a clue where my passport's got to."

This struck both Daniel and Dennis as a very poor response. "You will need to do better than that, Mr Whitelaw," Wang said calmly. "I will now come out to Japana and pick up your passport and check your other documents." He turned to Dennis. "Can I borrow Constable Kelly for an hour or two?"

"You will need a warrant, sergeant," Whitelaw said with something close to a sneer.

"No. It is a requirement that you show identity documents when asked. Passport. Driver's licence. You know the drill."

It seemed to paint Sebastian Whitelaw into a corner and Dennis wasn't really surprised when Wang called in to drop Kelly off a bit over an hour later and to show the passport which showed both an identifiable photograph of Whitelaw with the correct visas in the name of Sebastian Whitgreave.

"It's beginning to get too complicated for an old sod like me," Dennis said after leafing through the document. "But didn't you say, a while ago, that you already knew about the Whitelaw passport? How did you know if you hadn't seen it?"

"No. That was Immigration checked for us. Brand new passport issued to Whitelaw in Johannesburg in the name of Whitelaw, got his visa for Australia, arrived in Australia a week

later—at least, I'm not absolutely sure if the Zimbabwean Embassy is in Johannesburg or Pretoria but he gave an address in Johannesburg."

"And now you've got a passport in the name of Whitgreave, looks genuine, has a visa to enter Australia the right time, but no other record of him entering … I don't follow that. What's the bugger doing? Some sort of conjuring trick?"

Daniel hesitated to display his own confusions but finally said, "It's starting to look like some sort of fiddle going on. The only thing I can think of—you know when we heard him say that about his mate shooting him in the eye—and it seemed to me that he sort of tensed up and got antsy? That mate, maybe they swop identities as and when it suits them?"

"Even if they did," Dennis nodded slowly; he thought the 'mate' might be the clue to something, it wasn't yet clear what, "shouldn't Whitgreave still be listed as entering the country with a work permit?"

"So if he isn't—then maybe these stamps aren't genuine? It wouldn't take all that much to fudge it. This looks okay to me but I'm not an expert."

"Then maybe we need an expert? Because it may be that this bloke's not the only one? Maybe that ten thousand dollars also pays someone suss in Immigration to stamp a few extra passports?"

"But we still come back to the original question? Are Whitgreave and Whitelaw the same person?"

"At a punt I'd say so. I think maybe Oliver didn't just get up their nose with his film—and we don't know for *absolute* certain that they knew about the video—not if Craig Wrightson was still trying to decide how to tackle them about it—but if Hone recognised a man he'd known as Whitelaw who was now calling himself Whitgreave—then maybe that made him a risk?"

"Would he have queried it, do you think?"

"Possibly not. Just the knowing might've been enough to get Whitelaw worried—and more so if Hone knew he'd been working as a mercenary. This is a bit beyond me. Can a mercenary be accused of—would it be a crime to sign on?"

"Possibly not. At least, not the signing on part. They'd probably just call him a security guard or something. But if he'd been involved in human rights abuses, some sort of crime, smuggling, assisting some tinpot dictator who was up to his ears in crimes against humanity—there are a lot of possibilities—"

"You realise what this means, don't you?" Dennis sounded grim.

"Yes, Dennis. It hasn't escaped me," Wang said gloomily. "We're going to have to check every single overseas bod there with Immigration, see if we've got some more phantom people. And it wouldn't be that hard to work. So long as your passport had a photo and details that're pretty close to you, so long as you're white, neatly-dressed, speak English, not misbehaving, not got suss-looking luggage—it isn't likely they'd query you. And it wouldn't take much to make up a stamp to put your own visas and dates in. Most visa stamps seemed to be faint or smudged or something. So long as you leave by your due date … but it doesn't explain why."

"Someone's got a swag of false passports, hands 'em out, gets them to look a bit used." Dennis wasn't sure where he was going with the idea. "So Whitelaw gave you his passport. That has to mean that somewhere there *was* someone called Whitgreave—"

"So you think Whitgreave's dead and Whitelaw simply took over his passport, got it re-issued at an embassy outside of Zimbabwe … "

Dennis was still struggling to work through how all this might play out. "Seems possible. But how did you get on to that stuff about Whitelaw being a mercenary so easily?"

"Doesn't pay to go up the ranks if you want to stay anonymous," Daniel said drily. "Whitelaw got to the rank of captain in the Zimbabwean army and then he resigned and got on the executive of a company called Prime Tech Solutions, which could refer to almost anything, but seems to be something like Sandline that the PNG government recruited to help them clean up in Bougainville. Go on the Net and put in John Sebastian Whitelaw and Prime Tech Solutions and you'll get a potted bio of Whitelaw—unless he's busy right now removing it."

"So d'you think these two bods are related? How many people called Sebastian Something would there be with a similar background there?"

"Worth checking out. And there's the other names Hone mentions in his letters—"

"And Harper? Surely he had some idea of what Oliver was thinking? He was getting pretty paranoid too, I'd reckon—and maybe for the same reason. He'd been in the military. He might be able to point the finger. But you might need to offer him some sort of protection. Just being away from Japana probably isn't enough. Do they know he's still in Winville—or do they think he's headed off somewhere?"

"He wasn't called to Hove's trial … and we told him to keep his head down and grow a beard or something. But I'd say there's a good chance they're still keeping tabs on him."

Daniel thought of the amount of work ahead of him and the team. His first impulse was to feel bowed down under it. But his second response was curiously liberating. Whatever came of everything he thought they should be able to convict someone of *something* …

*

Sergeant Bishop sent a detailed e-mail through on Monday afternoon. He said he had got on to the High School in Oakey about young Thomas Savage and that the school, after a bit of umming and aahhing as to what student records they could release and what personal information they could give out, had sent him copies of the young man's school records. He had left school at sixteen and they thought he had moved back to somewhere near Garramindi.

After whipping through this long spiel, and possibly Dave Bishop had gone into this amount of detail in the hope of earning a pat on the back, Dennis came to the meat of the matter. Tom Savage had been registered under his own name when he enrolled at the school but after some discussion between the principal and the grandparents he was going to live with, or more particularly the grandmother and great aunt, it had been decided that young Thomas would be there under an assumed name; he would take his grandmother's maiden name and he would change his first name as well. He would be asked later if he wanted to continue under that name or revert to his original name. When that time came he had said categorically he would prefer to stay under his new name. He said he felt 'safer' …

And the assumed name for young Tom Savage, to Sergeant Walsh's astonishment, was Brendan Cooney.

"Holy Strewth!" Walsh sat back in his chair and tried to think where this might take them.

"Why the surprise?" Constable Kelly said rather diffidently.

"Cooney works here at the Butter Factory. He's worked here for at least six years, maybe more. Dave Grumm'd know. There might be two Brendan Cooneys but I doubt it."

"So you know him?"

"Yeah. Worse luck. He and that bloody Todd Price bashed Constable Hussein outside the pub. And he's been in a few other fights. S'pose they'll say he's carrying a lot of baggage round. But we'll have to think how best to tackle him."

"D'you want me to talk to him?" Brent Kelly found the idea a little nerve-wracking but after all that had been said about the family and that young boy coming home to carnage he felt a natural sense of curiosity. It could not have been easy to get some sort of life back together again. And more so if the grandfather had been a problem with his medical condition …

Dennis considered this offer for a while. Did they want to follow a low-key approach, and therefore Brent might be more suited, or go in hard and demand some answers … always assuming that he had some answers …

At last he nodded. "Duck round now. Catch him as he finishes up for the day. Check that Dave's material is right and he really was Tom Savage. Then set up an interview tomorrow or one day this week."

"Will I tell him the case is being re-opened?"

"So far as I can see it was never closed. There was an inquest but it seems the police evidence was accepted without question. They got an open verdict—on the understanding that the case was still being investigated. But Blinco and then Doug Towner just said—it has to be the dad, there's no one else to fit. Sort of saying there's no other realistic suspect so we'll plump for him. That's not good policing in my book."

"So you don't think there's any possibility it *was* the father?"

"Could've been. But only if the young lad came home and messed with the crime scene. Maybe picked up the rifle, then thought maybe he should leave it beside his dad, so he gave it a bit of a wipe and put it down again. But if we take that line—then any of them, even the mum could've been responsible—and he just decided to throw the blame on his dad because his dad was always belting him or something."

Kelly accepted this. "So maybe he knows more than anyone ever got out of him?"

"Sure to. Unless he went round with his bloody eyes closed. And there's another thing—though it's a bit iffy. Did he go to the store because he was scared something was going to blow? Or did one of the others *send* him to the shop because they thought the whole pressure cooker was going to blow? We worked out, unless he was a champion cyclist, that it would've taken him about twenty minutes to get to the shop the first time, say anything between ten minutes to half an hour there if he was mucking round with another kid, a bit over twenty minutes home—then, when he's looked around, maybe trying to find if anyone's still alive—he comes back. But he'd be getting tireder by then—so say it's nearly half an hour and he's maybe a bit shaky after what he's seen. The shopkeeper said he was in about half past nine the first time but it was nearly lunch, somewhere between half past eleven and twelve when he came back. Winville didn't log the first call because they thought it was a hoax call, kid ringing to say five people've been shot, I s'pose you can't blame 'em but they're still s'posed to log hoax calls in."

"So the second call?"

"The shopkeeper drove out to look and he came back and rang himself to say the kid wasn't lying. They logged that call in at twenty-five to one so it would've been at least two before Winville got there. The bodies weren't removed till the following morning, apparently because there was an argument over who should take charge. Blinco won. He said it was Winville's patch. Even though it was right on the edge. But he hadn't warned the hospital that Wittenbach would be needed and he wasn't back from somewhere he'd gone overnight, a family wedding I think, and he hadn't warned them that the morgue van would be needed and Tom Dicks had gone to early Mass with his wife. It was a complete mess. By the time Dicks got out there it was mid-morning and he brought the bodies back in two loads because they were stiff by then and sprawled out. And when they caught up with Fred Wittenbach he said he couldn't do five autopsies just like that, he would need an experienced assistant and he was told he'd just have to make do with Dr Murray and Sister Robbins. He already had several ops booked in and then he got a couple more emergencies. Apparently he told Blinco it was the worst bit of police bungling he had ever seen and Blinco tore into him saying he was some old has-been and not worth keeping on the government payroll … I get the impression the crime itself came second to all these egos and in-fighting getting in the way. That's why I hoped we could actually get to meet this Sister Robbins and see what she thought. Surely someone actually had eyes only for the victims?"

"And where was young Tom when all this was going on?"

"He was left with his grandfather in Garra—I'm not sure if the grandmother was still there or she'd already left for Oakey—but those are the sorts of things we need to know. Did the grandfather tell the boy to say or not say anything, did he try and influence him. What sort of counseling and support did he get."

By the time Constable Kelly drove round to the Butter Factory and caught Brendan Cooney just as he was preparing to leave work for the day he felt reasonably confident about tackling him.

Case No. 5: Follow the Leader

Brendan Cooney came round to the station the following afternoon. He had already admitted to Brent Kelly that he had originally been Tom Savage. Now he'd put on a sullen expression which didn't invite sympathy for his childhood losses. He was quite a well-set up man, fairly tall and fit from his years of packing at the factory. Even if no one else appreciated the new butter wrappers the factory might be printing after the art competition for a new design ending in October, Cooney

would probably appreciate something different to look at. Dennis thought the expression might be to hide a level of unease and fear. He couldn't know what they knew or what they wanted from him. Though it wasn't as if Cooney ever went round smiling at people and generally being friendly and approachable. Maybe he felt life hadn't given him much to smile about …

"Keeping your nose clean, Mr Cooney?" Dennis said with that heavy geniality which rarely put people at their ease.

Cooney hesitated then said sourly, "So what are you bastards after me for now?"

"Not to commiserate—though maybe you were sorry to lose a couple of your brothers. Anyway, take a seat." Cooney sat down on the edge of a chair and looked from Walsh to Kelly and back again.

"Okay, now what we want to do is run through everything that happened on the day your parents died."

"I already told it all to the guys that come out then, those Winville guys. I'm not going to talk to you."

"Oh, I think you are, son. Because it's still an open case. You can be interviewed any time we feel like it."

"No. It's not." Cooney almost burst out with the words. "It was my dad! He did it!"

"Maybe he did. But the evidence doesn't stack up. Because some of those bodies of your family were already dead when they got shot, weren't they?"

For the first time, something, maybe a tinge of apprehension, replaced the truculence on Cooney's face. "You don't know that!"

"They did the post mortems in a rush, I'll grant you that. But even the nurse there could see that some of the bodies were already dead when they were shot."

He had hoped to have something definite from Sister Robbins but Winville was dragging the chain when it came to actually interviewing her. He thought it would probably end up being another thing for him to do. Daniel was determined to get someone for Hone's death; he didn't see this old case as a priority; an attitude Dennis didn't have a problem with. But if Sister Robbins could simply tie up some loose ends then he thought she should be moved up the chain of priorities …

Cooney stayed silent.

"So what killed your family?"

"Someone shot 'em. My dad shot 'em."

"What killed them before he shot them? And he would of needed to be a clever fella to shoot them all when he was already dead."

"How would I know? I wasn't there."

"Convenient that. Who sent you to the shop?"

"No one. I just went."

"No chores?"

"Don't remember. I just went every Saturday … "

"No. You didn't." This too was a bit iffy. Bishop had spoken with the man who'd had the store at Merivale Junction and although he hadn't asked him specifically whether young Tom came every Saturday morning he had implied that he only saw the Savages occasionally as they didn't give their kids pocket money and the only children actually living at the Junction were three teenage girls and a baby; it was unlikely that any of them were special pals of Tom Savage.

Cooney shifted awkwardly in the chair but didn't respond to this denial.

"You didn't go every Saturday—so why did you go that Saturday?"

"I—just felt like it."

"What did you buy?"

"Nothing."

"Who did you go to see?"

"No one special. Just to get away from home."

"Why did you want to get away from home?"

"Sometimes … I just liked to ride the bike."

"Was it your bike?"

"We shared it."

"So when you came back from the store—what did you do?"

"I just … I put the bike by the back gate an' went into the kitchen … an' my mum was there, lying on the floor … an' I went into the hall an' I saw my brother lying on the floor … "

"You looked all around the house?"

"Yeah. They were all there."

"And what did you think had happened?"

The question seemed to stump Cooney. "How would I know?"

"How did you think they'd died?"

"How would I know?" He seemed to find some kind of comfort in the repeated question.

"You couldn't see any marks on them? They were just laying down on the floor?"

"I guess so—I mean," he said it hastily, "I could see where they'd been shot."

"Oh, you could, could you?"

"Yeah, course I could."

"How could you tell?"

Cooney looked both puzzled and uncomfortable. "By the blood—how d'you think?"

"But dead bodies aren't like live ones. They don't bleed. That's what puzzled the doctors. No blood."

"I could still see where they were shot." Cooney leaned forward slightly as if he needed to put emphasis on this point.

Dennis took out some notes. "Your father was shot in the side of his head, not impossible but not a usual way for people to suicide. Your mother was shot in the back. Your brother George was shot in the neck. Your brother John was shot in the back of his head."

"So? You think I couldn't see all that?"

"Were the lights on in the house?"

"Course not!"

"Little dim pokey house, dark hall, did you get down and touch your brother to see what had happened?"

"Course not! What are you!"

"But you instantly knew George was dead?"

"Anyone could see it."

"No, Mr Cooney. Anyone couldn't see it, not without turning on the lights. How long did you spend in the house?"

"How would I know?"

"Just a rough estimate?"

"Ten minutes. Maybe."

"And then what?"

"I rode back to the shop to tell 'em."

"And then what did you do?"

"I … I s'pose I went home."

"You didn't find it frightening? The bod who'd just shot five people might still be hanging round."

"I—I just went. I didn't think about anyone."

"Because you knew there wasn't anyone. Brendan Cooney, why did you shoot those five people?"

Kelly looked over at his boss. Brendan Cooney wasn't making a good impression. But it was still a large leap between that and seeing him as a mass murderer.

"I didn't! You can't prove I did!"

"Oh, I'm certain you did. Why did you shoot them, Brendan? Your father belted you. But what did the others do to you?"

"They didn't do nothing! They just—you can't say I did that!"

"But they did, didn't they? They made your life miserable. And you were the youngest. You had no power. There was nothing you could do to stop the way they all treated you. And you saw it going on and on, didn't you, year after year. And you couldn't take any more … "

There was a long silence. Brendan Cooney stared at Dennis like a rabbit transfixed by a snake. And then he put his head into both hands. Both officers simply let him sit there. Then Dennis said to his subordinate, "Go and make him a cup of tea."

It was only when a mug of tea was placed in front of Cooney and Dennis said, "D'you want milk or sugar?" that he looked up briefly. His face was wet with tears. But he just shook his head and drew the mug closer with both hands.

"Nothing's going to bring them back," Dennis said after another long silence. "But you might like to get it all off your chest."

Cooney shook his head slowly and kept his gaze firmly focused on the mug in front of him.

And then, unexpectedly, he said, "What'll they do to me?"

"Depends. They'll take into account your age and the pressure you were under. But it'll still mean doing time."

He seemed to take his time thinking this through then he said only, "I've got a girlfriend."

"Then tell her the truth and if she cares she'll stick by you." He personally didn't see Brendan Cooney *alias* Tom Savage as a great catch. But perhaps in another family, another way of looking at life … who knew …

"How did you know it was me?"

"Someone used your dad's rifle. But that same person didn't leave any ammo around."

It was hardly a compelling discrepancy but Cooney seemed to think it was a major mistake on his part. He went back to silent contemplation of his mug.

"So how did you kill all your family? If you'd tried to shoot them when they were all running around—you wouldn't of lasted two minutes before someone got the gun away from you."

"I poisoned them. I put oleander juice in the milk. They all drank it at breakfast. I didn't. I shot them. I wanted you to think someone come in an' done it. Lots o' people hated my dad … "

"How did you know oleanders were poisonous?"

"Everyone knows that!"

In the days when most country homesteads had an oleander or two around the place probably every child *was* warned … Dennis nodded slowly.

"Why did you kill them all? Surely you liked one of your brothers?"

"No. I hated them all. An' I hated mum because she never did anything to keep me safe."

"You'll need to see a psychiatrist—" Dennis thought the evaluation by a professional would be useful but Cooney seemed to think this was a new danger. "Here! You can't do that! I've confessed. That's it."

"No, Mr Cooney, that's just the start of a long process. You'll also need a lawyer. D'you want Charles Mather?"

"Course not! That old fart!"

"Then we'll get you someone from Legal Aid."

Dennis began shuffling papers together. "Brent, go and ring Dave Bishop. Tell him we'll take Cooney to Winville but he'll need to come there to do a formal interview. It's his collar."

Privately Brent Kelly thought it was Buckton's collar, that they had done more than half the work, but he did as he was told. Afterwards he said to his boss, "What about this Sister Robbins? Are you going to ring her?"

"That's a job you might like. You can tell her what Brendan's told us. But first you can do the charge sheet and then you can take Cooney to Winville. I'll ring to tell 'em you're coming."

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Sister Robbins listened to what Constable Kelly had to say and then she said, "It's not going to go down well with Dr Wittenbach. It'll make him look like a fool and an incompetent pathologist. But it wasn't really his fault. They kept hassling him. But he should've sent specimens … I even offered to do it myself. But that Blinco kept saying they didn't need any of that namby-pamby stuff, just the bullets. If they've still got the tape you'll hear him saying over and over again

‘Just the bullets!’ No wonder they came to completely wrong conclusions. What are you going to do with the boy? Well, of course he’s not a boy now.”

Kelly made a note to find out whether any tape of those post mortems had survived. It didn’t seem very likely. Neither Wittenbach nor Winville CIB would’ve seen them as evidence of the triumph of forensic investigation …

“He’s been charged. Winville will make sure he has a lawyer and sees a psychiatrist.”

“Yes, I think that’s very important. He was simply talked to briefly and then sent off to his grandparents. So who knows how they responded to the tragedy or the way they dealt with a traumatised kid?”

“There’s another thing. We’ve found out that his grandfather, John Savage, was suffering from Huntington’s chorea. It might’ve run through the family.”

There was a long pregnant pause. Then Sister Robbins said calmly, “Oh dear, you *have* opened a can of worms. But it might help in the long run. Make sure both surviving brothers get tested as soon as possible. If one or both come up positive then there’s a very high chance their dad was also affected.”

“Would he have known, d’you think?” Constable Kelly realised they had no idea where the other brother was. But he had gone on the internet and done some research on Huntington’s and he had also considered asking Iris Hitchener but he didn’t want her to think he only wanted her company to help him with cases …

Huntington’s struck him as a pretty terrifying thing to have in the family.

“If he knew his father had been diagnosed—then, yes, I would say it’s very likely.”

When Kelly hung up he found himself thinking about victims and perpetrators, about the role of inheritance, of what families placed on each member. When Dennis had told him about the case and got him to look through some of the material he had felt, vaguely, that digging up the past mightn’t be a good thing. His own father had sometimes complained that Ireland lived too much in the past. That it was the new Catholicism that mattered. Perhaps. But his own behaviour didn’t bear this out. As Brent had told Iris Hitchener, and he had found her deeply sympathetic, his father had clung to a religion that was frightening in its ‘oldness’, its rigidity, its deference to the power of the priests, its endless rules and strict routines, its males-only nature.

Looking back, something he didn’t do a lot of, he could point to dozens of things which had left him frightened and timid in the face of that power. And his father had reinforced it with a heavy wooden walking stick that lived behind the kitchen door. If there had been any love in his father’s brand of religion then it had been well-hidden. His brothers had responded, unsurprisingly, by drifting away from the church as soon as they had a chance. They weren’t going to have their lives ruled by a lot of ‘old men in black’. But he had gone in the opposite direction, embracing the church, trying harder and harder to meet all criteria, follow all rules, mind every thought and word and deed … and confession and struggle and prayer had brought him a kind of peace.

He knew people around Buckton said behind his back that he was in the wrong vocation, that he should be a priest not a cop, but as he had tried to find the words to explain it to Iris, to love the best the church had to offer was not the same thing. He felt he would like to be involved as a lay worker but he also wanted a family of his own who would love him not fear him …

Iris had also been brought up in a very strict religious household, though in the Pentecostal tradition, and much of what he said resonated; the patriarchal head might espouse slightly different reasons but he still drew heavily on Bible teachings and church dogma to underpin and justify his tyrannical power over his wife and children …

It wasn’t only the Carbonis who had wondered about the intense closeness displayed by the new constable and the nursing sister; though they hesitated to refer to Brent and Iris as an item. And Brent himself, knowing that Iris was happy to go out with him again, had gained in confidence. They had no future, he couldn’t make himself believe that, not beyond this time in Buckton, but he felt a deep secret pleasure in the knowledge they had this time together and he had found her a deeply sympathetic listener. What was in it for Iris no one knew. She had a pleasant working relationship with the hospital staff but she rarely talked about very personal things. Sister O’Brien

reflected the widely-held view when she said she thought Iris had taken pity on the young man so much the fish out of water here.

It didn't give him any insight into the vexed question: how best might they urge Brendan Cooney to go ahead and see if he was a walking time-bomb. And what had happened to Frank Savage in the years since? Was he now married with children? And there was a deeper ethical question in there: what should a couple do if they found they were carrying an afflicted baby? Abortion? Or bring a child into the world? Several times he felt himself overwhelmed by the issue and struggled to put it out of his mind.

*

It was DS Wang and DC Deane who brought Christian Harper, ex-employee of Japana and ex-best-friend of Oliver Hone, in to help with enquiries. Harper had a resigned look on his face but said he was willing to do anything which would help nail the men who had killed his best mate.

"Men?" Daniel said quietly. "Not man?"

"I'm sure it was men," Harper said quietly. "Just don't ask me to point the finger. I could give you a dozen names and they all probably knew what was going down … "

"What would make you pick on those dozen?"

"Because I would hear them talking. I'm sure Olly wasn't the first person they'd done over. I know it would only be my word against theirs … "

"Then how about giving us some names? We'll decide whether any of them have come to our notice for other reasons."

"Can I ask—what sort of other reasons?"

Many interviewers ignored questions, believing they were the only ones with the right to do the asking, but Deane thought that Daniel's quiet style would be more effective with someone like Harper. Even so, Wang didn't rush to decide whether to answer the question or ignore it and move on. Finally he said, "Immigration fraud, false pretences, that area, we're checking everyone."

"Rabey would know. When we got there he told us to open bank accounts here because our pay would go in directly. And he wanted to see our passports."

"Did you ever see anyone at Japana you believed was there under a false name?"

Harper seemed to realise this was a key question; something about the way Wang put it to him. At last he said slowly, "Olly did. I'm sure he did. I'm not good on names and faces. A couple of times he said to me he was certain there were people there who'd been in the army under a different name. I said he didn't know for sure. He said he did. But I didn't ask him for any details. I sometimes thought I just wanted to get through our year there and move on and forget everything."

"When you paid your money to get your entry into Australia and your work permit expedited did you have any reason to believe the people you were dealing with might not be—honest businessmen?"

Harper clearly wasn't happy with the question. "You want me to incriminate myself? That's a loaded question if ever there was one."

"I can understand you wanting to get out. I can understand you not asking questions about the set-up. But if someone is using that desperation as a way to get criminals into Australia, alongside perfectly legit migrants … " Wang let it trail away.

"I can't answer your question," Harper finally said. "Maybe we were very naïve but we really thought we were the sort of migrants Australia wanted and if paying that money would see us get here faster we didn't mind to make that commitment. After all, we worked hard when we got here and in a place and a job that not everyone wants."

Daniel nodded slowly but didn't rush on to his next question. Instead he looked over at DC Ali Deane and asked if she had any questions. She wasn't sure if Daniel simply wanted more time to think through the direction of the interview or whether he thought Harper was in some way taking advantage of the lack of pressure. She said simply, "Did you know you were coming to a Whites Only business here?"

"No."

"Did that bother you when you arrived?"

"I didn't think about it. I didn't like being surrounded by men who brought a lot of baggage with them. But then—who would?"

"It didn't bother you that you came to a Men Only business—where the only women ever connected with it were the women expected to act as prostitutes?"

"No-o-o. I just assumed most such businesses in country Australia don't try to recruit female employees. Look—why are you asking me all this? I didn't make the rules."

"But you didn't query anything?"

"No. Well, I guess not. I just wanted to finish my contract and leave."

"But Oliver Hone did?"

Ali Deane did not get many opportunities to grill people and she gave the impression she had no patience with Wang's gentlemanly approach. Harper, from apparently seeing her as someone to take notes, switched to a faint unease. He couldn't see what she was getting at. But was it wise to assume that as a woman, as an indigenous woman, she might not be as tolerant of any Japana employee as her boss. And she was asking him if he would like to rescue himself from a rather chauvinistic even possibly racist complacency by suggesting his best mate was more observant and more worried.

"I—I don't think query is quite the right word—"

"Then what is?"

"He … I really don't know what he said or did—"

"But you were his best mate."

"Well, ye-es, I'm sure I was. But it doesn't mean I was with him all the time."

"You knew they had killed him?"

"I … I didn't know for absolute certain. But I heard them talking … and then they cleared everything from his caravan."

"He had a caravan of his own?"

"No. He shared it with a man called Whitgreave. I wanted to do a deal to swop but Rabey said they weren't keen on men getting too … *close*."

"And after he disappeared—who shared it with Whitgreave?"

"A man called Tasker."

"And Tasker and Whitgreave both come from Zimbabwe?"

"Well, I guess so. I never asked."

"And you are aware that Whitgreave is the man he believed was Whitelaw?"

"No! That's rubbish. Look, you're just jumping to conclusions. He filmed that video, he asked me to get it to the police, he knew I had a room to myself. He was just upset about them being so cruel … and I knew they were burying offal there when they weren't supposed to … and when he disappeared I just … I just got worried that it might be more than offal and I took those photos and got them to Constable Wrightson. It was the best I could do."

"Right then, you'd better give us the names of all the men you believe might've had something to do with his murder and illegal burial and the looting of all his personal possessions."

"I … don't think I can do that. To point the finger … with no proof … and they've got families, I've got family there, it might lead on to … it might get back home that I fingered someone … you don't know what it's like … I thought I'd done all I could when I took that stuff to the police and you found Olly."

"Finding is only half the business. Getting the men who killed him is the other half. We thought you would want to help."

"I do want to help." He suddenly sounded rather petulant. "I just don't see how putting forward my vague suspicions might help. It might even send you down the wrong road."

After they had let him leave the interview room and make his way back to the street, Ali Deane said sharply, "They've got him, haven't they? They've nobbled him. I wonder how much it cost—or whether they threatened his family still back in Harare?"

"It begins to look like it. I think," he spoke more slowly, "you'd better add Christian Harper to the list for checking with Immigration. Being best mates with Hone doesn't automatically make him squeaky clean."

He took the tape out of the machine and labeled it before saying, “And it puts that Whitelaw-Whitgreave bod right back in the frame. They’re big caravans and they might’ve been doing different shifts or working in different parts of the business but I’d say putting Hone in with Whitelaw was a tragedy waiting to happen.”

“And why didn’t we know sooner that Hone was sharing a caravan with him?”

“Because like a fool—I simply assumed that Hone had been in another of those small rooms in the bunkhouse, same as Harper.”

She nodded. They had certainly all been given that impression. But they … she was going to say they hadn’t asked but in fact they had. It was Hove who had given them the impression Oliver Hone had a room to himself. He had even said it was company policy to clear out his room and put a new employee in. Room. Not caravan. And they now knew Hove was a consummate liar but they hadn’t gone back to re-check his earlier statements. “I think … we have to assume that none of the information we got from James Hove is correct unless we can confirm it from another source.”

“And what source there can we trust?”

“We can’t. But I guess we have to bring Rabey in for questioning. He was the one that didn’t want men to get too buddy-buddy. D’you think that’s a kind of shorthand for not wanting them to have … affairs?”

“Hove likened the place to an oil rig. I think it might be better to see it as more like a prison. Some of the men might be tempted … even if they wouldn’t fancy it outside of there … ”

He came out into the office and sat down at his desk to arrange a time for an interview with Wilson Rabey, asking him to come into Buckton to help with ‘our enquiries’. And then he pulled up some material on his computer about the legal responsibilities of trusts …

*

Over the past few months Dennis had had occasional bouts of abdominal pain, nothing very serious, and antibiotics always worked. But Dr Alistair Thompson in Winville kept telling him to take a week or two off work and let him whip that appendix out. Dennis kept putting it off, it never seemed to be a priority, and he only referred to it as a grumbling appendix at home; to say so in public would probably invite people to comment that it wasn’t the only thing about him that grumbled.

But there were days when he thought he probably should take advantage of Kelly’s increasing knowledge of the district and reasonable competence to book himself in. As Thompson liked to say ‘whip in, out again in a day or two, take it easy for a fortnight, and you’ll feel a new man’. It might not be quite that much of a miracle cure but he finally said to Kelly, “D’you think you could manage for a week? Brophy can send someone out a couple of days. I think it’s time I went and got rid of this bloody thing and be done with it.”

Brent didn’t leap at the idea of more responsibility but he said he thought he could manage; “If nothing awful happens”.

“I always wonder why people bother with crime in the very hot or the very cold weather—but some idiots don’t know when to lay off. Still, Cooney isn’t your responsibility and Japana isn’t your responsibility—and with luck Buckton will behave itself.”

“But Daniel Wang has asked Wilson Rabey to come here tomorrow morning to be interviewed again—”

“There’s no chance Thompson’ll get me on to the theatre list by tomorrow morning,” Dennis said drily; not unless the appendix decided to burst overnight and that didn’t seem very likely. “But I s’pose Rabey has been well-briefed and won’t give a thing away. Let’s just hope Immigration’s giving them something to hit him with.”

But when he told Fiona in the evening that Thompson was going to try and slip him in as soon as there was a bed free and a gap in the theatre list, she said with unexpected cheerfulness, “Then at least you’ll get a little bit of a rest, even if it comes with some pain.”

“I’ve put the whole business with Cooney back on to Garra … but I’m not entirely comfortable with it. A bit hard to pin down … ”

“Because it *is* hard to believe that a boy not yet twelve carried out mass murder apparently without turning a hair?”

"Mmmm. Someone told Dave that Joe Savage refused to give his kids any pocket money and so they all hated him. I know it doesn't take a big injustice to get kids going and young Tom seems to have been pretty well squashed flat by everyone else's anger and aggression and violence … but it somehow suggests a strength of mind, that sort of planned hitting back, that I don't think Cooney has. And he never strikes me as a brain either. I've always picked him as a follower. Todd Price knew which buttons to press and Cooney always went along and helped him with the dirty work when there was someone to 'teach a lesson to'—"

"But not an instigator?"

"Well, I'm hardly Freud but no, I don't reckon so."

He was obviously not the only person to be worrying about Cooney. He had a ring from Dave Grumm, the manager at the Butter Factory, a half hour later. Grumm said rather testily, "I hear you've taken young Cooney to Winville and that he won't be coming back. You could've warned me, Dennis."

"Sorry, Dave, but he's confessed to killing his parents and three of his brothers. Nothing else I could do—"

"Brendan! Christ, I don't believe it! He just plods along and if you spell out any instructions in words of one syllable he's reasonably reliable. But you can't go making him out to be Jack the Ripper. He hasn't got the brains or the initiative."

"He didn't dob anyone else in … but it's been worrying me too. He's a follower, the corporal not the major."

"So what're you going to do about it?"

"Nothing. He's confessed. He clearly knows what happened that day. It's up to him now."

"So I might as well do up his paycheck and send it on?"

"He was very young when he committed the crime, he was probably under extreme pressure, but, yeah, I don't see him coming back to the factory any time soon. But he'll come up for a bail hearing probably tomorrow. I doubt if he'll get it. No kind relatives to offer to mortgage their house for him. But if you're planning to be in Winville any time soon—there's just a possibility he might talk to you. If someone else was involved I don't want him to carry the whole can."

Grumm didn't jump at the offer but he finally said, "I'll be in there on Thursday. I guess I can go and see him." He couldn't infuse it with any enthusiasm. "Has he got a lawyer, d'you know?"

"Legal Aid."

*

Wilson Rabey was just starting to run to fat but like James Hove he projected a curiously neutral image. He came in and sat down and didn't object to the tape running. He gave his name as Wilson Charles Rabey and his age as forty-six. He said he had been born in Botswana but that his English parents had moved to what was then Rhodesia when he was about ten.

"My father worked at the Wankie Colliery in the north of the country. I went to a boarding school in what was then Salisbury. I went to South Africa and also trained as a mining engineer like my dad. I came back and worked at Wankie for a while and then I took various contracts to work in other countries. No lack of jobs. I came back to Zimbabwe when my father died so as to look after my mother. After she died I moved to Harare and got a desk job there and I met Jimmy Hove and he told me he was planning to come to Australia and why didn't I come. I didn't know a lot about cattle but I knew a fair bit about managing men and office administration. We were offered the job here and took it. It's been a learning curve for me but I simply follow company rules. It makes life simpler. When James was with us I did all the payroll work, paid the local bills, organised the transport. James did the rest. Since he went I've been doing everything but they've promised me an assistant. Even so, it isn't really my cup of tea. My contract will be up in a few months and I've started to look for a mining job again."

He sounded relaxed and chatty and Dennis and Daniel had to keep reminding themselves that he almost certainly knew Hone was dead the day he died; if not a more intimate involvement in the death. Brent took notes to back up the tape. And alone of the three officers he had no difficulty in seeing Rabey as guilty of something. Yet, when Dennis asked him for his impressions later, he

could only say 'he reminded me of someone I didn't like back home, I think, something two-faced and a bit smarmy.'

"James Hove told us that Oliver Hone had a room. We've recently found out that he shared a caravan. Why would Hove try and mislead us?"

"Room was probably shorthand for accommodation." It didn't fluster Rabey. "You know how you say tea even though you're not actually having a cup of tea."

It might be. But they all had doubts. "And he was sharing that accommodation when he died." This was Dennis. "There's no way he could leave without his room mate knowing something."

"It isn't that simple. The men get cycled round the other properties. There's accommodation now for the men on Caritas and over on the Harding property and across the railway. He could easily have been on his own for a couple of days."

"You know who he was sharing with?"

"Of course. A man called Seb Whitgreave. But I have an idea Whitgreave was doing stints over at the Harding place. It is a little hard to cross-check as we don't know when Mr Hone died and you don't seem to be in a hurry to tell us."

"So what did you do when he didn't turn up for his next shift?"

"Nothing. James went over to his room a day or two after he disappeared and cleared everything out and put in a new employee. That is policy. We're a bit short of accommodation."

Daniel looked as if he was buying everything and Rabey remained calm and relaxed. It suggested he felt very confident the crime would never be sheeted home. "You were worried about the men getting too *close* … just what did you have in mind?"

"Nothing in particular. But I was a bit uneasy about Harper and Hone. They did everything together. I thought that was a bit suss. It was their business. But some of those very macho guys there might use it as an excuse to have a go at them. I thought they would be safer if I separated them. It was no big deal." Rabey as a caring considerate employer wasn't terribly convincing but Wang moved on calmly.

"And why did you choose to put Hone in with Whitelaw?"

Rabey didn't appear to notice the change of name. "Each time new men arrive I just look on my map of spare rooms and allocate them."

"But you were aware that Whitelaw and Hone already knew each other?"

"Sorry? Did you say Whitelaw?"

"I did." Daniel resisted the temptation to say more.

"I think you'll find the name is Whitgreave."

"No, Mr Rabey, his name is Whitelaw."

"Well, I saw his papers and everything looked to be in tip-top order and it was definitely in the name of Whitgreave. He also came with good references and obviously has experience with cattle. Beyond that—well, it's not my business. But I will pass your concerns on. Our lawyer can check that everything our end is correct."

"Oliver Hone not only recognised Seb Whitelaw," Daniel said slowly, "but he also seems to have known that Whitelaw had been a mercenary involved in some very dirty little wars. When you put Hone in with Whitelaw you probably signed his death warrant."

"No, I'm quite quite sure you're wrong." Rabey managed to sound genuinely concerned. Later, Kelly said, "I half expected him to start crying crocodile tears."

"Then, while we get this all sorted out, you had better make very very sure that this Whitelaw-Whitgreave bod doesn't leave Japana. Because if he does," Wang was not half as terrifying as Dennis Walsh but he could summon up some cold steel to infuse his words when he tried, "you will find yourself being charged as an accessory to immigration fraud."

"I think that is an empty threat, sir, as no one, no matter how concerned, can make certain adult men do not leave Japana as and when they wish."

"Then you had better put your thinking cap on and give us some useful information, hadn't you? Because Japana is a corporate entity and you have legal responsibilities both to the Neurand Trust and to all the employees there. So far your record isn't any too good. You put Hone in with a

killer. You failed to notify us that James Hove had shot Constable Wrightson and had then removed the bullet from the crime scene. Pretending to be Mr Nice Guy isn't going to be enough."

Rabey's response was to reiterate that he simply did what he was told.

Neither Dennis nor Daniel were on hand to see him ring through to Gavin Whittaker as soon as he was alone in his office again. "You're going to have to get me out of Japana as soon as possible. Any of the Hoysted properties will do for starters."

Gavin Whittaker had just been dealing with a very tedious client and wasn't in the best of moods. "Why?"

"They've dug up the sod's past. They'll be looking at Prime Tech before you know it."

"So what good will it do if you cut and run?"

"It may not do you any good," Rabey said sourly, "but it might keep me safe."

'Mind Rabey'. Whittaker had no objection to seeing the back of Wilson Rabey but it would probably be another red rag to the bull so far as Dennis Walsh was concerned.

"You could … " Gavin Whittaker said the words very slowly, "serve him up on a plate. Get him to confess. Get him to say Hone and his arty farty ways got on his works and he gave him a whack and he was horrified to find Hone had fallen down and hit himself on something. He comes up, pleads guilty, expresses remorse for having a quick temper, goes to jail. End of story. The cops'll drop it all and move on."

Rabey gave this long careful thought before saying neutrally, "It might work."

*

Daniel Wang took the call the following morning. The caller identified himself as Sebastian Whitgreave and he said simply, "Okay, I admit it. The little arty farty bastard with his fucking *poetry* got up my nose. I was always telling him to shut up about it. But he wouldn't, just warbling on and on, and I got stuck into him one night and whacked him and he fell backwards and bumped himself. I didn't mean to kill him, just get him to back off, and I buried him where those other bastards had been burying offal. I know I should've reported it. But I just wanted him out of my hair. I'm sorry about it all. I'll plead guilty in court."

"Will you now." Daniel was relieved to get someone. But somehow it all seemed too pat. "Then we'll expect you in here in Winville later today to do a formal interview and get charged. You'd better pack a bag. There's no guarantee you'll get bail unless Japana wants to put up the money."

He turned to Greg and Ali and Stephanie who had just brought the mail in. "Sebastian Whitgreave or Whitelaw or whoever he is has just confessed to killing Oliver Hone."

Greg gave him the thumbs-up. It was Ali who said carefully, "D'you think he did?"

"I think he killed him but I don't think he gave him a whack and I don't think he killed him because he didn't like his poetry."

"So if he pleads guilty—do we go on digging?"

"We do. And there's another thing. The p.m. on Hone didn't show any sign of head trauma. They're still running tests for different poisons. He's still the obvious candidate to administer the poison but I still think it's more than Whitelaw … and we keep checking those other identities."

Dennis took the news calmly and said he thought it was a start. "But don't forget that doctor a while ago—that Redding who put his hand up as the family sacrifice. He was guilty but he was also saving the rest of the family from investigation. Chances are that Whitelaw may be saving some other necks. I wonder if any more of those men ever worked for this Prime Tech outfit?"

"Ali is doing all the immigration checks but I'll see if I can find where the company is registered and whether we can get on to any lists of employees. If I was going off to be a mercenary I'd want some good insurance cover. An eye might be the least of what you could lose."

"As a guess I'd say South Africa for everything—and as another guess, I wonder if that Admiral Neumann that tried to tell Sam Hoysted how to run his business, might have a finger in that pie." Daniel didn't rush to say this was a good idea …

And to Ali Deane he said glumly, "What a pity they aren't testing any more missiles. I wouldn't mind blowing up Japana and just leaving a very large hole."

*

David Grumm had been manager of the Butter Factory for the last seven years or so. His wife Anne ran the office and the two of them had a reputation round town as pleasant quiet people. Their son was in his late twenties and was a marine biologist, based in Townsville. He was also about the same age as Brendan Cooney. Dave wasn't certain if this influenced him or more simply the sense that he needed to know if Brendan really wouldn't be coming back to work and he should therefore advertise for someone new.

He called in to the police station on his way home from Winville and said briskly, "I dropped by to see him. He isn't coping very well but I've arranged for a friend of mine in Winville to drop by and see if he needs anything. He asked me if I could do anything about raising a surety for him. I said no. But I said we would help him fix up about his flat. I don't s'pose he's got a lot of stuff but it'll need to be stored."

Dennis nodded. "And what about this new girlfriend he says he's got?"

"Maya Smith. The new girl at the bakery. But I think it's only him buying her a couple of drinks. I doubt if it's anything serious."

"Still, it might be worth telling her what's going on. Then it's up to her. She's probably finding it pretty hard to deal with—knowing she's been going out with a guy with that background."

Mr Grumm didn't look excited by the suggestion but he said only, "There's another thing. I asked him if anyone put him up to it, him only being a little kiddy at the time … and he said no … and then he turned round and said yes, but no one would be likely to believe him."

"Who was it?"

"His brother John. He says John wanted to leave home and his dad said he could only leave when he said so. So John got Tom to help him cook up this stuff from the oleander leaves and twigs and said they would put it in the breakfast milk. And the idea was that he and John would go to the store, they used to double-bank on the bike sometimes … and when they got back and found everyone lying down they'd get the gun and shoot them and make it look like the father did it."

"So what went wrong?"

"It seems Tom … I keep wanting to call him Brendan … didn't believe just that little bit of juice in the milk would do the trick and when his mum wasn't looking he put it in other things, the teapot, the eggs his mum was cooking, I'm not sure about all this … and he thought John was going to avoid having any breakfast too, just pretend, but John hoed into a poached egg before he could stop him."

"So then he realised John was dying too?"

"If he's telling the truth. He went to the store anyway, not sure what else to do, and he came back and found them all dead. I think … and it's a feeling … that he didn't really believe that a bit of boiled up water that they'd steeped some leaves in could be that powerful. But I don't know if that'll do him any good, not when he still shot them all."

"It would depend whether he knew if they were definitely dead or not. Shooting a dead body is a crime but it isn't murder."

"I see. But it's his word that his brother put him up to it. I don't know if people will believe that."

"In a way it's easier to believe. John was about seventeen. I wondered if his nineteen-year-old brother might've been the one to put him up to it. I think … no, this is only guesswork, but if John wanted to get right away from the family, then leaving his little brother with the grandmother might've been enough to get him his freedom. People would say 'poor little Tom' and maybe even make a bit of a fuss over him. And John would tell their story and head off. I wonder what he was hoping to do once he got away from the farm?"

"Brendan … Tom … reckons he always wanted to be an engine driver on the railways."

Dennis nodded. "And did John treat his little brother okay?"

"I doubt it. He says he was scared of John, same as he was scared of all the others, but the thing I was wondering about, I know it's a bit out of my league, but I wondered if he could take a lie-detector test. Would that be any help to him?"

"Probably not. If he gets all het up it could go haywire anyway. But they will allow hypnotism in certain circumstances and if there's safeguards in place. If this story about his older brother is true—then that just might help get it on to the official record."

"I s'pose you shouldn't be telling me this," Dave Grumm said with a faint smile. "I imagine the police want to get a result after all these years of speculation."

"True. But it's worried me, the feeling that I just didn't really believe he organised everything. He was always the one that followed when bastards like Price wanted to go out and make trouble."

"I know. Well, I can talk with his lawyer."

"And if he goes down—tell him to take advantage of any programs they have in the slammer to train for something better. He's never going to be Einstein but maybe with all this stuff out in the open he can make something of himself."

"And who's going to pack my butter—if you want to turn him into a ruddy engineer or computer tyro?" Dave Grumm said wryly.

*

Daniel Wang and Greg Sullivan re-interviewed Sebastian Whitgreave. They could not get him to admit that he was also known as Sebastian Whitelaw. He repeated his original statement almost word for word; that he had got sick of Oliver Hone talking about poetry and had whacked him.

"He got on my works, simple as that. I know I should've simply asked to swop accommodation, but one evening I just saw red and whacked him."

"Do you know the date?"

"Are you crazy? Every day there is pretty much the same."

"You didn't go to Winville, to Dinawadding, to the pub, nothing at all?"

"Not worth the hassle. I had a TV, I sometimes went round to chat with some of the other guys—"

"Such as?"

"Couldn't really tell you. John, and Mike, and Aaron, and Carlo … I never asked for full names, why should I, and it was hardly being real buddy-buddy."

"And are they all still there?"

"Carlo isn't. Don't know about the others. I've been working over on the place Harding sold."

"And Hone was always there?"

"I'd say so. Maybe if he'd gone out more he wouldn't have got on my works like that."

"He did go regularly to the pub in Dinna."

"Did he? But I don't think it was more than once a week."

"And when you whacked him—what did you whack him with?"

"Just punched him." He raised a large granite fist. "I may not see so well these days but I can still pack a punch and that place keeps me fairly fit."

"When you went over to the Harding place—did you still come over to your caravan to sleep?" Daniel was trying to get a better sense of the background.

"Usually. But it was often late by the time I got back."

"Did he ever show you his cameras?"

"Don't reckon so."

"Did he talk about them at all?"

"Not really."

"But he talked non-stop about his poetry?"

"Yeah. He was always making the stuff up."

"So what did he do with it?"

"How would I know?"

"Did he send it to anyone?"

"If he did he never told me."

"Even though he spouted it non-stop?"

"That's about it."

"So what were his poems about?"

"How would I know? I didn't listen."

"You didn't listen but they bothered you?"

"Got it in one."

"Where did you whack him?"

"Side of his head, I'd reckon."

Daniel went over some of the stuff again before ending the interview and watching Whitgreave taken away. Then he said angrily, "What a set-up!"

"Yeah … " Sullivan sounded gloomy. "He'll probably think it a big laugh that we'll turn round now and prove he couldn't have done it."

Daniel had been thinking much the same thing. A jury would listen to this and find it unconvincing. Whitgreave *might* be guilty but there were too many discrepancies and things which just sounded too pathetic to be real …

"Wait a minute." But Wang didn't immediately go on. "He thinks we'll get annoyed about him wasting police time—but that's the worst it's going to get. We'll know his evidence doesn't fit with the facts of the case and we'll let him go eventually. Or we'll take it to trial and end up with egg on our faces … "

"But how does he *know* his scenario doesn't fit? Because he knows what really happened? Yeah, could be." Greg didn't sound excited.

"He's confessed. We've charged him. We keep him in custody unless Japana feels like putting up bail for him. And we get stuck into the Whitgreave-Whitelaw business and get it sorted out—"

"How?"

"If he's using Whitgreave and sounding pretty confident—then it looks like the real Whitgreave is dead. I believe Olly Hone when he says he's Whitelaw. But the thing is—Whitgreave must've died in a place, or in a way, that his death wasn't reported."

"You mean Prime Tech Solutions?"

"That'd be a good start. And there's a chance they're related. Say two cousins sign up as mercenaries. They're fed up with what's going on in the Zimbabwean Army, Mugabe doesn't want to promote any whitefellas—so they sign on with this outfit and get sent—where? And one of them gets killed. He packs up his cousin's stuff to take home to his old mum—but then he thinks, what the heck, a passport with a very similar-looking bod in it just might come in handy. So he goes into the Embassy and gets a new one issued, then all he has to do is make sure he comes through on a flight where he knows someone who will stamp both passports for him—or even just come through with a lot of obstreperous children or late at night, something, and he says, sorry you missed my passport—but I think Japana has someone somewhere, maybe just a sympathetic fellow-countryman who's now on a particular checkpoint … I don't think it would be all that hard to work that part of it … but whether it's just to give him options … or whether there's more to it … "

"And instead of finding everyone there at Japana is pretty much sympathetic and in the same boat—he ends up sharing with Olly Hone who knows his real name and knows something—" Greg had been scrambling to keep up. "But wouldn't that mean that Hone also knows what happened to the real Whitgreave? Otherwise it's maybe a bit of funny business with a surname but Whitelaw can just say, I decided to change my name because my mum remarried, something trivial … but Hone knew, or thought he knew, what had happened to Whitgreave?"

"Yep." Daniel sat for several minutes going over all this in his mind. "So how do we find out what happened to Seb Whitgreave?"

"The AFP?" Greg said dubiously. "The Embassy."

Daniel considered both ideas then said, "No, I think I am going to try and get on to Oliver's parents. If he knew, there's just a possibility they knew too. I wonder what the time difference is like." Greg obediently got up and went over to pick up the nearest phone directory.

*

With an eight-hour-difference in time Daniel did some sums on a scrap of paper. The best would probably be to try and get them around breakfast time. They had been thoughtful enough to

send him their phone number and post box number when they wrote back with copies of Oliver's letters home.

But it took him some thought before he had a list of quick and, hopefully, simple questions nutted out. When a man's voice answered, sounding rather tired and dispirited, perhaps it was what dentistry did to its practitioners, perhaps it had to do with life in Zimbabwe, Wang simply told him that Oliver's letters were probably the vital information, the breakthrough they needed, and that Seb Whitelaw swore black and blue that he was Seb Whitgreave. Did they know how Oliver might have recognised him as Whitelaw?

"The Whitelaws lived just down the street from us," Mr Homan-Mortlake said carefully. "They're patients of mine. John, the son, went away years ago. We heard Mugabe sent some troops to the Congo and that John had gone with them … and later we heard he'd gone to West Africa as a mercenary … but I never asked. We didn't particularly … *like* the family. And John used to tease and bully Oliver. It seemed a terrible coincidence that they should end up in the same place in Australia. I know Oliver asked and asked to be moved to one of their other properties but they kept telling him he had signed a contract to work there and that was that."

"Did he write this to you?" Daniel couldn't remember seeing that in any of the copied letters.

"No. He rang us up a couple of times. He said he was going to tell someone, I assume the police but maybe Immigration, but we only got the one letter after that. Then it went for more than a month with no word and we finally rang the office there to ask if Olly was all right and they told us he had broken his contract and left and that we would probably hear from him when he got settled somewhere else. We found it hard to believe he would break a contract unless the pressure had become unbearable." Mr Homan-Mortlake seemed to break over the last word.

"So you don't know if he did actually tell anyone about Whitelaw?"

"I'm sorry, no."

"And the name of Sebastian Whitgreave—do you know anyone of that name?"

"We know a Stephen and Sally Whitgreave but they don't have children. I can't think of any others."

"You're quite certain they don't have children?"

At last Mr Homan-Mortlake said slowly, "I couldn't swear to it. They were living here when we arrived from the UK twenty years ago." Oliver's father still sounded very English. "We've never heard or seen any sign that they had children."

Daniel wasn't sure if this was a dead-end. While he was considering his next question Mr Homan-Mortlake said more briskly, "Are you sure his name was John Sebastian Whitelaw? Now that I think about it I'm sure his name was John Marcus Whitelaw … perhaps he wasn't the same John after all … but I can't think of another John that Olly might've known."

"It wouldn't be hard to change a name … " And they had only seen the Whitgreave passport. "Could I ask you to look around very discreetly and see if there's any chance the Whitgreaves ever had a child, perhaps one that died young or was adopted or went to live with other relatives. There might've been a birth notice in a paper, something like that, but don't draw attention to yourself."

"I've got used to not drawing attention to myself," Mr Homan-Mortlake said rather gloomily.

"But you stay on?"

"Yes, I stay on. People still deserve the sort of care I can give them." Perhaps Oliver had inherited something of a social conscience …

Daniel jotted some notes after he'd hung up. He'd given Oliver's father their e-mail and fax number. It was only a slight chance. But someone applying for a passport only had to provide a birth certificate and a signed photo; they didn't have to prove that the name on the birth certificate hadn't died in the interim. But why would anyone *need* two passports? He went back to the Internet and finally drew up a head office in London, not South Africa as he had assumed. Then he nutted out a letter and faxed it off to them. Could they tell him when they had employed John Sebastian Whitelaw and the circumstances in which he had lost an eye and had they ever employed a Sebastian Paul Whitgreave?

'I don't think I'll hold my breath,' he said to the empty room. 'But I've now got an address for the Whitelaw family. They can surely be fleshed out, his schooling, his siblings, when he joined

the army, the date he left for the Congo, *if* he left for the Congo … Whitelaw thinks he's being clever … but I wonder if he's clever enough … '

*

John Applegarth enjoyed the process of settling into the station in Garramindi. Dave Bishop was an unremarkable station officer but he had left everything quite tidy and well-organised. Megan and the children looked all round the yard to see what possibilities it might offer them in the way of play areas and room for a little garden. The old netting runs which had once contained exotic poultry now offered room for more everyday hens and bantams. Little Elise Walsh had offered them some Golden Pekin chicks the next time her bantam hatched some out. They had brought their cat, Tomasine, and had to keep her locked in for several days before she settled down and agreed that this was home. They went to Winville for a couple of extra pieces of furniture.

The station computer had a password but it was a nice easy one to remember; other than that the office didn't bristle with hi-tech. John worked his way through the old filing cabinet and checked the store room. He worked his way through the current caseload in the hope that ideas of new angles to be pursued would occur to him.

He had an appointment with John Brophy teed up. Sergeant Bishop was no fan of Brophy's and had said simply, "I think he just wants you to tell him he's a great guy. Up to you. But I s'pose it's worth keeping him on side till you see if you need him."

John didn't mind giving his new boss a metaphoric pat on his back but as he went round town and made a point of talking to everyone and going into the pub and making contact with the schools, the Wheat Board, the churches, and the few local organisations, it came increasingly to him that Brophy or whoever made the call had it round the wrong way. Garra wasn't paradise but it was a pretty quiet and fairly law-abiding little town. Did it need a sergeant—when Dinna and the troubles at Japana only got a constable? Wouldn't it be better the other way around? The trouble with this, when he put it to Megan, was the simple corollary: if Brophy took it on board then they might lose this posting for the much less attractive one of Dinawadding …

The local talking-point, naturally, was Sergeant Bishop's quixotic decision to re-energise the old Savage case *and* get a result. Quite a lot of people said they thought Bishop should've let sleeping dogs lie, that Joe Savage was a monster and they didn't mind in the least seeing his name permanently sullied.

John Applegarth could see both sides of the argument and he usually said something non-committal. But now and again people weren't content with just making a comment. Several people prefaced their remarks—or brought it out as an add-on—that it was typical of that "bloody Dinny Walsh", that he wasn't content with turning Buckton upside-down and inside-out but he had to "stick his big nose into Garra's business".

Sergeant Applegarth was tempted to simply let such comments go in the interests of starting out without controversy. But it wasn't simply Dennis in the firing line, he didn't think, it was police in general. "Dinny Walsh busts his guts for the community and all he gets is criticisms. I don't think it's really fair to blame him for everything—"

This didn't go over very well and several people expanded their complaints to include "Walsh's bloody wife who shut the bank down here". In a way he found this easier to respond to. "You preferred things to go on the way they were—with everyone in the bank stealing from accounts?"

"At least we still had a bank."

"The decision to close the bank came from Brisbane, Fiona was just the meat in that sandwich."

"Still, she should've stood up for us, instead of just—"

"The way Margaret Elliott and Hilton Browne stood up for you?"

"Hilton said he wrote regularly to Brisbane, urging them to keep the bank open."

John seriously doubted this. Fiona had not even known the bank was slated for closure until she arrived in Garramindi. Certainly Hilton had never gone public. "You saw the letters he wrote?"

"Of course not! It was private bank business."

"And it was Fiona who called a public meeting to find out how much the bank employees had been taking from people's accounts—"

'That was all just puff."

John accepted that nothing he could say would change anyone's view of either Dennis or Fiona but it changed his feelings about the Savage case. Now he felt himself determined to see Tom Savage *alias* Brendan Cooney go to trial, to get a fair trial, to bring out all the aspects of that family which had been hidden away, overlooked, ignored, because he didn't doubt that Joe Savage had seriously abused his children and that *no one*, not teachers, not neighbours, not people who did business with the family, had tried to get help for those children. Child abuse continued simply because people did not want to get involved with families like the Savages; it was easier to condemn them all as hillbillies and hooligans, never stopping to ask what life in such a family might be like for those boys.

As soon as he had got himself settled in, knew his way around, encouraged people to come to him regardless of whether they had large or small problems, (shades of Dennis Walsh), he took the long trip to Winville to see Tom Savage. "Brendan, I know you're thinking of just pleading guilty, just to get it all over with, but I've been all through Dave Bishop's notes and I spoke about it with him before he left and he thought it would be worth your while pleading Not Guilty. You may not win your case but that way you can be sure of getting all the abuse you suffered in your family on to the public record. That way it will almost certainly get you a much reduced sentence."

"And why should you care what sort of sentence I get?" Savage said grumpily. "It was your lot put me here in the first place."

"No, mate, it was what you did fifteen years ago that put you in here. You did shoot and poison your family. You can't walk away from that. But the world deserves to know why you were miserable enough to even think of doing that. Get it all on public record. You'll find there's a lot of sympathy out there for you."

Tom Savage a.k.a Brendan Cooney didn't jump at the idea. But a week later Sergeant Applegarth had a ring from Savage to say he'd talked it over with his Legal Aid lawyer and they were going to change it to a plea of Not Guilty. John wasn't certain how it would play out—Savage was not exactly a cute kid or a serious heart throb. His surly expression and glum not-very-articulate way of speaking would not tear at the heart strings of the jury.

But as he hung up he wondered how local people who had been so reluctant to see the father off the hook and the son on would now feel about being put under the microscope as a community themselves …

*

Fiona had been busy the last week turning the little store room by the door on to the south verandah and next to the spare bedroom into a play room for Robbie. Once he felt happy and at home in it they would move his cot in as well. She had followed the same routine as she had done with Elise: letting him choose colours and patterns. It was now decorated in colours of brown and cream and yellow with cork tiles and curtains sprinkled with stylised Australian animals. She had removed the few old boxes in which Mrs Roberts had stored some remnants and some rather drab curtains and cushions and replaced them with a lo-boy, a small cupboard with drawers and open shelves and two child-size chairs and a low table.

Her idea was now to go on and finish decorating the spare bedroom so that she and Dennis could move in. It had a window opening into the store room which she planned to turn into a French door so they would have easier access to his room. She was painting the walls a spring green with a darker green trim and she had got Winston Pounder in to do the ceiling an off-white. She thought she would leave the curtains Ali Deane had put in which were of autumn leaves and autumn colours but the curtain over the French door would be plainer, just colours to reflect some of the autumn tints. They would no longer be directly opposite Elise's room which would probably be a good thing. Elise had sharp ears and an even sharper curiosity …

She had been preoccupied with matters of interior decoration, and the children were more than happy to give their father a blow-by-blow description of the things they had bought and what Mr Pounder had said when he stopped for morning tea, including telling them the difference

between a gloss and a matte finish—she was not sorry to drop it all for a morning and turn to sorting out what Dennis would need for a brief stay in hospital.

It had worried her that he was willing to put up with discomfort rather than simply accept that a small operation and a few days off work was a far better alternative … Stoicism had its moments but not when it came to something as volatile as an appendix …

*

Although wives have traditionally packed suitcases for husbands the situation in the Walsh household was a little different. For many years Dennis would not have allowed anyone to touch his private possessions, to go hunting through his underwear drawers or taking his things from the bathroom. But he trusted Fiona implicitly to treat everything he owned with care, more care than he would in most cases. But he still vaguely felt it was not something to be dumped on her. When he said, "I'd better throw a few things into a suitcase" she said "It wouldn't take me long to pack you a bag." She felt that stress might be playing a role in his health problems but it was no good talking to Dennis about stress; he couldn't imagine himself going at things in a different way. So she felt she just had to hope that he really would feel so much better after the operation.

"Would you? You always do it better than me."

"The kids have got you two little surprises. I'll pack them in for you. They'll help the time go quicker and take your mind off your stitches—"

"Not to mention bloody bedpans," he said gloomily. "But at least it won't be like last time and stuck on my back for weeks."

She had taken the children to the newsagents and the op-shop, suggesting they might like to choose out some little things so their dad would have something to read. Robbie, interested in cats, had picked out a Garfield comic book. Elise had carried on a long running 'dialogue' with herself.

'Would he like that?'

'No, I think it would be too hard to read in bed.'

'What about this? It has some good pictures.' And so on.

In the end she had carefully wrapped a second hand copy of *This is the Grass* in the mistaken belief it was all about grass and she knew her father was interested in grass and a new copy of *The Silver Brumby* because she knew he liked horses …

"And Anya came round with the bub today," Fiona said to Dennis when they'd finished discussing how much he needed to take for his few days in hospital. Anya Mackie, a young farm exchange worker from Moldova had married local dairy farmer Seymour Mackie, Iain Mackie's brother, and recently had a baby. Anya had been teaching the Walsh children a few words of Russian.

"So what did she call him? Boris?"

"No. It seems Anya expected Seymour to choose, male privilege and all that but he said as she was so far from home she might like to name him for one of her family—"

"Vladimir then—what was that fella—Kruschev, wasn't it?"

"Do you want to hear the story or not," she said with a smile.

"Of course. Go on."

"And Anya said a Moldovan name would sound a bit strange with Mackie—"

"Yeah, it probably would. So some awful Russian name like Leonid?" She turned to aim a mock punch at his jaw. "Okay, so what was it?"

"They thought they might choose from a movie or a TV show or a singer they both liked—"

"The Inkies or something?"

She wasn't sure if this was a group she hadn't heard of, or something half-remembered from his childhood, or something misheard or misread, perhaps INXS, as he sometimes put the ordinary radio on when he had a long drive …

"Very funny. No, apparently they both like watching Indiana Jones movies so they called him Harrison, Harry for short—"

"Well, there's worse names."

"Yes, sweetheart, and you've just come up with some of them … "

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Country Casebook: Book Thirty-Three

Case No. 1: News of the Bitter Kind

Winter in the small Darling Downs town of Buckton was a chilly time. The wide flat farmland to the west and north-west did nothing to slow the cold dry westerlies sweeping across the state. On the still mornings there might be a crinkling of frost across the dry grass of town lawns. Both Sergeant Dennis Walsh and Constable Brent Kelly were not wild about getting to work; Walsh more so as he was still recuperating from a minor operation. But they had a call which impelled them into action, chilled or not. A woman rang to say rather hysterically, "She's dead! Bella's dead! Can you come now?"

"Bella who?" Dennis said grimly.

"Seymour. My niece. Out at Thornleigh." Thornleigh was the rather inappropriate name of the big grain property which was still known round the district as 'the Cunningham's old place' even though the Cunninghams had been gone for five years. Except for a straggle of bougainvillea growing over an arbor on the south side of the house there weren't any obvious thorns …

"Okay, don't touch anything." Dennis turned to his junior. "Sudden death—or the dame's off with the birds. We'd best check. Leave that for now and get the camera."

The sun was now well up in a clear sky and the day might warm later. But Dennis took advantage of the car's heater. At least it might get his brain working. The Seymours had only bought the farm a month or two ago from Mr and Mrs Terry and various rumours were doing the rounds—not least Don Binnie's sour statement in the pub, "Think they're better than everyone around here, those Seymours." And several people had agreed with unexpected fervency. It wasn't that any of the people who had ever lived at Thornleigh had been frequenters of the Coolibah but the Seymours were said to be part of the Seymour dynasty and so 'not one of us' in the estimate of various local people. The sort of people who got round their various properties in private planes and expected to be invited on to the boards of companies …

Dennis didn't know just how this particular family connected up. But at least they showed signs of bringing the rather neglected property back into normal production. Several times when he had been out that way recently he'd seen a tractor at work in the paddocks. The Terrys who had been the previous owners hadn't stayed long; they had been spooked by knowing there were several underground bunkers on the farm. The owner before them, Trevor Hunt, had been a Vietnam vet and in Walsh's estimation one of the odder bods to come his way. Hunt had been fixated on the North Vietnamese system of supply tunnels and bunkers where people lived for long periods during the war—and with the help of his nephew had begun to dig up his farm and create and stock several of these mysterious underground 'rooms'. The Terrys believed someone was taking advantage of these hidden spaces to squat on their farm. How the Seymours felt about the bunkers, or even if they were fully aware of them, no one locally knew.

They made good time on the nearly-deserted road and drew in and parked in front of the sizeable house. "At least they're getting it tidied up a bit," Dennis said as they got out. The place had begun to wear a slightly neglected air in the years since the Cunninghams left. The Seymours were obviously putting some time and money and effort into the place. Several new shrubs, still

with their labels on, had been planted out and someone had repainted the attractive big patio and stocked it with comfortable chairs. “I hate to see a good farm go to rack and ruin.”

But this sense of refurbishment and renewal came unstuck as they went up to the front door. It stood open and as they knocked and waited they could see chaos inside. “A wild party?” Dennis said to his junior as an attractive woman in a peach-coloured satin robe picked her way past forgotten glasses, broken ornaments, overturned chairs, dropped bits of clothing, some tossed magazines …

Kelly merely stood at the door and stared at the mess and at the woman who gave the sense of not belonging. She came up to them and said, “I haven’t touched *anything* … I hardly know where to start.” There was a faint tinge of bitterness to her voice. “But come through. Bella’s in here.”

What had once been an old-fashioned hallway had been opened out by two wide arches giving an instant view of a big sitting room and an equally big dining room with its table pushed into a far corner. The table was covered with empty bottles, empty glasses, spilt drinks, empty bowls, several handkerchiefs and tissues, a large candle which had been allowed to burn right down and spread wax across the mahogany surface of the table. But she took them instead into the other room where several armchairs had been over-turned and a woman with long blonde hair lay sprawled on the sheepskin rug in front of an unused fireplace.

Dennis got his junior to take several photographs of the scene. Then he stepped gingerly over more clothes and what appeared to be a lace curtain to bend down and feel for a pulse. The arm was stiff and cold. “Ring Winville,” Dennis said curtly. “Tell ’em where to come, tell ’em the girl’s probably been dead for more than twelve hours.” Brent hurriedly went out, glad to be out of the house with its mess and smell, so he didn’t see Mrs Seymour turn to his boss and say, “That can’t be right! I saw her last night.”

“Not up to me to make that call. But she’s stiff. Rigor mortis has begun to set in.” That the house, without fires or heaters on, would’ve been very chilly might have speeded the process a little. He didn’t feel this was the moment to speculate.

“But she *was* here! I’m not kidding you. She was drinking and she was with a young man when I came back.”

He turned and went out of the room. “Is there anywhere we can sit down that we won’t be disturbing this mess?”

As he’d considered her he had gradually upped her age. She looked very smooth and unlined but there was something a little mask-like about her face and neck and he wondered if she might’ve had a facelift. She was still an attractive woman but perhaps she was trying to compete with a younger woman … or she was vain … Buckton’s answer to Hollywood …

“The kitchen is reasonable.” She said it unemotionally and he wondered what relation she was to the dead girl and how she had felt about her. He followed her in and took the chair she offered but he thought ‘reasonable’ was an overstatement. This big room too was crammed and crowded with things—including a rifle on a bench.

“That yours?”

“No.”

“Licensed?”

“How would I know?” She sounded angry now. “It isn’t mine.”

Dennis went over, picked up a stray tea towel to hold it while he broke it open. At least it wasn’t loaded but it didn’t mean it hadn’t been loaded some time recently.

“Okay, so where d’you fit into this situation?”

“She’s my niece, Bella Seymour. They asked, she asked, if they could use the house while I was away, while Mal and I were in Brisbane. We said yes. We were fools—but she’s Ralph’s daughter. It’s hard to say no to her.”

“So she and some of her friends came out here and did their best to wreck your home?”

She looked away from him as though she found both his presence and his question confronting. “We didn’t expect … this.”

“So where is Mal?”

“Still in Brisbane.”

"Well, I think the best thing would be if you'd go and get dressed and Winville will want to do an interview with you once they've finished with your niece. D'you have any thoughts yourself as to what happened?"

"You can see it, the bruises on her head, someone hit her. Maybe they didn't mean to, maybe they were all drunk—"

"And stoned," Dennis said drily. He didn't have a lot of experience when it came to picking up on drugs but he was fairly sure some of the ash in some of the ashtrays would prove to come from thin little roll-your-owns. "So where is everyone?"

"I don't know. The house was a mess but I didn't see anyone when I arrived home last night. So I just went straight to bed. I was tired." She went over and checked a kettle and switched it on. "I couldn't face doing anything about the mess at that time of night."

"What time of night?"

"It must've been going on for twelve."

"That your car out the front? The Mercedes?"

"Yes."

"So when did you find her?"

"This morning. I was tired. I thought I'd come out and make myself something. This was about half an hour ago—and I looked in there … "

"But you first said you saw her last night—with a young man?"

"Oh! So I did … " She raised a rather shaky hand to her head. "I've got a splitting headache. I wish we'd never bought this horrible place … "

Constable Kelly after getting on to Winville CIB wasn't sure whether to simply come inside again or wait in the car. He finally did a careful walk around the drive in front of the old house to see if he could get any clues from the cars which had come and gone. Some of them, clearly, had found it hard to find and stay on the gravel road. But it puzzled him that there was no sign of a car parked for the dead girl. Had she come with someone, a boyfriend maybe, and he had simply driven away and left her. Had anyone tried to get help?

He walked over to the various sheds and looked around. Finally, unnoticed behind what they probably called the tractor shed, going by the big Fiat inside, along with a ride-on mower, a quad bike, and some other machinery he couldn't identify, he found a silver Porsche. So Ms Seymour had come here in a car most young people would give their eyeteeth for? He considered the thought but felt no envy; just a kind of muted sadness that her life could end so swiftly and untidily and apparently without sparking much concern in her guests …

He went back to the car to get his mobile and ring the small ambulance service in Buckton. It only had the one vehicle but claimed to be on 24 hour call. Jim Phelps' wife Rose answered. She listened to his query but was adamant that no call had come in. He had no better luck with the local hospital and the two local doctors, Tad Lombardi and Brett Sorenson. "What has happened, Brent?" Lombardi said. "Did we miss a call?"

"I don't think so. It's a lady out at the Seymours' farm, she died … " He was about to say "some time last night" when he remembered Dennis's query about the length of time Bella Seymour had been dead; "probably some time yesterday." He wondered if he should ring back and correct his other queries but he felt sure they would've mentioned it if a call had come in during the late afternoon.

"Young lady?" Lombardi said. "I thought it was a middle-aged couple living there. I didn't know they had … I heard they've got—I think it's two kids at boarding school in Brisbane. It wouldn't be holidays yet surely? I know some private schools use different dates."

"Mrs Seymour said it's a Bella Seymour."

"No. Doesn't ring a bell. Would you like one of us to come?"

Brent Kelly felt nervous about taking this responsibility on to his unsure shoulders but he finally said, "If you can spare the time. The whole thing is a bit strange." What he felt but couldn't bring himself to say was that he thought the more pairs of eyes surveying the scene the greater the chance someone would make sense of it …

Dennis came out to the car, preferring not to be in the house while Mrs Seymour changed from her sexy pink robe into … something. They would need to keep an eye on things but if there had been anything compromising in that room—then Mrs Seymour had had ample time to find and remove it. If there were clues then he thought it was more likely to be the post mortem which would throw them up. Kelly said, "I've found a car. It's a Porsche and it's over behind that shed. And I rang ambulance, hospital, and doctors and none of them received any kind of call for help."

"Good lad," Dennis said as he looked around the quiet farm. It was here that he had been shot in the stomach, by Trevor Hunt's nephew, but Bella Seymour—if they had been given the correct identification and it seemed most likely—gave the impression of someone who had been hit on both sides of her head. That might not prove to be the cause of death. But he found himself picturing a cartoon character with two large brass cymbals and someone getting their unfortunate head in the way. It was hard to imagine anything like that happening in real life. Had she instead been staggering to and fro, bumping into things, while she was blind drunk? He tried to erase the image. It wasn't his brief to decide on cause of death.

He turned and went back up the shallow steps and into the old house. Now, his nose refreshed, he could distinguish a number of odours but the most powerful one he thought was incense. Had they been burning it while other things went on—or had they chosen to burn some sticks later in the hope of masking a different odour?

*

It was another half-hour before DS Wang arrived from the nearby town of Winville. He had brought DC Ali Deane, Constable Atkinson, and Sergeant Strohling, the lab technician in Winville. As he got out and Dennis came over to him he said brusquely, "The morgue van's on its way."

"Good oh, but you'd better warn your people to pull all stops out. The dame that lives here's just told me the dead girl is the daughter of Ralph Seymour—our new Minister for—what?—Mines and Energy, I think. So warn them … " It shouldn't be like that: that wealthy or prominent people got a more thorough investigation than ordinary nobodies but he thought the Seymours probably had the power to damage Wang's career if they thought he wasn't doing a good enough job; and walking that fine line between a thorough investigation and protecting a grieving family from the worst of the publicity and embarrassment was never easy for a conscientious officer …

"And another thing—she's given me two conflicting stories—that she saw her niece with a young man last night and that she didn't see anyone last night. I'm not sure which is correct but it is possible that she's not a reliable witness to anything. Maybe she was just tired but she seems a bit flaky to me … "

Daniel registered the faint emphasis on 'anything' before going on into the house and facing the hideous mess. Like Dennis he bent down carefully and felt for a pulse and accepted that this young woman had been dead for quite a while. He could see the blood which had soaked through her hair and dried. Finally he turned, stepped back very carefully, and began putting the investigation together. His first thought, how to work through this chaos, had gradually fallen into the pattern of priorities. He sent Atkinson out to pick up all the rubbish around the house before it blew away or began to weather. He set Ali Deane on to searching the other rooms. He left Strohling to the job of photographing every nook and cranny of the room in which the young woman lay dead. And he rang Winville Hospital to see if Dr Wittenbach could come out. Dr Lombardi could tell them what they already knew: the girl was definitely dead. But he had taken Dennis's words to heart; two doctors looking at her *in situ* would be just that little bit more protection …

He took Mrs Seymour, now clothed in an expensive silk shirt and black slacks, into the kitchen and went over her story again. This time she said she had seen Bella and a young man but hadn't spoken with them. She had been very tired and had gone straight to bed. She was adamant that there was no one else in the house.

"Did you go through all the rooms?" Daniel said mildly.

"No, of course not. Just the bathroom and into my bedroom. I just wanted to crash."

"You drove while feeling very sleepy?"

"It's psychological. You turn in your home gate and your tiredness hits you like a sledgehammer."

"Maybe. Did they know you were on your way home?"

"No. I thought of ringing to warn them—"

"Warn them? Why?"

"My husband may believe Bella is a lovely young woman. I *know* she is an irresponsible little bimbo. But then he rather likes bimbos." She said it with a tinge of bitterness.

"So you half-expected things to be in this sort of mess?"

"Not as bad."

Unexpectedly tears came into her eyes. She had put on some eyeshadow and lipstick. But she didn't seem to care what got smudged. He couldn't be sure but he thought she was mourning what had been done to her home, not the death of her niece. But perhaps he was doing her an injustice.

"So when do you think this mess was made? Last night?"

"How would I know? I assumed so. But I think they'd been partying for several days. *No one* could make that much mess in a few hours."

Wang took this with a grain of salt. He had seen houses turned over by hooligans in less than twenty minutes … but presumably your invited guests didn't start on the destruction the minute they walked in the door …

"So you drove home from Brisbane last night?"

"Yes. My husband should get home tonight."

"So why did you buy this farm?"

"My husband. The shining knight. The rescuer. He saw what a mess this place had been allowed to get into and he wanted to get it back to normal. A couple of years, then we will move on. He's done it before."

"But you would rather live in the city?"

"Well, wouldn't you?"

Wang nodded but didn't want to get sidetracked. "So your husband knew you were coming home? Might he have rung anyone here?"

"Why should he? He's not the one who will have to tidy it up."

"But he did know you were coming?"

"I left him a note. He only had eyes for Ralph's new PA. I'm sure he does it on purpose. Ralph, I mean."

"In what way?"

"He knows Mal won't be able to resist. Ralph is like that, a manipulative bastard."

Wang was beginning to think Dennis was right, this was an investigation where they would need to be sure they'd dotted every i and crossed every t. But there was a vindictiveness in her words which suggested deeper layers of family dysfunction. The police might find themselves caught between warring factions of the Seymour family …

Daniel Wang finally said, "If you haven't got animals here or anything that would need you to stay on the farm I think you should come into Winville and spend a couple of nights in a hotel or something. It will be quite disruptive here with us going through the house. If you would like to pack a bag and tell your husband to come directly to Winville."

She put on a rather mulish expression and he couldn't help wondering if she had been gearing up to say to her husband as soon as he arrived home: look at the mess your precious niece and her pals have got us into. As he was a very neat and precise man in his own home life he couldn't really blame her if she wanted to score some points. But for the sake of the investigation the sooner she was out of this house the better. Not just this room but probably the whole house would need to be fingerprinted and checked for evidence of every guest at the rave.

He hoped he could find at least one guest who had remained sober enough to register the identities of everyone who had been in the house. But her mind was running along a different groove. "Will I need to ring Ralph and Colette to tell them about their daughter?"

"No. We'll do that. They'll need to come to Winville to formally identify her."

"You don't trust me?" She suddenly sounded sharp.

"Procedure. We need to get her next-of-kin if possible. I assume that would be her parents in this case." He found it hard to feel much sympathy for Mrs Seymour, and she hadn't shown much

for her dead niece, but he accepted that she had received a nasty shock and shock could affect people in many ways. And he felt a faint gratitude towards her; if she'd waited and come home with her husband then the dead girl would have lain there another sixteen hours or more. And there was always the possibility that one of the young ones after that first moment of panic might have come back to try and retrieve and dispose of the body …

They would need to leave a guard on the house. But when he put this to Dennis to ask if he could spare Constable Kelly and passed on what Mrs Seymour had told him Dennis said, "And—do you trust her? That she came home when she said? That she merely *found* the girl? If I'd come home and found a bunch o' little shits had wrecked my house I might feel like doing something unpleasant to them."

Daniel nodded; he could understand the impulse. But he said only, "We'll check everything." And Constable Kelly, when told he would need to remain behind, found his increasing confidence overtaken by anxiety and a vague sense of something which was not quite fear but a definite sense of apprehension. This was a house of the dead. And he had the uneasy feeling that death here had been treated much too lightly … though just what he meant by that he wasn't sure …

*

DS Wang took upon himself the depressing job of ringing Ralph Seymour MLA to tell him of his daughter's death and to ask if he and his wife could come to Winville to formally identify their daughter. Parliament wasn't sitting but he had to be called out of a meeting and wasn't in a good mood when he finally came to the phone. "This had better be important," was his uncompromising greeting.

"I'm sorry to bring bad news, sir," Daniel said hurriedly, "but it's about your daughter—"

"Which daughter?"

"Bella. She's been found dead at the home of Mal and Margaret Seymour. We will need you to do a formal identification."

"Dead! You're joking! How could she be dead?"

"We will have to wait on the post mortem for the cause of death. I am sorry about it all."

Seymour brushed this away and said, "Who's doing the p.m.? Some useless old country—"

"It would be Dr Wittenbach at Winville District Hospital, sir, but you can—"

"Yes, I'll make sure the head honcho here comes to—where did you say?"

"Winville." Winville was not the centre of the universe in Daniel's estimation but he did think a National Party member of long standing should have heard of it.

"Winville." Seymour seemed to be weighing things up. "Look, I can't leave here for another hour. I'll have to miss another meeting. Has my wife been told?"

"Not yet."

"Okay, you can tell her. And tell her to ring me here if she wants to come up with me."

Daniel said he would and tried to tender a more formal apology but he was brushed aside. In a way he wasn't sorry. Dealing with men who were used to having their days filled in with appointments and functions was always difficult. It was perhaps a little strange that Seymour hadn't taken much notice of the actual death but then people didn't always take in a major loss immediately. And how many daughters were there? Perhaps Bella was the wild one who didn't get mentioned at home.

He didn't relish ringing Mrs Seymour but he didn't think it was something he should fob off on DC Deane, not if the parents' response to the news might in any way give a clue to the tragedy. But he realised he should not have said so definitely that it *was* Bella Seymour; he only had the aunt's word for it and he had wondered if the aunt was on some kind of medication. She didn't give the impression of someone fully in control of herself.

When he got on to Colette Seymour he put it as 'a young woman, said by your sister-in-law to be your daughter Bella.'

Mrs Seymour also took this surprisingly calmly. "And you're sure it is? I had no idea Bella was even planning to go out there. It seems an odd place for her to go."

"We would like you and your husband to do the formal identification. So far as I know she and some young friends of hers came out here because the house was going to be empty for a few days—"

"And they wanted to have an orgy? That sounds a bit like Bella. Completely irresponsible. We just can't seem to get through to her." She was still treating her daughter as though she was still alive. It was probably a natural response.

"Your husband asked if you could ring him—to arrange a time to come to Winville."

"Ring his secretary, you mean. Ralph is a very busy man. He is due to fly to Japan tomorrow."

He could see how this talk of busyness could easily have the side effect of putting pressure on his team. The Seymours would want a quick result. They would probably talk loudly about tying things up, getting a quick conviction, seeing justice done. And if he wanted to do a slow and thorough examination of everything they would make him feel as if he was being some sort of nuisance. To call them to come to Winville for an identification and formal interview once would be acceptable. To ask them to come back again and again … they would probably expect him to come to them …

He left the room after finishing the call and saying to DS Greg Sullivan, "He wants to get his own person up to help with the p.m."

Greg said without rancour, "I don't see a problem. That way they've got no comeback." The unstated bit behind this was the increasing age and poor eyesight of Dr Wittenbach.

Wang went along to see Superintendent Brophy to say, "We won't be able to contain the story. Do you want to set a time for a media conference? Better than people ringing up piecemeal. It'll be headlines by tomorrow. 'Cabinet Minister's Daughter Dead in Orgy'."

"What d'you mean—orgy?" John Brophy was sharp for once.

"That's what the mother asked me. Did she come up here for an orgy? It certainly seems to have been a wild party. And the other thing is—we need to put out a call for everyone who attended the party. There could've been gate-crashers … they probably didn't send out invitations, just said people might like to turn up—"

"It is an odd place for a minister's daughter to come just for a party, isn't it? Couldn't she find somewhere closer to home? Didn't her parents like her inviting her friends around?"

"I would think she was old enough to have her own flat or something. But it's early days. They'll be able to tell us where she was working or studying. That'll give us a handle on the sort of friends she invited."

John Brophy seemed to be following a line of thought of his own. "The Seymours—isn't that the place out near Buckton that's got the underground bunkers? Hassell was banging on about it, said Dinny Walsh should've warned him, instead of trying to make a fool of him."

Privately, Daniel thought Sergeant Hassell only had himself to blame for not finding out about the bunkers the time he was called out there by Mr and Mrs Terry because of a prowler. And blaming Dennis because he'd been called out in the middle of the night was just sour grapes. They all got called out in the middle of the night occasionally. But Hassell seemed to think he should be spared any such inconveniences.

There was a time when John Brophy would not have wanted to hear a word against Aidan Hassell. Now he didn't seem to care. But then he was planning to retire next year. It wasn't likely he would keep in touch with Hassell or any of the other officers here. He might not even care about the Seymours and their clout.

Daniel agreed that it was the same place. Then the significance of what Brophy was saying seemed to strike him. "Could that be why they wanted to come there for their party? Because they'd heard all sorts of stories about mysterious places underground—they wanted to see for themselves?"

"You'll have to ask them, won't you?" Brophy obviously didn't want to do more than discuss the case briefly. "And we'd better call a news conference for—say, ten tomorrow. I'll tell Stephanie to let people know."

Daniel was tempted to say that might be too soon. Could they get any sort of handle on the death by then? But it might be best to simply make it public then get on with the quiet behind-the-scenes work. He agreed to the time and went back to his office to say to Ali Deane, "See what you can dig out on the Seymours—both Ralph's family and Malcolm's family and the family in general. I need an idea on what I'll be dealing with." If nothing else they could use the media conference to call for those partygoers to come forward while implying that they were following several leads.

"Seymour Holdings," she said drily. "They're pretty big … not as big as the Hoysteds maybe … but much more focused."

"See if there are any more politicians in the family."

"I think their father was. I think Malcolm's the one that sort of dropped out. Maybe they're a bit of ashamed of him for not achieving much. I don't mean he's a real drop-out, just not in the big league."

"Okay, go for it. See if you can have something ready for me this evening. We'll go over what we've got. Jake's gone out to help Strohling. But I still wonder if we should call Brisbane in … "

"Could it be natural causes? That she was drunk or stoned and fell against something?"

"It's possible. The odd thing was that she'd been hit on both sides of the head. She was bleeding from both ears. But if she was reeling round and falling and getting up and bumping up against that marble fireplace … who knows. Maybe she was an accident waiting to happen. And if she shows both alcohol and speed or something in her blood—we'll have Ralph Seymour telling us to put the lid on it. He won't want everyone thinking *his* daughter is a junkie."

"I know. But the story will die down quicker if it's seen as an accident."

"Well, they won't do the p.m. till tomorrow so it's no good wondering what it'll tell us. But it might be an idea—no, I'll get Greg to ring Dennis—see if anyone round Buckton noticed any strangers, strange cars, noise from the property, that sort of thing."

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Dennis Walsh had half-expected one of the Winville people to drop Constable Kelly back to Buckton. It was quicker for them to cut through via Burleigh but he thought one of them could come round this way. Instead he got a rather diffident phone call from Kelly at about seven. "They've all gone now. What should I do? I don't really want to stay here all night. And I don't know if I should eat any of the food that's in the kitchen."

Dennis said he would be out in twenty minutes but he felt vaguely annoyed that they had all just gone off and left Brent on his own. Or did they think he *should* stay overnight …

It was always that sixty-four dollar question. Had they missed anything? Something someone might come back quietly to collect. He got a chain and padlock from the back shed and went out to the car. Locking the gate on to the side road wouldn't stop someone determined to get in but it would deter any casual passers-by from going in to see the crime scene.

He could understand why Brent didn't want to stay any longer. There was a chill wind blowing and the house without lights stood imposingly but rather sinisterly on the slight slope with its big sheds rearing up as an amorphous black mass beyond it. He pulled in by the front patio. The moon had risen but was hidden every so often by scudding cloud. Somewhere in the distance he could hear something banging, probably some loose tin on one of the sheds.

"Have you made sure all the windows and doors are locked?"

Kelly said he had. "But what about the Porsche? D'you think it's safe to leave here?"

"Have they fingerprinted it?"

"I—I don't think so."

"Well, let's see if we can cover it with an old tarp or something, make it a bit less obvious if anyone does come in and scout around." They walked over and Dennis shone a torch around the sheds before coming up with a big sheet of black plastic. It had probably come in handy as the Seymours started to refurbish the house. It didn't make the car completely safe but it helped to make it disappear into the deep shadows behind the tractor shed.

"What else do we need to do?" Brent was feeling very cold and hungry. Buckton might not be paradise but it increasingly loomed in his thoughts as the source of a nice hot dinner at the café, a heater, a long hot shower, bed …

"That's it for the moment. You'll need to come out at the crack of dawn. Get Jess at the café to make you a good hot breakfast and we'll pay it out of petty cash. Don't know what time the team is planning to come back out but they've called a news conference for ten. I just hope Daniel is getting Brophy clear on what to say. He's not exactly Ray Martin … " Privately he thought Daniel would do a far better job but there was some anti-Asian stuff going round Winville, the whole district, and Wang might be less successful in getting people to ring in with information. John Brophy was hardly a person to promote confidence in an investigation but at least he just looked like your average close-to-being-pensioned-off superintendent.

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It seemed, though, that setting a time for a media conference wasn't enough to spike anyone's curiosity. From somewhere, and no one seemed to know where, huge headlines blazoned across several front pages next morning. Minister's Daughter Dies in Mysterious Circumstances. And more lurid variations. The headlines were one thing. To the astonishment of both the Buckton and Winville police the stories included a picture of a young woman with blonde hair lying in the sitting room at the homestead. And the room, when all the officers who had been in looked closely at the poor quality newspaper picture, was definitely the right room. No one was running a hoax. Dennis Walsh and Brent Kelly looked at each other but didn't trade any accusations about leaks. The same could not be said for Winville.

Brophy was often willing to let things simply slide by, anything apparently for a quiet life, but this had him nearly gibbering with rage. One of them had leaked it and he was determined to know who it was.

Daniel Wang watched people reply to Brophy's accusations and felt certain it was none of his team. "I think, sir," he finally risked his career, "it is just possible that it was Margaret Seymour. She probably told people at the hotel, maybe she told friends, maybe she went to the chemist or to a restaurant. I get the impression there's no love lost between her and her husband's family. And she is still furious at the way her house was trashed. I think this may be pay-back time."

Brophy gradually calmed down. But he still wasn't ready to let them all off the hook. "If I find any of you had *anything*, doesn't matter how small, to do with this shambles—I'll see you bloody well drummed out of the force myself. And get Walsh on the phone. I don't trust the bastard not to think he can tell the world."

Dennis didn't bother to get hot under the collar at the implication. Things always leaked. It was up to Brophy to turn the leak to good account. "And who says Margaret Seymour is the only loose cannon around? There's all the kids that partyed there. There's Ralph Seymour and his wife. There's the rest of the family if he passed the news on. There's Mal and his girlfriends. And everyone living with a ten k radius of the farm probably knows something was going on."

It didn't really appease John Brophy but then he wasn't a Dennis Walsh fan. Daniel simply accepted that the genie was well and truly out of the bottle. "I think," he said to everyone gathered to go over the material, "we should be looking to set up a hotline. We'll probably get some crank calls, some people wanting to complain about kids and their behaviour. But there's a chance all this publicity can be made to play to our advantage."

Constable Kelly was not wild about returning to the house to mount guard. But everything, including the Porsche, appeared untouched. And the place seemed much less grim and worrying with the sun shining off the tin roofs and a couple of crows swaying on the top branches of the ironbarks beyond the sheds. He hadn't been told specifically to do anything and he thought he might as well take a book from the glovebox of his car.

But he had only been there about twenty minutes when an old brown Landrover came up the long lane. He didn't recognise the car or the driver so he simply waited for the man to come over to him. "Morning," he was possibly in his late forties, wearing a check shirt and rather grubby jeans with boots, "Sergeant Walsh not here?"

"No. He'll probably be out later. Can I help you?"

"Probably best if I pass it straight on to him." The unknown man tipped his battered hat and returned to his vehicle and drove away. Kelly made a note of the number plate. It was vaguely

demeaning to be passed over in favour of his boss but then he couldn't guess what kind of information or queries the man might've come to share.

It was nearly half past ten by the time Dennis Walsh came out to the farm. He was astonished to find Kelly was the only person who had been there that morning. "Where the hell are they all?" Dennis knew Kelly couldn't answer the question but he still felt the need to ask it.

"I guess they're dealing with the family, both families, and maybe the government pathologist has turned up and is a prima donna … "

"Maybe. So anything else happening here?"

"A man came in and said he would talk to you, fairly small man in a brown Landrover, I took the number, but he didn't say what it was about."

"No one's got in touch, maybe he's still thinking about it, but it sounds like Mr Drake, Neil Drake, he lives over to the east. I wonder if that's the way the kids came through, not through Buckton … Look, go out and start the farm to farm. See if anyone saw or heard cars coming or going. I'll give Drake a ring at home. See if it was him."

"And if people ask me about the case—what do I tell them?"

"Just that a young woman with blonde hair died here. Don't try and be specific about the time. We'll see what they have to say."

Kelly nodded. "There is one other thing that I was thinking about. I was outside and I heard … I think it was Sergeant Strohling talking to someone and he said he was a bit puzzled."

"Did he say why?"

"Well, I think he was asking why a young woman with lots of money and everything wouldn't have very good teeth and her fingernails were not really good, things like that."

"Seems this Bella Seymour is a bit of a wild kid. Maybe she was trying to cut loose from the sort of girl her family wanted her to be, sort of go a bit feral. But I'm not entirely happy about what Margaret Seymour told us. If she genuinely did see her niece with a man when she came home—then that can't be her niece that she found dead on the floor. So she was maybe hallucinating or we've got two similar young blonde women and it isn't clear which is which. But I guess the p.m.'ll sort that out too. Anyway, off you go and see if you can get a line on which way those kids came here and if anyone saw or heard their partying."

After Kelly had driven off Dennis went inside and found a phone book to get Neil Drake's number. No one answered. It might mean that Mr Drake was now pounding on the station door and wondering where everyone was. He was pretty sure he hadn't passed a Landrover on the way out here. But Mr Drake might now be peacefully doing some shopping or talking to Charles Mather about a legal problem or sitting in the waiting room at the doctors' surgery …

He went and mooched through the house, carefully avoiding the pushed-over furniture and broken glass, and trying to get something of a sense of what had gone on here. Even the spartan back rooms, only provided with a bed, chair, and wardrobe, had not been spared. He stepped out into the back yard and looked around. He half-expected to see more carnage here, destroyed garden beds, overturned pots, broken garden furniture, but the mess seemed to stop at the back door. He made his slow way back to the front and looked out over the drive. How many cars … and had they got any idea of what type of vehicles? The drive was graveled which was both a help and a hindrance. Here and there he could see where something had taken off, digging itself in briefly and spurting gravel. But it didn't show up the tyres sufficiently.

He was still musing on this when his own phone rang. It was Karen Dalton to say there had been an accident near what people called Iron Pot Bridge on the way to Winville, a truck and what looked like a Kombi van. "The van seems to have rolled in the bit of a ditch there, Dennis, they might need you to sort things out."

"Okay, I'm on my way." But as he went back to his car he rang Brent Kelly and told him to come back here and 'hold the fort' until someone from Winville arrived. Brent said he was just talking to someone but he'd be there in ten minutes. It didn't require Dennis to spell it out. If Winville arrived and the crime scene was deserted they would be sure to complain. Dennis thought of calling Hassell, as traffic investigator for the district, but he decided it would probably be quicker and easier if he handled it.

And the other question: cut through the back roads this side of Buckton or go through the town? It was a little longer through the town but the roads were much better. And he could see if there was any sign of Drake at the station.

The accident didn't look too serious when he got there. No one lying down. The man who'd taken on the lease of Reg Butcher's farm, an Alex Moy, had come out his lane with a truckload of pigs. Rumour had it that he had looked at Butcher's contracts and decided he could make more simply by taking them to the fortnightly sales in Winville. It might be more work for him but he seemed to take it in his stride; just as he seemed to take living on a farm with some unpleasant connotations in his stride. He was a big blustery cheerful man with little imagination and not much interest in what had happened yesterday or last week.

He also struck Dennis as being a very careless driver …

Walsh pulled in and got out and went over to where Moy was checking his load of pigs and a couple of the people from the van were yelling at him. "Okay, calm down. What happened?"

"You wouldn't believe it! That old fool just put-putted out like the road was empty."

The van had been carrying six people. Now they all stood around, looking a bit shaken up but not hurt, and backed up what their driver was saying. "Right in the middle of the road, going about twenty, never looked. We couldn't pass him on the right, we tried to stop without running into the back of him, but we couldn't, we swerved left, to avoid him and the van rolled in the gravel there."

"What speed were you doing?"

"Between fifty and sixty. Old Mollie doesn't do fast."

Dennis could well believe this—unless they'd put a souped-up engine into an old body. At first he'd defined them as a group of hippies wandering round the country, and when he went over and looked in the van he couldn't miss the smell of marijuana, but as he looked more closely at them he thought the definition wasn't quite correct. Their hair might be long and untidy but they were all tanned and fit and gave the impression of people used to hard physical labour. There were two women and four men; one man might be a Murri and another just might be Indian but otherwise they looked pretty average.

"So who was sitting where?"

They said two of the men and one woman had been in the front, the others sitting on a folded-down bunk bed. "So three of you were without seatbelts?"

They didn't respond to this. But one of the women said loudly, "God knows what's got broken when we went over! So you can make that old fool pay for it!" She sounded mildly hysterical and he said, "Okay, calm down" again.

He walked around the van and saw the right front headlight was smashed so they had just clipped the truck. He walked over to the driver, looking in at the pigs as well, and said, "So what happened?"

"It was that dusty," Mr Moy screwed up his eyes, "and I was running late."

"You didn't see the van?" The wind wasn't strong but strong enough to lift a light haze of dust from the ploughed paddocks.

"Well, I did, but I reckoned I had time to get on to the road." But as he spoke he did another blinking and screwing of his eyes.

"Next time you'd better wait, not reckon anything," Walsh said grimly. "And when you've finished at the sale I expect you to go round and book yourself in for an eye-test."

"Strewth! I can't be fussing about me bloody eyes! They're good enough to see me through."

Mr Moy was probably in his sixties but Dennis wasn't buying 'good enough'. "You'll get them checked or I'll be looking much closer at your driving every time you leave the farm. Got it?"

It took a lot to squelch the farmer's ebullient nature. Now he only said, "If you say so, guv."

"I do. And before you go—have you got a rope. We'd best get the van pulled out before we get any more trucks trying to squeeze past." The last thing he wanted was one of the transports on the way to Japana getting into the mix …

The van's occupants also unearthed a rope. It only took a couple of minutes to get the van out of the shallow ditch and back on to the verge. Dennis stood back and left everyone else to do the

pushing to right the van. He still had a rather tender abdomen from his appendix operation. Then he told Mr Moy he could get on his way. To the van's people he said, "Where're you lot heading for?"

"Work," one of them said drily.

"What kind of work?"

"The way we look at it," the driver said, "is we work as we need to and we go where we feel like. We can turn our hands to just about anything—fruit picking, shearing, dipping, fencing—"

"Cooking, gardening—"

"Horse-breaking—"

"Building—"

"You're qualified?"

"I'm a qualified carpenter," the driver said; "Matt's a qualified electrician," indicating one of the other men, "Alice worked at the Botanical Gardens before she decided to dump the rat race—"

"Okay. So go and get all your joints and give them to me."

For a minute there was a deep mulish silence then the woman called Alice climbed into the van and brought out a tobacco tin. "We've got broken cups and plates in there. What're you going to do about *them?*"

"Nothing. Now, I'll take all your names and check your licences if you all take turns driving. Then you can get on your way. I won't charge you for possession. But don't drive at night. And get that headlight fixed as soon as you've started your next job and got a pay packet."

A couple of them opened their mouths to protest. He ignored them to go on: "You can sue Mr Moy if you want. You can drop round to the station in Buckton, if you want, I know someone who wants a verandah built. But you do *not* grow, buy, deal, trade, share, or smoke this rubbish while you're on my patch. Got it?"

"You want to smoke it yourself, eh?" The driver seemed to have made himself their spokesman. "I always knew the filth was corrupt—but I never saw it so blatant."

"You'd best get on your way, son, before I change my mind and charge the lot of you."

They turned and walked over to the van. But just before the driver got in he turned and said loudly, "I am not your *son*, you bloody pervert."

Dennis stood and watched them dwindle into the hazy distance. The road remained deserted. For a minute he considered simply up-ending the tin and letting its contents blow away. Then he slipped the tin into his jacket pocket. It would need to be labeled and go in the station safe in case anything about the accident came back to haunt him. And whether it was all they had …

He went back over the accident and wondered if he should've done anything any differently; there was something about that group of young people; a sense of toughness, simplicity, self-reliance, he could see their value to people in country areas desperate for qualified tradespeople, but he also felt they were all carrying round very large collective chips on their collective shoulder. He wondered if it was something specific which had brought them together …

But, with luck, they would be someone else's problem and he just jotted a note to himself to follow up and make sure Mr Moy *had* got his eyes tested …

As he unlocked the station and checked the couple of messages which had come in a quite different thought came to him: had the partygoers all come in separate cars or had some of them hired a bus, all squeezed into a couple of cars, maybe even a van like this one. It was only a gut feeling: that there weren't signs of enough vehicles there for the amount of damage done …

Mr Drake, when he finally came in to the station in the early afternoon, only had a very small and possibly irrelevant piece of information. "I heard the news about what happened at the Seymours and I just wondered. It was the day before yesterday. I was down at the road fence. I guess it was about four, maybe a bit earlier, and this van came along, you could hear it a mile off the way the rock music was pounding—and as they passed me they all waved and tooted—like I was some big buddy of theirs. I waved back but I wasn't sorry to see them go. I just wondered if they were some of the party people you're wanting to know about."

"Could be. Any idea on the vehicle?"

"It was a van, painted white," so not the van he'd just looked into which was maroon with a dirty white hood, "and I have an idea that part of the number plate was triple three—I wouldn't

absolutely guarantee it. Just might've been triple two or even triple eight. I wasn't right behind the van."

"Fair enough. We'll follow it up. And when you say van, any idea what make?"

"I'd say it was a VW, by the sound, they've got a special name, haven't they?"

"Yep. That's a good help. And any idea which way they were heading."

"Just straight on past me, going south. I didn't see them turn on to any side road while I was watching."

So it wasn't likely they came through Buckton. Dennis nodded and made a note. "If you think of anything else about the van or the kids in it—give me a buzz."

"It had something stuck on the windscreen, on the passenger side, sort of yellow, maybe a cat, I wouldn't swear to it."

"A Garfield?" Dennis couldn't understand why people wanted to stick things on their windscreens or have them dangling from their rear-view mirror but at times like this it might come in useful. Mr Drake wouldn't commit himself beyond the idea of a cat.

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Strohling and Moss finally turned up at the farm and set to work spraying the rooms. There were blood stains on the rug where they'd found the girl lying dead. But if they could show up any other blood stains elsewhere it might suggest she'd been brought in there and dumped. Constable Kelly watched their slow progress round the house with keen interest. But at the end of more than an hour they had come up negative. So if she had bumped against the mantelpiece or any of the furniture then it hadn't caused an immediate gush of blood.

"Still, it does seem a bit odd," Strohling finally allowed himself the comment. "No sign of anywhere she bumped—no sign of any sort of weapon used to hit her. They could've taken it away with them. Maybe a block of wood."

There was nothing odd about the driving energy of Ralph Seymour when he and his wife were taken round to the morgue and shown the young blonde woman. She had now been dead, the introduced pathologist, Dr Steyne, estimated, for around thirty-six to forty hours. Dr Wittenbach concurred. Even with the cold night on the farm and being brought in here to be stored small changes were taking places in the body. Both men, from their first brief examination of the body, also agreed she had not been moved from that one position she'd been found in.

Now, Ralph Seymour said authoritively, "It certainly looks like Bella. We haven't seen her for some time. She was living in Toowoomba and didn't see coming home as a priority."

Mrs Seymour dissolved into tears but managed a miserable nod. Dr Wittenbach wondered why her husband showed no sign of wanting to either comfort her or share something of the sorrow. He continued to stand rather aggressively and look down on the dead girl's face, now starting to slacken again.

"What happens next," he said over the sound of his wife's quiet sobbing.

"We will carry out the full post mortem. We will also need to do toxicology reports. It is possible she had been drinking or taking something."

"Drugs, you mean?"

"Possibly." Dr Steyne hesitated, then said quietly, "There is another thing that has given us some concern. She appears to have been in the habit of self-harming, possibly over quite a long period of time."

Seymour shook his head. "Nonsense! Bella was as fit and—" he dropped whatever other description he was going to use, "what d'you mean by self-harm anyway?"

"We've found signs of maybe pins or needles being thrust through her stomach, scars, scratches, we think she might've broken fingers at some stage … it is sometimes a sign of autism or some form of mental illness—but it is more usually a sign of some serious childhood trauma."

"Nonsense! We've got pictures of her in her togs. We would've noticed if there was anything like that."

Daniel Wang had arranged for all four of the Seymour adults to sit and wait together at the station. When Ralph and Colette came back from the morgue he let them sit together for a few minutes in the hope that their inter-action with Malcolm and Margaret might be informative. But

except for Margaret trying to say to Colette how sympathetic she was and how hard it must be to go to the morgue and Colette getting out her handkerchief again it simply suggested four people immersed in their own private thoughts and feelings.

Wang came through and said to them all, "Anything you can tell us about Bella Seymour and her friends will be a help. It doesn't matter how small. And we need to know when she arrived at the farmhouse and when the others left. Anything—a phone call, a message, a sighting—could help us—"

The only response this got was Ralph Seymour saying, "Look, I'm sure you know your job, sergeant, but I am a busy man. Could we get on? I've got to be back in Brisbane by five for my flight."

"If you'll come on through then, sir, we'll interview you first."

Mal Seymour opened his mouth to say "But—" then closed it again. He probably felt this was yet another time when he had to play second fiddle to his dynamic brother. Ralph went on into the interview room, his whole demeanour suggesting 'let's get this over with', and the three people waiting seemed to sink back into apathetic silence. Margaret sat there pressing her cuticles back with rather nervous hands. Colette began to cry again, dabbing at her eyes and cheeks. Malcolm drummed his fingers on his knees then got up and did a turn around the room, sat down again, got up for another circle. Margaret finally said irritably, "Oh sit down! You're getting on our nerves."

Ralph told Wang and Sullivan he couldn't remember when he last saw Bella but he thought it was probably around Christmas time. He said he was sorry it had come to this but she was an ungrateful little 'minx' and he had always expected her to get into trouble.

Colette had difficulty saying anything but she insisted that Bella was a good girl, she had just got off the track a bit, but she was doing quite well at uni, and she didn't believe for one minute she would ever stick pins in herself.

"She wouldn't even let me use a needle to get splinters out when she was little. It always had to be a corn plaster or a poultice and time for it to work itself out … "

"And which uni are you talking about?"

"Oh, in Toowoomba. The Uni of Southern Queensland there. We hoped … we really hoped, if she had her own flat, her own life, not having us close, she would need to make her own decisions."

But she too could not suggest names for any actual friends or classmates.

Margaret Seymour found it very difficult to think it through clearly. But she *was* sure it was Bella and a young man in the room as she came through. "You say it can't have been Bella because she was already … already … I don't know what to say, just that it did look like Bella but it must've been another young woman with blonde hair." She hesitated then said, "Are you saying I *saw* the ones who did that to Bella … and I just … "

"If it was it was probably just as well you didn't tackle them, Mrs Seymour. If they had already hurt one person or were prepared to simply abandon her without getting help … but did they see you?"

She found this surprisingly difficult to answer. "They had their arms around each other. I didn't really see him. Just short curly black hair. She had her arms around him."

"Was the front door open when you arrived home?"

"Ye-es, I'm sure it was … and the lights were on in some of the rooms."

"Was it smoky?"

"Oh yes, I could hardly breathe." He thought of asking her why she hadn't mentioned any of this earlier but it probably didn't matter. Instead he went back to the times when she left, when she'd been in touch with Bella, when Bella had spoken to her about spending a few days in the house. She was hazy on the actual dates but she said it was Bella who had come to see them after they'd moved on to the farm.

"Did she say why she'd come?"

"She wanted to know about the underground bunkers. We said we hadn't had time to even look at them."

"Did she say how she'd heard?"

"No, and I didn't ask her … "

Malcolm Seymour largely reiterated his wife's information about Bella coming to the farm.

"She came alone?"

"So far as I remember. She wasn't there for long. Half an hour maybe. Her boyfriend could've sat in the car."

"Did you see what kind of car she was driving?"

"Oh, the Porsche, spoilt little brat that she was."

"So her parents bought it for her?"

"Of course. It was a bribe. Stay in school, go to uni, and we'll get you whichever car you want. I'll guarantee other kids liked her because she had a flash car."

"She didn't say anything about having a boyfriend?"

"No."

Daniel jotted a note for Greg Sullivan, 'Get on to USQ and get a tutor or someone who knew her well'; he wasn't sure if they were still on holiday but there would be people in the office at least, perhaps holiday seminars and things …

He turned back to Malcolm Seymour. "Have you been inside the underground bunkers on your farm?"

"Of course! I got the Terrys to show me one of them, there under the shed. It was why they wanted a quick sale."

"So you paid less than the farm was worth?"

He seemed to see this as a trick question. But he finally said, "Maybe. It had been let go a bit but they were really spooked—and they kept blaming each other for buying the farm in the first place. It didn't bother us. When I've got time I plan to fill them in. I can't see that they're any real use to us."

"You know they had a prowler there, probably camped under the shed?"

"Yeah, they told me. We made sure the lid was closed so no one can get in there now."

"And did Bella know you were interested in buying the place?"

"Probably. We've got a place near Oakey. She came out there to see us. I've got a manager on it now."

"So why d'you think this young woman liked to come and see you?"

"Probably because we never have anything good to say about her dad. She liked that. She liked to tell us stories about the things he did. She liked to embarrass him. She turned up to a function he was hosting once with a safety-pin through her nose and her clothes in rags. It didn't go over too well."

"So she liked to stick pins in herself?"

"Don't reckon so. It was just a clip-on." He seemed to think back over the trend in the questions. "Are you saying the bunkers do have something to do with … well, something to do with her coming out?"

"At this stage, Mr Seymour, we're just canvassing all possibilities. So if you think of anything she said when she came to visit, let us know."

"Well, this is only second-hand, she said it to Maggie, something about her dad not liking her boyfriend. It didn't strike me as unusual. I'm not fussed on some of the friends my kids bring home for holidays."

"She didn't give a name or a reason or anything?"

"I don't reckon so." But Daniel made a note to re-question Margaret Seymour on that point. Was the man she had seen the young woman embracing this unsatisfactory boyfriend?

*

Dennis told Fiona about the accident and about confiscating the tin of 'grass' and about the young people accusing him of wanting it for himself. "And—were you tempted?" she said with a smile.

"I was—a bit. What's all the fuss about. Just roll a quick smoke. See what happens. And then I thought it's curiosity that gets the kids started in the first place. Who am I to criticise if I'm no better."

He was like that; as hard on himself as he ever was on any of the people who came into his orbit because of minor misdemeanours. “And then you thought—how will I handle it when these two little monsters get to their teens and want to smoke and do all sorts of things?”

“Yeah, I guess I did. Just the thought—and the hope I’ll know what to say and do.”

“I’m sure you will—and even if kids go a bit off the rails, want to rebel and forge an identity separate from their parents—if they have years of happy things in their backgrounds—I’m sure it’s only a phase. But I imagine we’ll just have to wait and find out.”

“And kids with authority figures as parents, y’know, teachers, cops, lawyers, sometimes seem to find it harder … ”

“Yes, they always say the children of bishops tend to be wild. The children of politicians … ”

But Daniel when he rang to bring Dennis up to scratch with the parents had a slightly different take. “She had the Porsche but I get the feeling none of those adults really liked her all that much. Even her mum who’s cried pots of tears hasn’t actually said anything nice about her. And there’s another strange thing. They reckon her body shows a long period of self-harm. Isn’t that usually like a cry for help?”

“You’d better ask a ruddy psychiatrist, not an old sod like me,” Dennis said drily. “But are you absolutely certain you’ve got a correct identification?”

“We’ve got Margaret, Colette and Ralph. Surely they all know her?”

“Blonde girl. Blue eyes. Jeans. Skivvy top. About the same height. And Margaret’s a pill-popper I’d bet you anything. Ralph’s in a hurry to head off to Japan and would probably say whatever you want. I haven’t seen Colette but she hadn’t seen her daughter in how long?”

“At least six months. The trouble with that, Dennis, is that doing a DNA test will be like a slap in the face for the family. Us virtually saying they don’t know their own daughter or niece.”

“Then don’t tell them—”

“And how am I going to compare it with someone else in the family?”

“Go and search her room in Toowoomba. Get some hairs or something.”

But the rooms in Toowoomba, the whole of her little flat, sparkled in their cleanliness. All she had left behind were some food and clothes and books and folders and her computer. No mess. Bella Seymour might be wild. She was also almost fanatically clean and tidy. The Porsche only showed the dead girl’s prints on its wheel and gear lever and door and seat belt … it too sparkled …

She had trashed one house and left another spotless. It struck the team as significant.

Case No. 2: My Lovely Little Daughter

Ralph Seymour took his charter flight out of Winville, leaving his wife behind to deal with everything. Dennis Walsh was told they didn’t need Constable Kelly to guard the crime scene any longer. And several more sightings of that van with noisy young people in it were reported to Buckton Police, mainly it seemed because people weren’t wild about having ‘idiots like that’ on their roads.

“The puzzle,” Dennis said to Brent, “is why there aren’t more vehicles. Even if you got six in the van, four in the Porsche, and maybe another car no one’s noticed—it doesn’t seem like the swarm of locusts that did their best to wreck that house.”

“And the Porsche is a puzzle,” Kelly said. He had had a great deal of time while sitting and standing round the empty house to think things through. “Surely people would’ve noticed a car like that?”

“You’d think so. Okay, so draw up a graph and put in the sightings. We’ve got Margaret saying she got back about twelve. I wonder what time she left Brisbane and if she stopped anywhere people might remember her. We’ve got the estimated time of death. We’ve got the time Margaret and Mal left the farm to go to Brisbane. And we’ve got the last sighting of Bella in Toowoomba. None of these are guaranteed but it’ll give us a bit of an idea of the gaps.”

Brent was getting quite good at creating graphs on the computer. It looked professional when he did it. “Now, there’s another thing, this business about the farm being flogged off cheap because the Terrys thought they’d bought a lemon. We never found the vagrant or whoever was living in the bunker under the shed. The dates we were called out’ll be in the book. And we’ve got rough dates for when they left and when the Seymours moved in.”

“You think the Seymours had something to do with upsetting the Terrys?” Brent couldn’t hide his surprise.

“Seems a long shot but Mal Seymour who’s already well off got to buy a farm for probably less than it would’ve gone for on the open market. So far as I know it was never advertised. That suggests Mal Seymour approached them with an offer. Not illegal. But it is a bit odd. Did the Seymours already know the Terrys?”

“And was it a vagrant?”

Dennis took time out to think all this through before saying, “Mightn’t be relevant. But the Porsche certainly is. So if no one noticed it, it suggests it arrived after dark. So what time did it leave Toowoomba and did anyone see it on the roads there?” He rat-a-tatted his big fingers on the desk a minute and then said, “The other thing is that people here probably wouldn’t put the same store by seeing a Porsche as people in the city. They’d be more likely to stop and look if you had a new ute with bull bars, say, or something really old. Here, they’d probably just see it as some poncey European car and not take much notice. Next time you’re round at the garage ask Noel if he’s noticed one any time.”

But it was Winville’s case and Dennis felt that was enough speculation; they had their own work and once Kelly’s report of his interrupted farm to farm was finalised and faxed off they could leave it for the team in Winville.

He sent Kelly round to deal with another of Nelson L’Estrange’s endless complaints at the primary school. L’Estrange was probably a good principal, in terms of keeping the school and its grounds in good condition, of expecting a lot from teachers and parents, of encouraging his pupils to be well-behaved and courteous without breathing down their necks all the time. But he did annoy the police because of his endless little nit-picking complaints. This one was to do with a hole in the netting fence along the creek side of the school grounds. He thought older teenagers might be getting on to the school grounds of a night and he wanted to know what to do about it.

As a teenager could leap any of the fences in a single bound there wasn’t a lot the school could do except fix the hole. So long as valuable things were locked up …

And unless they wanted to put in some expensive security …

“It’s the graffiti,” Mr L’Estrange said with a moue of distaste. “I don’t want small children to see it.”

“Is it still there or have you cleaned it?”

“Not yet.”

L’Estrange got up and went out; Kelly followed him obediently. Along the cream-painted back of the small demountable which housed art and craft, a small library, and a store room, someone, or possibly a number of people, had used spray cans to depict several giant sets of balls, each with an erect and spraying penis. Underneath someone had printed ‘diny Walsh is a fucker’.

Constable Kelly was almost as embarrassed as Mr L’Estrange, let alone the ‘small children’, and he said, “I hope they haven’t seen this?”

“I’m afraid some of the boys have. They told Ms McLaren about it and she told me. Normally I get the children to scrub off or paint over any graffiti so they learn to accept the consequences of being silly. But I didn’t want them dealing with this. I’ve asked Mr Conroy to slap a bit of paint over it for the time being. But I wanted you to see it first in case you might know who did it. I really don’t think it is any of my pupils.”

Brent Kelly wasn’t sure if it might be possible to tell an age from the drawings or the writing but he said, “I’ll just get a photo. We’re putting together a collection of graffiti. It gets easier to tell people’s … style … when we’ve got things to compare.”

“Well, better you than me,” L’Estrange said with the first hint of humour Brent had ever seen in him, “going back to show these to Sergeant Walsh.”

"There is that," Kelly said cautiously. "And you could get a dog to roam the grounds of a night. It might keep people out. Or those heat sensor lights." The Principal didn't rush to embrace these ideas. But only two days later Constable Kelly noticed, as he went down to check on a small problem in a house beyond the school, that the fence was repaired and two small mongrel dogs, both probably with a fair degree of Yorkshire terrier in them, were enjoying undisputed ownership of the grounds after the children had left. They might make a lot of noise but it wasn't likely they would deter a real hooligan element.

Dennis, when he saw the photo Brent had taken, only said drily, "Not one of Coleman's brightest scholars then."

"Is it like any other graffiti we've got on record?"

Dennis got out the bundle they had already collected. "Most of them are just mindless scribbles or initials … but this looks like someone who doesn't like me. I'm tempted to say 'Rowan Burchall' … but I think we can just leave it." Burchall, along with his mother and siblings, had left his grandfather's home and moved into a small cottage on the outskirts of Buckton. The family had obviously believed the grandfather, Don Binnie, would back down and let them stay. But he had remained adamant. Mrs Burchall had got herself a part time job in the newsagents as young Sophie Miller was going to Toowoomba to do a hospitality course. Whether she would want to come back to Buckton at the end of it …

After a lot of grumbling and whining, 'how could he do this to me', Mrs Burchall seemed to quite enjoy working there. She met people, she heard the news and gossip, she got away from her old grump of a father and didn't have to spend so much time with her children … or that was how Karen Miller expressed it to several people. Don Binnie, too, seemed to relish the peace and quiet their departure gave him. Blood might be thicker than water in the Binnie clan but no one doubted that his daughter and grandchildren had irritated him. He had even surprised the whole town by shouting a round of drinks in the Coolibah for everyone there; though he picked a quiet night.

"Now that," long-time barman George Johnson later said to the cook Maurice Smith, "is just about a bloody miracle. I'd reckon it's the first time in my life I ever saw the sour old sod do anything for anyone—except for family."

It might've put George into a cheery mood. Dennis wasn't pleased when he heard on the grapevine that a photo of that graffiti had gone all around the High School. He said to Fiona, "Maybe it wasn't a kid, maybe it was bloody Coleman himself, making it look like a kid. He's the one that really wants to get back at me."

He had tried to follow up the rumour that the High School principal, Derek Coleman, liked watching porn. But the story seemed to peter out when Janice Low told him it was Myrtle Grundy who had told people. Mrs Grundy was a nice but rather strict old lady. What she regarded as pornographic might not raise an eyebrow elsewhere. True to her name she probably felt Michaelangelo's 'David' should be wearing trousers. But Dennis liked her. She might look down on modern permissiveness but he knew she had a good sense of humour, including the much rarer ability to laugh at herself.

"So how on earth did she come to be the one to spread it?" he had asked Janice Low.

She could understand his surprise. "Oh, the CWA was putting on their International Day, I forget what country, and they divided up the chores and someone said maybe the High School could help with posters or music or a video or something. So she volunteered to go round and ask Mr Coleman. She left it till the evening so he would be home. When she got there and knocked no one came to the door. She could only see one car so she wasn't sure if one or both of them were out. But there was a light on and the curtain wasn't quite drawn so she went over and looked in. She couldn't see anyone. But there was this thing running on the TV, she says it was a video because there were lights on the video recorder … and she said she didn't know where to look. She felt she couldn't possibly face Mr Coleman after seeing that."

"So she never got anything from him?"

"She told all the CWA ladies … and then she thought she was being a bit spineless so she went back a few days later and got Nanci who said she would ask Derek. But I don't know that they got anything from him … "

"So it may not have been … well, real porn? Just a bit bawdy?"

"I wondered. But she is absolutely certain that it was porn. She said the men were bashing a naked woman and then it was piggyback stuff, really violent. I don't know how good her eyes are. And I suppose it was all role-playing, not the real thing, but it just left us all feeling … well, I don't know how to describe it … I mean, I could still be polite and helpful to Derek when he came into the bank … but it just sort of felt like I wouldn't want him to touch me, if you know what I mean."

The trouble was—Mrs Grundy might not have seen it very clearly through a crack in the curtain and the TV probably wasn't facing her directly, her eyes mightn't be very good, she might well have exaggerated. He wasn't sure what to do. To get a warrant on the vague assertion that Derek Coleman was watching illegally-imported videos or something would almost certainly backfire. He would probably get in there and find it was something legally on sale, and even if parents and teachers and community might not be wild about their principal watching R-rated videos they wouldn't see it as police business. So he had left the whole thing to hang. A half-written letter to the Education Department still on the station computer. A query to the post office as to whether Derek Coleman got videos through the mail left unasked—

But one evening Nanci Coleman, Derek's wife, called in at the Walsh house saying she would like to discuss Elise with them. Elise and Robert went on Monday mornings to childcare as a way of getting to know other children and to give Fiona a little freedom to do any business or shopping that was easier done without small children around.

Nanci accepted a cup of coffee and a brioche from Fiona and said rather awkwardly, never feeling terribly comfortable in Dennis Walsh's presence, "I just feel Elise is growing out of childcare. The other children are perfectly happy with the activities we give them. But she is constantly looking for something more. I don't know whether you've thought of sending her to kindy next year. I know it still probably won't be enough. The little stories and games and craft activities. She's already reading at about the level of a ten-year-old."

"It is difficult, isn't it," Fiona said slowly. "She brings such determination and excitement to learning … but whether she is physically and socially mature enough to leapfrog the normal classes and activities, I'm not sure."

"My own impression is that she could easily jump a year. She seems so much more mature and confident than the other children her age. She could perhaps sit in on kindy and see if she would find it more exciting than anything we can offer."

The town had the small kindergarten attached to the primary school and an even smaller one attached to St Monica's. Fiona nodded slowly. "It *is* an idea. I think children like to be able to say they've gone through the same years as others, kindy and so on, but even six months of it might be all she needs. I'll have a chat with Mr L'Estrange."

Fiona had bought a set of Spanish tapes, now that they rarely saw Ramón Gutierrez, and Elise was gobbling them up. They still saw Anya Mackie and learnt a few Russian words from her but Fiona thought it would probably make better sense for her to get a set of Russian tapes as well rather than depend on Anya who, as well as a new baby, helped milk two hundred cows night and morning. A set of tapes meant that the whole family could listen in …

They talked a little longer then Nanci stood up to go. Before she could walk over to the front door Dennis jumped in without any 'excuse me', "You've probably heard the story going round Buckton that your husband likes to watch pornography. I don't know if it's true."

To Fiona's surprise Nanci flamed up into a sick-looking blotchy red. Then she burst out with, "Sometimes I really *hate* this place," and it was hard to know whether it was anger or embarrassment which had the upper hand. "If people can say nasty things they will. It's none of their business."

"Is there any truth in it?"

"Of course not! I don't like some of the things he watches. But it's all stuff legally available."

"That's not quite the same thing," Dennis said grimly. "He—and you too—you're both in charge of vulnerable children. If he lives on a steady diet of porn then you can't blame parents for starting to feel a bit antsy."

"What business is it of theirs! He doesn't ask them about what they do at home. He runs that school very well. He gets good results—"

"*And* he calls the girls cock-teases. If anyone called my daughter that I would be round there to blast him into the middle of next week." Even just thinking about it stirred Dennis to anger. Dennis Coleman had never accepted the slightest responsibility for any of the tragedies which had befallen his female students over the years.

He calmed himself with an effort. "Look, I know it isn't your fault. But if any of those videos *aren't* things he simply bought over the counter in Queensland—then I'd like to know about it."

"You're asking me to spy on my own husband?"

"I'm asking you to look through his video collection and make sure they're all above board."

Nanci didn't respond to this, simply saying a curt "Good night" and going out. But she didn't drive away immediately. She wasn't sure which of them she hated most: her husband or Dennis Walsh. Because she hated her husband's fixation with porn. His constant pressure on her to come and watch with him. The secret fear that a visitor to their home would see one of his current crop. And something deeper. A sense that the films reinforced his demeaning attitude to women. She didn't believe it was possible to watch such material night after night and not somehow have it enter and influence your psyche, your worldview, your attitudes …

And sooner or later Dennis Walsh would find a way to get at Derek's collection and see what was really there and sooner or later it wouldn't just be a vague rumour going round Buckton, it would be parents petitioning the department asking for his removal, if not his head …

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Greg Sullivan was looking quite cheerful when he called into Buckton Station a few days later, saying he was on his way to the station at Dinawadding as there had been another break-in, "Except there's nothing much for them to take now. Just bored kids, I s'pose."

"Well, talk to John Simpson while you're there. He's started a little Neighbourhood Watch style of thing. Someone might've seen something. And how're you going with the Seymours?"

"We've got the names of four kids, all from the uni, who said they came out to see the bunkers, they say Bella invited them. They say they came out in the morning, saw around, had some lunch there, watched a video, sat round talking a while, then came back to Toowoomba. They were in a white van. They say Bella and about four other people were there but the others left soon after them."

"How do they know they left if it was after?"

"Because they're all at uni too. They're all back to their studies again. And they all swear black and blue that the place was pretty tidy, just a bit of mess in the kitchen where they made lunch. They say there were a few … I think they called them Buddha sticks … burning in one of the rooms but they mostly sat out on the front patio and talked. They reckon Bella liked to meditate, using them, because she got stressed easily. And they say Bella told them some lurid stories about the man who built the bunkers and how a cop got shot there."

"You know something, Greg, I think that house was trashed deliberately. It's like someone went through every room deliberately looking for things to tip over or smash or throw around. I think we were all *meant* to think it was a party that got out of hand."

"Yeah, could be. If all those kids are telling the truth—it all must've happened after four … and they reckon the girl was dead by about six. Between six and seven. So when did her killer arrive—if they all left and Bella was there on her own for a while?"

"And they knew she'd come in the Porsche?"

"I don't know if they got asked."

"And were they asked about her boyfriend?"

"It doesn't sound like she had one, nothing serious. A couple of the guys angled to go out with her just to get a ride in the Porsche … but you know something Dennis? I don't think anyone liked her much. Even her dad was just in and out, answered the questions, said he was in a hurry to be on the plane to Japan. It wasn't like 'How could anyone do this to my darling little daughter?' And the mum's cried pots o' tears but she hasn't actually said anything about loving her daughter or desperately wanting us to find her killer. And the aunt and uncle are furious at what she did to their

house and I think they're just sorry they can't get stuck into her and give her a piece of their mind. It's a bit sad, really."

"And was she all that wild—or all that rich or spoilt? We know she had a fancy car but she was just living in a little flat."

"She sounds a bit of a brat. But even brats get forgiven if they die violently—or they usually do by their parents. Anyway, you'll get the full p.m. details early next week, and I'd better hit the road if I'm going to get there before they all start complaining to Brophy … "

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Dennis added DS Sullivan's few snippets to their own file on the Seymour case. It wasn't up to him to solve it. But neither was he happy to think the tragedy had happened on his patch. The Seymours, Mal and Margaret, had come home and were no doubt busy cleaning and tidying and scrubbing and deciding what could be fixed and what was only stuff for the tip. But he wasn't easy in his mind.

It was too glaring a discrepancy: Bella Seymour had left her own flat spotless and shining but had left her aunt's house like something the Hell's Angels had ridden through. He was still thinking on this as he walked briskly up to the main road where he went into the video shop and asked Sasha Gray if Derek Coleman ever came in to hire videos.

She shook her head. "Not since I've worked here. I didn't know he liked videos."

"Just curious." He hired a copy of 'Alice in Wonderland' for the kids and a copy of 'Crocodile Dundee' for himself on the off-chance he might find himself with some spare time …

Then he went on along to the post office and asked the postmistress, Judy Bilton, if she ever saw packages for Derek Coleman which looked the shape of a video. "Oh, every week," she said cheerfully. "Well, maybe that's an exaggeration, but quite often. Is there something wrong?"

"Not as far as I know." But he pictured himself diverting one such package and watching it before Mrs Bilton passed it on to Coleman with abject apologies for what the postal service had so carelessly done to his mail. "Have the parcels ever been queried?" He wasn't quite sure what he was trying to ask.

"Oh, his porn collection!" she laughed comfortably. "That's what everyone says they are. It's just a local joke. I don't think anyone takes it seriously. They're probably Bugs Bunny or My Trip to China."

"Could be." If the rumours got too strident they might eventually get to departmental ears. But he couldn't bring himself to contemplate doing someone down by rumour and innuendo. If Derek Coleman was watching things which hadn't got past the censor, which possibly had been imported illegally, or which were being produced 'underground' in Queensland, then he wanted the whole thing out in the open and Coleman with the same rights as any other accused person.

He bought some stamps and a couple of aerogrammes to write to his parents in Scotland and went out again. He went along to the bakery and asked young Maya Smith if she was keeping in touch with Brendan Cooney. She looked a bit embarrassed and finally said, "No, my parents didn't like the idea of me going out with him—now that they know—and my girlfriends kept making jokes about how I might be the next one on his list. I just sort of wanted to move on and find someone better. And it wasn't like he was much fun … "

Brendan had been charged with killing his family fifteen years ago. The police had finally found his surviving eldest brother living near Kingaroy, married with two children. Brendan had finally agreed to a genetic test and it had come back with the worst news possible; like his grandfather and possibly his father he had inherited the gene for Huntington's chorea. What role, if any, the condition had played in the family's tragedy was not clear …

Dennis nodded. "I don't blame you. And he's just found out he's got a serious genetic condition and probably shouldn't have children anyway. But he's a bit short on friends. Just someone to write him a friendly letter occasionally might be a nice thing to do."

She didn't rush his suggestion but as she put some fruit buns in a bag for him she said cautiously, "Where would I send the letter?"

"Just the Watch House, Winville, that'll get to him. He didn't have anyone to post bail for him. So he'll be there till the trial comes up." Brendan would stand trial accused of murdering five

of his family when he was an eleven-year-old boy. Dennis felt sure he had committed the crime under pressure from an older brother but the court might not see it that way …

She said she would but not in such a way that he really believed she would. He mentioned it to Fiona in the evening though not with any great sense of sympathy for the young man. She considered it carefully before saying, "I don't mind to post bail for him if you think he won't run. But I think he should do some fence-mending—"

"Such as?"

"Well, like saying sorry to Sam for starters." Brendan Cooney and Todd Price had punched young Constable Sam Hussein to the ground when he first arrived in Buckton.

"Yep, wouldn't hurt him to apologise. And I don't really think it's hurting him to stay on remand. It's not like he was doing a great job batching for himself. He's probably glad to get three square meals a day and no work. But I'll drop by and see him next time we're in Winville."

She nodded. "And I went round to talk to the kindy teacher today. I asked her if she thought it would be out of order for Elise to sit in a couple of times."

"Sit in?" Dennis said drily. "The kid'll probably want to take over the class."

Fiona smiled at that. "Ms Coffey seems very nice and I got the impression all the children like her, a nice atmosphere. So she's going to go next Friday and see what she thinks."

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There was no requirement that DS Wang ask the first officers to attend the crime scene to sit in on his interviews with the victim's family, other witnesses, or potential suspects. But Daniel Wang rang Dennis to say, "Do you want to come and meet the mother before she disappears back to Brisbane? She's going to clear out the flat in Toowoomba and see if she can get the lease overturned. She has asked that her daughter be cremated and her ashes scattered. But we don't want to do that, not until we get the DNA test results."

"Does she know what you're doing?"

"I haven't told her." He began to shuffle papers irritably as he spoke. "I've asked for some extra help. It's too much for the three of us. We're still trying to put together all the Japana stuff and we've got more passports that don't gibe with the details we've been given. And Bishop's handed us all his stuff on the Savage case and pissed off. And the bloody Seymours all seem to think we should have someone in custody by now—and we've just had a vicious home invasion case here. I'm beginning to wonder what my own home looks like. I hardly get to see it."

Dennis said he didn't mind to come and sit in and he checked his appointment book to see what he had down. "I can make it by five, all being well here. Will that suit her?"

"It'll have to. If she wants to get someone for her daughter's death—"

"And you're absolutely sure it's murder—not suicide or an accident?"

"No, Dennis, I'm not. Wittenbach has already told us she shows signs of self-harm—or maybe living in an abusive relationship—over quite a long period of time. But we're treating it as murder so we're not caught flat-footed somewhere down the road. And both her parents and her aunt and uncle are certain she was killed."

Dennis didn't rush the journey to Winville. He asked Fiona if she needed anything or would like to come but it was an unpleasant blustery day and he wasn't sorry when she said no to everything; he would be glad to be home for dinner on time.

Mrs Seymour was still an attractive woman. Her cap of chestnut brown hair was softly feathered around her face giving her a gamine look and the sense was heightened by the skilful way she'd made up her big blue-grey eyes. Her voice was less attractive, having a sharp edge to it, or perhaps she was feeling an anxiety and worry she couldn't bring herself to express in other ways. She had cried frequently but no one had actually heard her say how much she missed her daughter.

Daniel led her through the things they had already gone over, after introducing Sergeant Walsh, including when she last saw her daughter, how she had come to get her car and her flat, when she had decided she would like to study in Toowoomba, how they had kept in touch, whether Bella had ever mentioned friends, fellow students, staff, boyfriends, or any other people she might've got to know in Toowoomba.

"She rang me occasionally but it was hardly for a heart-to-heart," Colette Seymour said rather sadly. "She wasn't in the habit of confiding in me but perhaps she said something to her friends or her brother and sister."

"Toowoomba is talking to all her friends." DS Sumpter was talking with a number of people there at USQ and Daniel had had some not very productive phone conversations with the other Seymour children, a married sister Nanette and a younger brother Thompson. "But she doesn't appear to have confided much in anyone, even the ones she invited out to the farm."

"Or they're not saying anything."

"Possibly. But we're still hoping her current boyfriend will come forward. Are you sure she never mentioned a name?"

"Not to me. She knew I didn't approve of most of the hooligans she seemed to like to run around with."

"Hooligans? Not fellow students?"

"How would I know? After bringing one or two home and upsetting us … "

"Can you give us any names?"

"No, I certainly can not. I was so relieved when she seemed to have dropped them."

"So why didn't you approve?"

"One of them turned up in a bikie's jacket and torn jeans, for heaven's sake! *And* he had a chipped tooth and a nose ring. Is that what you would want in your family?" Her voice rose on the question.

"You don't remember if the jacket had a logo for a bikie gang?"

"No, I do *not*. I just wanted him out of the house before half the neighbourhood started speculating. I just hoped she had settled down a bit."

"But your sister-in-law said she saw your daughter apparently embracing a man with black curly hair at her house … "

Both Wang and Walsh saw it, a sudden widening of those guileless eyes, then she said, "I hate to say this about my sister-in-law but she is bombed out half the time. She can't get through the day without popping pills."

"Is she older or younger than you?" Daniel said as he wondered how best to tackle the intuition that she had, at the very least, a suspicion as to who the man might be.

"Older. Can't you tell? She's already started on the nip-and-tuck merry-go-round. All that family have scraggy necks."

There was something close to relish in the way she said this. Dennis leant forward suddenly and said, "Mrs Seymour, we know this has been a traumatic time for you. But are you absolutely a hundred per cent certain that the girl you saw at the morgue is your daughter, not another young blonde woman with blue eyes?"

"Are you suggesting I don't know my own daughter?"

"No. We are saying you were extremely stressed and upset and rushed when you saw that body in the morgue."

"That's absurd! I gave birth to my daughter—"

"So you were aware that she had been self-harming over a long period of time? Something which usually points to a severe childhood trauma, often sexual abuse, or mental illness." Dennis hadn't known anything much about self-harm until he had got a run-down on the post mortem from Ali Deane …

"No, of course I wasn't! I would've got help for her if I'd known."

"But it could also point to a mistaken identity. Would you be willing to give us a sample for a DNA match?"

"No, I most certainly would not! Are you trying to turn it all into some sort of circus? You're not content to put us through the ringer—you have to do us down as parents as well."

"Mrs Seymour, you're over-reacting to a simple question," Dennis Walsh said grimly. "We have a serious problem with the body you identified as your daughter. Because your daughter was apparently embracing a man you know or think you may know at least six hours after that girl in the morgue died. So either your daughter is dead and you need to help us identify those two young

people still at the house when your sister-in-law returned—because they almost certainly had something to do with her death. Or your daughter and a man had something to do with the death of a young woman who very closely resembles your daughter."

"So why aren't you out looking?" She now sounded shrill.

"Where would you like us to look, Mrs Seymour?" Daniel said mildly. "Because this crime almost certainly is linked to your family in some way."

"I don't believe it! You're just out to try to make me feel even worse that any mother should!" And she burst into noisy tears.

Daniel passed across a box of tissues but left the tape running and simply sat without saying anything as she cried. After five minutes had gone by he said simply, "You know your daughter was dating a man with black curly hair. We would like to know when you knew this and whether she ever offered a name."

"How would I know! She did it on purpose! She deliberately set out to choose the sort of man she knew her father would not want to meet."

"The sort of men Pauline Hanson might object to—or the sort of men who have done time?"

"Either! Both! Everyone is getting on that bandwagon now—but he's been saying it for years! We'll be sorry. And he's right. Now, I really believe he's right."

"Your husband is ambitious in his political career?"

"Of course he is! Wouldn't you be? Do you really want to stay in this dump all your life?"

This was one below the belt for DS Wang who was hoping he could get out of Winville in the not-so-distant future. "And you are ambitious for him? You help him as much as you can in his political career?"

"Of course I do! Why do you have a problem with that?"

"I don't. I think it's praiseworthy. But if your daughter was trying to embarrass him, to damage his political career, to run him down—then I don't imagine he would've been too happy about it—"

"Are you seriously suggesting that my husband had something to do with my daughter's death! You must be mad!"

"He was angry with the way she behaved," Daniel contined to speak quietly and calmly, "and so it maybe made her more determined to annoy him, to do things she knew he would hate—like going out with unsuitable young men." He felt certain he was on the money; again her eyes, perhaps beyond her control, seemed to widen and stare for a moment. "It doesn't mean we won't work around the clock to find out exactly what happened. But if you know anything, no matter how small, how irrelevant you might think it is, about how she was living her life, the sort of people she was mixing with—then please tell us now. Don't leave us to dig it all out ourselves."

She seemed to grow calmer, perhaps because she didn't see the implied threat and only regarded it as an olive branch. At last she said, "I'm sorry, I can't help you. But if I think of anything I will get straight on to you. Now, if you will excuse me, I've got to pack all her things in the flat and I am not looking forward to it."

Dennis simply sat there and gazed in his grim way at her as she spoke. She seemed to find his gaze unnerving because she kept her own eyes solely on Daniel Wang. A minute later he escorted her to the door and asked Ali Deane to see if she would like a cup of tea before she went back to her hotel. After the door closed on her, he came back and sat down beside Dennis and said wearily, "What is it about this alleged guy with the black curly hair?"

"Well, if Margaret really did see him—then I think we can take it that he is someone who has been involved in Bella's life for a while. And black curly hair might suggest someone from New Guinea, Fiji, maybe Africa—"

"An African-American? But why would that make Ralph and Colette see red?"

"What was that guy they used to talk about? Malcolm X? That sort of area?"

"The Nation of Islam in America? Yes, it might get up someone like Ralph's nose. He's pretty far to the right … "

*

Elise Walsh was thrilled by her first day at kindy. She had a very small backpack containing an extra hanky, her woollen gloves, her lunchbox, and a couple of books. Her mother walked her to the school and said she would come back to pick her up. But when Elise came out into the blowy day at noon there was no sign of her mother. She watched the other children leaving, some together, some picked up, some walking away. And she felt she could easily walk home. It was only a few blocks and she would probably meet her mother coming for her.

But there was still no sign of Fiona when she reached the police station and thought she would go in and tell her father about her first experience of kindergarten. The handle on the front door was just above her reach so she knocked loudly and Constable Kelly's voice said "Come in!"

"It's me, Benny!" Elise said in response. "I can't reach."

A minute later the door opened and she went in happily and looked around. Brent, understanding why she had come, said, "Your dad's not here just now, love. He'll be back soon."

"Can I wait here for him?" She had learnt that there were times when she was in the way in the small cramped station.

"If you'd like to." He quite liked the idea of her company as he worked on reports. Elise took a chair in the small waiting area and opened her backpack and took out her lunchbox and drink bottle. She had eaten a sandwich and a banana at little lunch but everyone had gone off home before they had time to sit down to a 'proper' lunch. The phone rang and Brent said without enthusiasm "I'll come round and check it out." It wasn't an emergency but he probably should not wait for his boss to come back.

"Ellie, I have to go out. Would you like to go on home or stay here and wait?" He could take her with him but he didn't have a child's seat in his own car.

"I'll wait." She usually knew what she wanted and wasn't timid about saying it out loud.

He put the sign on the front door 'Back Soon' which also now included his and his boss's mobile numbers. He wasn't certain whether to lock the front door but finally felt he should. The back door was unlocked although she would have difficulty reaching the handle unless she climbed on something—which, for Elise, was not a problem. She accepted her solitude quite happily. She had two books in her little pack, a Robin Klein and *Anne of Green Gables* and considered them both before deciding on the Klein. She had hoped to be able to show them to Ms Coffey but there hadn't really been a chance and she didn't like to say or do anything pushy on her first day. It didn't occur to her to wonder if her mother might be wondering where she had got to. At the back of her mind was the happy thought that her dad would arrive any minute and be pleased to find her waiting. She ate her sandwiches and a muesli bar and drank the remains of her juice.

A fax came through. The phone rang and the answerphone picked up. The station clock ticked. It wasn't yet half past twelve but it began to seem to the little girl that hours had passed. She thought of going to the station toilet but it would mean pushing a chair over so she could climb up and unlatch the low swing door to get behind the counter and out into the little passageway beyond it. She put her things back into her pack—

Someone tried the front door handle then went away again. She thought of yelling something out but she knew the phone numbers were listed. There was a brief moment of quietness except for the clock and the faint hum of the little frig behind the counter. Then the back door opened with a suddenness that made her jump. A man stepped in, thrust a small girl in front of him, a very pitiful little girl with a tear-streaked face and wet pants, then before Elise had fully taken in the situation he had grabbed her by one arm. She squealed "Let me go!" but he whipped out a big and very dirty handkerchief, tied it tightly round her mouth, picked her up and went out again.

The whole operation had taken perhaps two minutes.

The man had not planned to stop here but seeing no sign of a police vehicle and the 'Back Soon' note had decided to take a chance and dump the little girl he had abducted an hour ago on the back step; anything to finally be free of her endless crying. He had thought of stopping and gagging her but it seemed simplest just to dump her. It was taking a risk. But in the deserted street no one would think it was anything beyond someone bringing in a lost crying child, or perhaps a child who had been hurt or frightened. And if anyone saw him carry the child into the station they might not

realise he had carried a different child out. Police stations, after all, were meant to be very safe places for children …

He pushed Elise into the back seat, strapped her in tightly, and set out for Winville.

*

Dennis was the first back into the station and was surprised to be confronted by a frightened miserable little girl of about three-years-old. He didn't recognise her and wondered how she had got in. Had someone found her and left her here for them to deal with? The little girl said her name but he found it hard to catch. Phoebe … perhaps.

He went round behind the counter to see if anyone had left a note. He read the fax and ran the messages through. It had Sergeant Hassell in Winville warning them to look out for a grey Corona, number given, driven by a man in his forties who had abducted a small girl in Oakey, apparently as a hostage to force his ex-wife to give him more frequent access to his two school-age sons. 'Thought to be heading towards Buckton after a sighting in Dinna. Not armed but possibly out of emotional control.'

"Holy heck!" Dennis said it aloud just as the door opened and Brent came in. He had passed a car answering to that description just the Winville side of town, just past the white weatherboard Church of Christ. "Get on the road—you might be able to catch him." Dennis gave him instructions. "Take your car. He won't recognise it and you might be able to pass him and pull him over. Keep an eye out at all the turn-offs. I'll ring Winville to get someone to come out and meet you."

Brent didn't feel terribly confident about finding, let alone stopping, the grey Corona but he ran to his car and did the fastest u-turn his Mazda had ever done in its life. The country increasingly opened out towards Winville, fewer timbered paddocks, just the occasional little clump or row, so he might still be able to spot the car even if it had turned off the main road. Dennis rang Winville and told them to hurry, that Brent might not be able to deal with the man on his own.

Then he turned back to the little girl. He didn't feel he was very good with distressed little children but he needed to know if she was the abductee mentioned in that message. He didn't recognise the backpack as Fiona had only bought it the day before and he assumed vaguely that it must belong to the child.

"How did you get here, sweetie?"

The child started crying something about 'the man' and 'he wouldn't stop when I needed a wee'. He could see she was exhausted and he thought it might be easier to ask the doctor to come round and check her out while he looked in her backpack for signs of her identity or address. But the backpack yielded up the two books which he didn't really see this child reading and when he opened them up he saw 'F. Greehan' printed in the front of the L. M. Montgomery.

Was that what had happened? The bastard in the grey Corona had found Elise here and simply swapped children. "How did you get into the station, sweetie?"

She pointed miserably to the back door. "And was there another little girl in here when you came in?"

She nodded.

For a moment Dennis Walsh felt an almost crippling red swirl of rage. To take Elise! He pictured himself doing something very drastic to that unknown man. And then commonsense gradually intervened and told him it was out of his hands now. He could go racing after Brent in the Mazda but he needed to get this child medical care and support, clean clothes, and with luck a parent to come and take her home. He rang the Oakey police to tell them he had a small child, probably called Phoebe here. "Phoebe Cox?" He turned to the child and said, "Are you Phoebe Cox?" She nodded but looked if anything more frightened.

"Yep, I've got her here. Has she got a mum or dad who can come and fetch her? I'll get the doctor to come round and check her. I don't think she's actually hurt, just frightened and distressed."

Then he rang the doctor's surgery and got the promise that Dr Lombardi would be around 'in a few minutes'. After that he rang the service station and asked if Mavis Barnard could come over to sit with the little girl. He had found that Mavis, brisk but kind, was very good with children; it

probably came naturally but she had also been the leading light for Buckton's little group of Girl Guides and Brownies for many years. She said she would be over as soon as she could.

Then he considered the most difficult question of all: whether to ring home and tell Fiona that Elise, almost certainly, had been abducted. She probably wasn't aware that Elise had come into the station to see him. She probably thought Elise was still safely at her first experience of kindy. Perhaps Elise had got bored and decided to make her own way home …

But Mavis turned up while the young doctor was checking the little girl and Mavis said in surprise, "Oh! But kindy finishes at twelve." Dennis frowned. "Are you sure? Maybe I got it wrong but I'm sure Fiona said it finished at two."

"I think it's Fiona who's got it wrong," Mavis said mildly. "Anyway, what say I take little Phoebe round to your house so she can have a bath and a change of clothes while she waits for someone to come and pick her up."

Dennis nodded. "But God knows how we're going to tell Fiona we think Ellie's gone—"

"I'll tell her," Mavis said kindly. "You'll need to be here."

"Brent's gone after them—and someone from Winville—but I think I should go too—"

"No. You might let your temper get the better of you." There weren't many people round Buckton who would give Dennis simple sensible advice—and have him take it—but Mavis was one of the few.

"I guess you're right but it goes against the grain. Y'know, Mave, I think I actually passed the bastard on my way into town—and when I think Elise was probably there in the car with him—I just about explode—"

"I know."

He hadn't seen any particular reason to take notice of the car. It wasn't speeding. It wasn't hogging the road. There was nothing about the car itself to draw his attention, no smashed lights, or large dints, no massive bullbars or signs it had been seriously souped up or taken off road …

He hadn't seen Elise and now the thought of her in that back seat—

But if he hadn't seen his daughter, she, tied in tightly by the seat belt but down low because the man didn't have a child's booster seat, had seen the bonnet of the police car pass them. She didn't know if it was her father, it just might be someone from Winville, but she felt sure it was her dad—and the glimpse had given her renewed hope. She couldn't scream or wave but she knew it wouldn't be long before he found she was missing and came after her. The man had put on the radio perhaps in the mistaken idea that she might still find a way to make a noise or possibly to see if there was anything on the local radio station about him … and Elise found the strength of mind to simply sit back and try to relax quietly.

She would listen. She would wait. And quite soon …

There was an irony in the fact that the man had deliberately kept himself to a low speed, not wanting to draw attention to his vehicle on the quiet road—and Brent Kelly, putting his foot down, saw him in the distance just past what had been the Henniger's farm until recently. He didn't know who owned all the properties along here but Dennis had pointed that one out. He began to plan his strategy. To pass, to get in front, to slow down, to indicate to him to pull over … but would he? Or would he panic and try to speed up and pass, maybe turn off on to one of the side lanes … there was a back road that wound round and came out through Burleigh on his right. A bit further along there was a turn-off to the left which would bring him to the tiny rather desolate hamlet of Norwilla in a further ten minutes …

If he could stop the driver passing, hog the road, until he saw someone heading out from Winville …

He desperately hoped they had taken Dennis seriously and understood he couldn't handle this on his own. Another two minutes brought him up behind the Corona, he put on his indicators and the car showed no worries about letting him pass. But then, in his own car, without his cap, and wearing his blue jacket he probably wasn't obviously a cop. He passed the Corona then dropped his speed but kept over towards the centre of the road. With luck the driver would merely assume it was a typical country driver believing the whole road was his for the taking …

He was reluctant to try and pull the Corona over. He wanted the driver to keep driving moderately and quietly, not panic. But where the heck was Winville? He was now almost three-quarters of the way there. Surely they should be meeting him on the road? His spirits went down. Had they disregarded Buckton completely? Had they believed he and Dennis could handle it between them? He was beginning to feel his own rising sense of panic when a car heading towards him appeared in the distance.

But it was not an official vehicle. Was it a plain clothes person? Or merely a local citizen coming home? As it closed with him he put a hand out to try and wave it to a stop alongside him. As the other car slowed Kelly saw it was Graham Low. He didn't know him personally but he knew of him as a local 'identity'. Low drew level with him and stopped. "What is it?"

Kelly continued to hope that the car behind him which had now been forced to a stop also would simply see this as two local people abusing the road to exchange a few words. And beyond Low's sedan he could at last see what he had hoped to see: a police car. "If you would just stop there a minute, Mr Low," Brent said, ashamed of the sudden squeak in his voice, "till the cops catch up. The car behind us has an abducted child in it."

"Oh!" Low looked astonished but did as he was asked. And a minute later Winville closed with them. Brent turned his car slightly off the road to the left but without leaving sufficient space between himself and Graham Low for anything to squeeze through. The cop car pulled up on the far side of Mr Low and Adrian Hassell and Constable Atkinson got out.

If the unknown driver had thought to reverse and then try to do a fast u-ee he was frustrated by a couple of vehicles coming up behind him on the Buckton side. As Hassell went over to the driver Kelly went round the far side of the car and looked into the back seat. Elise stared up at him, her mouth stuffed with the filthy handkerchief and her hands now tied with an old bit of twine. But although tears glistened in her eyes she seemed to tell him with her gaze that she had never doubted he would come.

He opened the door, undid the seatbelt and lifted her out. She too, frightened and denied the toilet she had come to need, had wet her pants. She felt a moment of shame. What would he think of her! But Brent simply tightened his arms around her and then, unexpectedly, bent to give her a quick kiss. "You'll be home soon."

He took her around the other side of the car and put her down and fumbled at the knots in the hanky. Constable Atkinson came over to help him. Then he said in surprise, "Isn't that Walsh's little girl?"

"Elise. Yes."

It took Kelly an inward struggle to keep his own tears back. In that moment when he had held Elise he felt the last of his sometime doubts about his vocation flutter and die. He knew people thought he was a priest who had mistaken his vocation and ended up in the police. But holding Elise he knew he could not voluntarily choose childlessness. It might be his fate in life but he knew without a flicker of uncertainty he wanted a family of his own.

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Mavis didn't find it easy to break the news to Fiona. And Fiona said in astonishment, "But Elise is still at kindy! How could she get abducted from there?"

"No. Kindy finishes at twelve—"

"I'm sure Ms Coffey said two o'clock. I know there was a lot of noise going on. The kids had just gone out to play … but she said bring a little lunch … I'm sure she said that."

"Little lunch? She probably just meant morning tea. The canteen doesn't open till twelve-thirty."

"And I thought of it as 'a little bit of lunch'? Oh dear, and Elise didn't see me there and thought she would walk home?"

"And she thought she would go into the station and say hello to Dennis? Yep, that sounds pretty much like what she would do. And this man dropped this little girl there when Dennis and Brent were just out—and he grabbed Ellie instead? That's probably how it was."

As they spoke Fiona had been running a warm bath for the little girl and adding some bath bubbles and Robbie's rubber duck. Now she said, "Sweetheart, if you'd like to take your messy clothes off and hop in. I'll get you some nice clean clothes to put on."

"Dennis said to put her own clothes in a plastic bag just as they are. They might be evidence, I s'pose," Mavis said.

It was more than thirty minutes later before little Phoebe was dry and warm and dressed in an old track suit of Elise's and sitting down to a bowl of soup and a mug of hot chocolate and a piece of apple and cinnamon cake. She still looked a bit distressed and teary but she made good work of the scratch meal only looking up once or twice to ask about when her mum would come.

"I think it'll be quite soon, sweetheart," Fiona reassured her. Mavis finally felt she could leave and return to the service station.

It was Dennis who came round first. He came over and simply took Fiona in his arms and said, "It's okay, they've found her. She'll be home soon."

Her own agony had not been so much about a fear that they wouldn't find Elise, she had great confidence in Dennis's ability to resolve difficult and traumatic issues, but rather her own dismay at the way she had contributed to the potential tragedy. To live with the way she had so carelessly accepted what she thought she had heard without checking to make absolutely sure …

Dennis's anguish had been rather different. He had lost his first little girl, Danielle, thirty years ago. The thought that he might now lose his second precious child … He had found it very hard to deal with the need to stay calm and keep things under control and planned out. Because if they couldn't find the Corona on the road to Winville they would need to set in place a wider search. And it was unlikely that the man had headed this way purely on a whim. It was very likely he had a friend or relative living somewhere in the district where he could go to ground and wait for his ex-wife to crack and give in to his ultimatum.

"And Robbie? He's safe?"

"Yes, having a nap." She went with him into their bedroom where the little boy was just waking up in his cot and getting to his feet to hold out his arms to be picked up. Fiona stayed back to let Dennis pick him up and give him a relieved hug.

In the middle of this a woman turned up at their door. The little girl, sitting on the sofa, with the last of her crumbs on her plate, struggled down and ran to her with a cry. The woman said loudly, "Phoebe! What the hell are you doing here!" But instead of coming in to pick her little girl up she just took a reluctant step or two inside and said, "You shouldn't be here! You should've stayed with Peter! Now he'll be in trouble!"

Dennis came over. "Are you saying Peter's this moron who abducted your little girl and then dumped her in a strange town and abducted another little girl? Because if you are then Peter's in big big trouble."

"And what's it to you? Why don't you keep your big nose out of our business!"

"It is police business now, madam, so don't come with that nonsense."

Fiona didn't think this was a very sympathetic thing to say to a temporarily bereaved mother although she was surprised at the women's lack of apparent concern for her child. But then the combination of sudden shock and sudden relief—plus the long anxious drive to get here—sometimes drew people into saying things they would not say in calmer happier circumstances.

"She knows Peter—so why on earth did she scream and carry on?" It wasn't hard to see that Phoebe had been crying and was still distressed.

"You might cry and carry on if you were snatched and driven away with, you stupid woman. So give your child some comfort now. And when you get home make sure she goes to a doctor and gets some counseling."

"That's rubbish! There's nothing wrong with her. He wouldn't hurt her."

"You will do as you're told, and I will check with the police in Oakey to make sure you've done it, or you will be charged with conspiracy to kidnap. Got it?"

This was Dennis at his most implacable but it didn't seem to faze Phoebe's mother. "Don't you go telling *me* how to bring up my kid!"

"You knew he was going to snatch Phoebe and go off with her, didn't you?"

The woman suddenly seemed to see that this was a dangerous question and she mentally backtracked. “Of course not! That’s stupid! But we’ve lived next door to Peter and his family for years. We *know* them. We know him. He’s a good bloke. He wouldn’t hurt Phoebe.”

“Then I think you had better come straight over to the station before you go home and I will charge you with being a party to this abduction and the abduction of another little girl.”

“What other little girl? He only took Phoebe—”

“Oh, so you know he only took Phoebe? How d’you know that?”

“I don’t *know*—I just—I just guessed.”

“Don’t give me that bullshit.” He turned to the little girl and said, “Phoebe, you will need to come back to the station now. It’s quite safe. No one will hurt you.”

Phoebe’s mother said, “Not like that! Where are her own clothes? I’m not taking someone else’s rubbish. It’s probably full of germs!” Fiona came over with the bag of clothes and handed them to her. Mrs Cox looked in and said, “I’m not taking these! What’ve you done with her good clothes?”

“She couldn’t help wetting herself, the poor darling, because he wouldn’t stop and let her go to the toilet,” Fiona said gently.

“That’s rubbish! Of course he would!”

The little girl began to cry again and it was all Fiona could do not to squat down and put both arms around the little girl to give her some comfort. Instead it was the mother who came over and took her by one arm and yanked her away. “We’re going home and I don’t want to ever see you people again.”

“No, Mrs Cox, you’re coming over to the station with me. You’ll have to come, Phoebe, I’m afraid. But we’ll get you some help. Don’t cry now.”

All through this scene Robert had stood in the doorway and watched and listened. Now he said to Phoebe, “Don’t cry now.”

“Oh, she’ll cry alright—when I get her home!”

“Then I think we’ll also need to involve Child Welfare,” Dennis said wearily. “What sort of a useless mother are you? A beautiful little daughter and you’re behaving like a monster.”

But Fiona could see that it was probably more than an idea Peter and Phoebe’s mum had cooked up together. Mrs Cox, she felt certain, wanted this Peter and wasn’t going to be scrupulous in how she tied him to her …

Dennis went out shepherding mother and daughter.

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Brent drove very slowly back to Buckton with Elise in his front passenger seat. He told her she didn’t need to worry about her wet pants. That those sorts of things didn’t matter. She found it difficult to talk after having her mouth so tightly pulled back but the stiffness gradually eased and she said frankly, “I was very scared. But I knew you or Dad would come and get me.”

That there had been an element of luck in it all Brent could see clearly but he didn’t think he needed to say that to Elise. “Yes, we came as fast as we could. And now he’ll go to jail and you’ll feel completely safe again.”

“D’you think Mummy’s looking everywhere for me?”

“I’ve called to tell them we’re coming.”

He felt certain Elise would weather the day’s dramatic events with aplomb and Fiona would know what to say and do. But it didn’t entirely remove his own niggling sense of guilt. He shouldn’t have shut Elise alone in the station. He should’ve made sure she went on home. Or, at the very least, left the back door ajar and told her to leave if her dad didn’t come by the time she’d finished her lunch. Maybe he should get a child’s seat and put it in his own car. That way he could’ve taken her with him … and in the future there might be other children … sometimes people tried copycat crimes when they heard of things like this …

Dennis charged Mrs Cox with conspiracy to kidnap and sent a copy of the charge sheet to Oakey. Then he told her she could go on home for her daughter’s sake but that the child’s follow-up care would be monitored. This might be an idle threat but he didn’t mind to do the follow-up

himself if necessary. Phoebe might know this Peter character and more so if they were next-door-neighbours; it didn't alter the fact that she had been frightened and distressed by his behaviour.

It was quite late by the time he'd brought their other work up to date. "So the way the tree was ringbarked didn't suggest kids just messing around?" Brent had been called out to see that someone had ringbarked one of the ancient oak trees planted round the small cenotaph.

"Mr Brady said it looked a very professional job, not like teenagers just messing about."

In the early days of white settlement men had been employed solely to ringbark on some properties, not so much here as they were on the edge of the timbered country, but elsewhere. Now farmers contracted to have the machinery come through simply toppling everything in the path of the chain or sometimes individually bulldozed. It was faster and more thorough. But Dennis always felt they were building up problems for the future. A few drought years and there was nothing to hold the topsoil …

Now Walsh said, "Ask around, see if there's anybody who still ringbarks. Maybe Chad Scully occasionally gets a bit of work in that area."

Brent made notes on all the calls and follow-up investigations they would need to do tomorrow but Dennis had provided one small bit of good news. He had called in on Alex Moy on his way back from checking out some stolen tools on a farm near Moy and he had found Mr Moy with a brand new pair of glasses. "Don't like wearing the damn things," he said rather tetchily, "but I s'pose I'd better if I don't want you lot breathing down my neck every time I go out."

"Next time it might be you that gets thrown around and smashed up, Mr Moy, or your pigs—so get used to them."

But after Dennis had gone on home Brent Kelly continued to sit thinking over the day. He couldn't really use it as a way to persuade Iris Hitchener to come and have dinner in the café with him; he felt vaguely that Iris was just being kind to someone she probably saw as a bit lonely here still. But equally he didn't feel like sitting by himself and continuing to think on the things he had done wrong. It would be nicer to hear about her day at the hospital instead.

He lifted the phone, hoping she wasn't on duty, and called. She said there were already rumours going round town and she would be happy to come down and meet him.

"Would the café be okay?"

"Sure. Except we'll have Artie for company."

"If he bothers us—I'll—I'll tell him to get lost." It didn't surprise him that many women round town felt a little uneasy in Artie's presence. He was mentally retarded but it didn't stop him being a big rather intimidating man.

"Okay, I'll see you in twenty minutes."

Brent tidied himself up and cleaned his teeth. It wasn't that he had ever kissed Iris but he felt it was part of the necessary preparation. Of course, after he'd eaten a hamburger and chips he would be back to Square One. It was more the thought …

In the beginning he would much rather have got to kiss Fiona but gradually that swift and useless passion for her had faded. He wasn't in love with Iris but he thought, if he didn't spend so much time telling himself it was no good hoping, Iris was much older, much better looking, much more skilled and making more money … and not a Catholic … then he felt he could come to love her. Although she was a quiet rather reserved person on the outside he felt he now knew her well enough to see the very warm and loveable person underneath. He wasn't good with women, he knew he carried some uneasy baggage, but Buckton was so remote from his childhood he thought it really was a new life, a new beginning.

Artie was there in the little café but they took the rear booth and it wasn't long before they were deep in the recital, the responses, the sharing of thoughts and feelings. Jess had run the café for Carl Pender for many years usually with the help of a teenager and she knew her regulars very well. She might not exactly *like* Artie, it was doubtful if anyone did, but she was always kind and considerate towards him and if Artie loved anyone in Buckton apart from the photo of a beautiful woman beside his bed then it was probably Jess. Dennis Walsh had given him the photo in the hope of steering him away from real women, particularly Fiona, and had encouraged him to call his

imaginary lady friend Lizzie. It seemed, touch wood, to have taken Artie away from bothering real women …

But it was Brent and Iris who intrigued Jess. She was quite good at summing people up and even though, so far as she knew, they only talked about ordinary news, and certainly never held hands or acted like lovers, she thought they were two people meant for each other. She saw lots of couples come in here and share anything from a milkshake to a simple three course meal and she could see that they were obviously and more deeply close than people who had their hands all over each other. But she could understand Brent's reticence to see it as more than dinner together.

He probably agonised because Iris would be almost ten years older than him. He probably wished he was handsome. He probably wished he had something to offer in the way of a house. And there was the religious side of it. Everyone round town knew he went to early Mass. No one had ever seen Iris go to church …

She wondered if they could find some middle ground. She went over to remove their plates and ask if they would like a sweet or coffee. They both chose coffee and a piece of cake. She jotted it down and then she said the words she had several times thought of saying.

"I love to watch you two together. Just something about you. It's hard to describe. But I think you're made for each other."

Iris just gave that her lovely smile. Brent went red and looked mildly embarrassed.

"And now I'll go away and leave you to each other," Jess said with her own cheerful grin. When she came back with the coffee the embarrassment had passed, she thought, and they were deep in conversation again. But although they never had any difficulty in finding subjects of absorbing interest, or so it seemed, he couldn't find the words to say what had been in his mind all afternoon.

'I held Ellie in my arms and I knew it was what I wanted more than anything else in the world. A little child of my own. I don't know how much I would sacrifice for that … but a lot.'

As they went out into the winter's night he thought he would risk everything. Everything? Dinners were nice. But he wanted to take Iris somewhere where they wouldn't have the Carbonis or Jess as the third to their tryst. "Iris, could I take you to Winville some time, a movie maybe." It sounded very stiff and formal. He hadn't meant to say it quite like that.

"That would be nice." Before she turned to go to her car she unexpectedly laid a hand on his arm. "I would like that … and, please, don't go worrying about the difference in our ages. When I'm with you those sorts of things don't matter." She could see the marks that a complicated life had left on him whereas many people just saw the rather gauche young man …

It took him a long time to get to sleep. Whereas Elise, with her father sitting safely, in his large and protective self, beside her, had found no difficulty at all in going to sleep despite it being a terrible tiring traumatising day.

Case No. 3: Born under an Evil Star

DS Wang rang from Winville to say he was coming out to re-interview Mal and Margaret Seymour at the farm and would Dennis like to sit in. "Yeah, I wouldn't mind. I still think all the Seymours know more than they've let on. Anything new?"

"Well, the dead girl had been drinking. She had also probably taken Ecstasy before she died."

"And it's something you shouldn't take with alcohol?"

"God knows. She had also had a cup of strong coffee by the looks of it. And she had probably smoked a bit of grass earlier in the day. We've also got a full list of her old injuries. They make disturbing reading. Old scabs and scars all over her."

"And no other blonde reported missing?"

"We haven't really looked. But certainly the uni isn't missing any other students."

"So either she was a gatecrasher—or Bella Seymour knew her—or Bella Seymour managed to hide one heck of a lot of things from her parents?"

"That's about it. Anyway, I'll pick you up in an hour."

The clear arching blue domed a dry landscape. Small shoots for spring crops were appearing but except for the people with irrigation they were in need of some rain in the near future. The long range forecasts weren't offering much cheer. "Any news on the Porsche?"

"We found the dead girl's prints on the wheel and so on. The front passenger side has some smudged prints, probably not hers, so it's just possible she brought someone out with her. It was a cold day. They might have been wearing gloves and smudged existing prints. But all the students say they didn't see the Porsche. Several of them say they did look briefly behind the sheds and it wasn't there. So it looks like Bella got dropped off and her boyfriend came back later in it … I'm not sure how that might work out. We've got three vehicles, the van, a Holden Commodore that several other students came out in, and an old white Holden ute. They say they assumed the ute belonged on the farm but the Seymours say they don't have a ute, just the small truck that's still there in the tractor shed."

"So both the ute and the Porsche are a bit of a mystery. She might abandon a ute but would she abandon the Porsche?"

"I wondered about that. And I think she just might. We don't know if it's what she wanted or whether it's just what her father chose for her. Sort of—like it or lump it. Not every young woman wants to go around in a flash car … and it's not a very good car for anyone who planned on coming out to a farm regularly. Their lane is reasonable but I wouldn't like to take a Porsche up some farm tracks."

"True." Dennis hadn't had a lot to do with fancy cars. Most people in his experience wanted something that could be easily fixed if they had a breakdown on a country road. They wouldn't want to be waiting on parts from Europe or a specialist dealer in Brisbane. "They didn't get a number for the ute?"

"Seems not. If we get desperate maybe we can hypnotise them," Daniel said drily, "and see if their subconscious registered anything."

"Or they know and would prefer not to say? And Bella was there on her own when the first lot turned up?"

"That's what they say. When they'd all arrived she took them down the paddocks to see the bunkers there. They say they didn't get to see the underground place in the shed because her uncle had put a lot of junk over it."

"So it's just possible someone was already there and she was steering them away from it?"

"It's possible." Daniel turned in the gate at 'Thornleigh' and parked a minute later near the house. The place looked as peaceful as it had the day Walsh had pulled in here years ago, stepped out of the car, and got shot in the stomach. Daniel got out and showed Dennis roughly where the group of students said the cars had been.

"But that can't be right," Dennis said calmly. "You saw the way it was all churned up. It looked like a dozen cars were revving and churning … "

"Same as the house maybe." Daniel was inclined to think a lot of the mess they'd seen was 'theatrical' mess, things thrown around and broken for effect, to give the impression a lot of people had come and gone.

Dennis nodded. "And it was all done after the girl died?"

"Hard to say. We can get a bit of an idea from where drinks were spilt and soaked in or started to dry out … but it's only very rough." He reconsidered the question. "Are you saying that it was done to suggest it was an accident?"

Dennis hadn't seen it in that specific a way but now that he thought about it … "Maybe. Maybe it was an accident but they didn't believe it would be accepted as an accident … I'm only guessing."

The front door opened and Mrs Seymour stood waiting for them to come over. She was wearing a woolen pants suit in a soft creamy-apricot shade. Daniel thanked her for her time and asked if her husband was home.

"He is, and upset that you don't seem to be getting anywhere. But come in. I've made coffee and muffins." She escorted them into a now tidy dining room and suggested they take chairs. Mal

Seymour came in from the kitchen with a plate of hot buttered muffins and his wife brought in a coffee pot and suggested they help themselves to milk and sugar.

Seen like this she seemed much more ordinary; a country housewife who had been thrust into a world she couldn't quite cope with. Dennis wondered if the image might be true not just of recent events but of her whole married life, that she would've been far happier married to someone without any large ambitions. But then she had told Daniel that she hated country life. He substituted 'suburban' for 'country'. Someone who would like to shop and do chores in the morning and sit down like the traditional housewife and watch soapies and game shows in the afternoon …

"How much damage were you left with?" Daniel said.

"Except for some china and glass and a bit of kitsch we've managed to fix just about everything," Mal Seymour said without any obvious emotion. "I didn't like it that they got my rifle down—and some of those glasses were a new set Maggie bought only last year—in case we got to do any entertaining here."

"And there was one strange thing," his wife said rather drearily. "All the clothes, the scarves and jumpers and stockings and things we found spread around—they were all mine. I hate the thought that they came into my room and helped themselves to my things."

"It's possible they wanted everyone to think the girl died in the middle of a wild party. This was the quickest and simplest way to do it."

"Are you saying she *didn't* die here?" Mal Seymour said in surprise.

"She probably died where you found her."

"Then I don't follow what you're getting at?"

"It looks like a set-up but just why and how … anyway, we've just got a few more questions." Daniel again went over exactly when they had left for Brisbane, whether they had told anyone besides Bella, when they had left Brisbane to return, whether they had said anything to anyone.

"Bella knew we were going. She didn't think we were coming back till the following evening. That's what we told her."

"So why did you come home early, Mrs Seymour?" She had already told them. Wang felt she should say it in front of her husband.

"You all know why," she said sharply. "My husband was with another woman."

"And you, Mr Seymour, how did you feel when you found your wife had taken the Mercedes?"

"Look, I wasn't with another woman. I was with Ralph and my two other brothers James and Roger at a small get-together in Ralph's office. A couple of his staff were there, and they happen to be women, that's all there is to it."

"What was the meeting about, Mr Seymour?" Daniel said politely.

"Family stuff. We've got an election coming up. Ralph was hoping we would all pitch in. Family solidarity you might say."

"He was afraid he wouldn't get enough support from the party?"

"It wasn't that kind of support. There is a woman claiming Ralph promised her—all the usual—and fathered her child—and then he reneged on everything. I don't want to go into the sordid details—and the whole thing is lies from beginning to end—but he wanted to feel that he could count on family, that he could get up and say we're not that kind of family, that we all adhere to traditional Christian family values."

"Even though you don't come to church here?" Dennis said it as a throwaway line.

"We've only just moved in a couple of months ago, Sergeant, and we're still going to and fro to the Oakey property—"

"So you go to church in Oakey?"

Seymour hesitated then shook his head. "No, we go when we're in Brisbane. It's much nicer."

"And people can see the family together." Seymour seemed to accept this statement as a simple truth and nodded with a slight smile. Dennis felt it was all a sign of humbug. "And your children—do they come with you?"

"They do."

"Your brothers—they've also got children at boarding school in Brisbane?"

Both Mal and Margaret nodded. Daniel wasn't sure if the other children were relevant but cousins just might have known more about Bella Seymour's life than uncles and aunts. He drew up his paper and said, "Okay, give me all the names and ages and where they're at school, as close as you're able." At the end of it they came up with five children still at school, one of them at Bella Seymour's old alma mater St Margaret's. Dennis didn't say anything but that was also Fiona's school and he wondered if she kept in touch with anyone there. What had Bella been like as a student? Had she made friends with students, with teachers, or outside of the school?

The Seymours obviously couldn't see any relevance to it but they seemed to relax a little as they talked about their own and the other children in the family; their two sons were at Brisbane's Church of England Grammar …

"And that problem we haven't resolved," Daniel went on as though everything was connected, "the dead girl in there and the two young people embracing in here—have you had any more thoughts, Mrs Seymour?"

"No. I don't understand what was going on."

"If you turned up before Bella and her boyfriend had decided how to deal with the dead girl—d'you think they chose to embrace like that so you would not like to disturb them? If they'd just been sitting there drinking coffee or something … " Dennis was more old-fashioned than Daniel; the idea of intruding on people's very private moments, unless he had a pressing reason, was less to his liking. He was probably making heavier weather of Derek Coleman and his supposed porn than a younger man who would simply ask to see the videos.

"I … I think that's right, they seemed to have most of their clothes off … I didn't like to … it wasn't the moment to ask what was going on … I thought the morning would be … " Margaret tailed off.

"Are you saying that wasn't Bella they found dead?" her husband said suddenly.

"Ralph and Colette refused to take DNA tests. Bella had left her Toowoomba flat spotless—"

"But that can't be right!" Margaret abruptly seemed to spark up. "I called in to see her just—it must've been early March, I was in Toowoomba, I said she might like to come out and see us. That was when we were near Oakey. She liked to ride and we had a horse there."

"And?" Dennis thought he could see where she was going.

"Well, I won't say it was a mess—but it was pretty untidy and a bit grubby."

Malcolm Seymour came out to their car with them and suddenly burst out with, "Too right I was furious when she took the Merc and came home. I almost felt like staying on in Brisbane a few more days to teach her a lesson. Okay, I like some of the pretty girls Ralph has working for him. But I'm not *doing* anything with them."

"Is your wife taking anything?"

"Some fool of a doctor put her on tranquilisers years ago—and she got addicted and the things they've put her on to that's s'posed to wean her off them have only made her worse. I thought this could be a nice farm again and I hoped … well, I hoped that she might make new friends, not those pill-popping vampires she got in with years ago. But she refuses to go anywhere except Brisbane and so she's lonely and she only swops one thing for another … I don't even know if I believe her when she says she saw the two people in the house … "

"Then bring her into Buckton, to dinner, to the pub, encourage her to come to church. If you're going to talk about this Christian family you all believe in—do something about it," Dennis said drily.

As they drove away again Daniel said, "Are we any further forward?"

"We've got a mysterious ute, a mysterious man with black curly hair, a flat that was untidy and grubby … and a corpse that was seriously abusing itself. I think you're going to have to go to Toowoomba, not leave it up to Sumpter, and I think you should look right back to her friends before she came to Toowoomba. Maybe the Porsche wasn't just to get her to go to uni there—but to get her away from unsuitable friends in Brisbane."

"I've asked for extra help. I can't do that Japana stuff and this and everything else. They've promised me another DS so I'll go to Toowoomba when he comes. But they keep e-mailing me, the

parents, demanding to be kept up to date with everything we're doing. They want all our info but they were about as helpful as two garden gnomes."

"They're afraid, that's why. They want to get warning of the nasties you might be unconvering, the drug abuse or whatever. But I'm not sure they really want you to solve the case."

"Because they think they know who the man is?"

"Partly. But you heard what they said about the election coming up. I think Ralph would rather get the sympathy vote, police falling down on the job, he and his wife left to grieve without any sort of resolution, that sort of bunkum. That would play out better in the electorate … "

"It was hard to get a real sense of Ralph—as a father—he was in such a tearing hurry. But I always come back to that same question—do you think he had any hand in the death?"

Dennis felt it was a question he couldn't answer. "I'd say there's secrets in that family they don't want made public—and not just Margaret being a Valium addict or whatever—but my impression, and it's only an impression, is the other way around. All this, the mess, the cars, inviting those kids to come, it's all part of an elaborate way of cutting loose completely from the family."

"But why would she need to go to such lengths? Surely, if she said she was going to go to a uni down south, say, they'd be only too happy to get her completely out of their hair."

"You'd think so. But maybe there's a link we don't know about. Maybe this guy had something on Ralph … I'm only guessing … "

"Ali is doing some work on the family. We might turn something up."

They dropped back into silence for the run-in to Buckton. But as Daniel let Dennis out he said, "I hope Elise is okay again?"

"She was a bit clingy the day after. But she's talked it out pretty well. I think that's the advantage she's got over the other little girl—" He had taken her down to the paddock, with Robbie, so they could ride their shaggy little pony, Twinkletoes, and she had seemed more interested in asking when she could go along to Pony Club by the time they had come home in the chill afternoon …

"And different parents," Daniel said drily.

He was halfway to Winville when he found himself thinking 'different parents'; was it possible that Bella Seymour's apparent anger with her parents had something to do with her parentage? That she was adopted, that she knew something had gone on behind the scenes, perhaps Ralph *had* had a love child and persuaded Colette to take her on after their marriage, pretend she was her own, and Colette had agreed but it didn't stop her resenting the child … it all seemed rather farfetched and he brought his mind back to more practical avenues.

The school …

It was only four years since Bella Seymour had been there. They would surely remember her.

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Dennis found time in the late afternoon to call by the doctor's surgery. He knew next to nothing about self-harm and it sounded to him like the sort of thing where people tell someone to stop being hysterical and get on with life; something which might or might not be possible. But if it was going to play out as a major issue in this case he thought he needed to be a little more knowledgeable. He caught the two doctors just after Joanne McNally had finished up and gone and they were closing the surgery to go on home and cook dinner.

People round Buckton had been rather wary about having two young men who lived together. Different people interpreted 'living together' in different ways. Dennis took the simple position that if they were capable doctors and not breaking the law they could do what they liked at home. There were only a few die-hard hold-outs like Betty Cronk who regularly said "It isn't nice" to anyone who would listen. But Brett Sorenson and Tad Lombardi had won round most of the local people simply by being good doctors. And as a bonus they had done up the dreary old house next to the surgery … Dennis still went to Alistair Thompson in Winville and Fiona took the children to his wife Kamala for anything that wasn't urgent but that had more to do with the fact that Alistair had delivered both their children and Kamala was very good with kids; not as a rejection of Tad and

Brett. Now he said to them, "Can you spare a minute to educate me on self-harm. It looks like being an issue in the Seymour case."

"The young lady who died recently?"

"Yep. They say she was covered with scars and scabs, and had probably broken bones, and that she probably did it herself. This is confidential but the whole thing's a bit hard to get my head around."

"Take a pew, Dennis." Tad drew up a couple of chairs. "Tea? Coffee?"

"No. You'll be wanting to get home."

"Well, at its simplest it's usually the internalising of anger. Instead of taking it out on someone else you take it out on yourself. So it's more likely to be women, particularly women who've been taught as children to be nice little girls who don't lose their tempers and don't react aggressively. Often victims of sexual abuse, sometimes physical abuse or neglect, sometimes a generalised feeling that they haven't measured up to a family expectation. Sometimes a symptom of mental illness, sometimes we see a form of ritual abuse in autistic people. It can be a kind of release of emotional tension. But the more people self-harm the more they may try to hide the signs, wearing trousers, long sleeves, and it can lead to cutting themselves off from the possibilities of friendly support."

"Can they actually kill themselves—or is it usually pretty minor stuff?"

The two doctors looked at each other then Dr Lombardi said soberly, "It can be at any level. People who cut themselves may bleed to death if they've caught an artery. But it rarely leads to suicide. It's almost like they need to let out this tension so they can get on with life. But the tension builds up again, particularly if they are in a stressful situation, and they have to self-harm again."

"Dennis," Brett Sorenson said quietly, "if you can give us a line on the sorts of injuries we might be able to be a bit more specific. You know we won't spread information."

"It'll come out at the inquest but they haven't set a date for that. It looked like she had been running needles or pins up and under her skin. They thought she might've crushed several fingers at some time. They hadn't healed quite straight. They found cuts that had been hidden by her hair which were partly healed up. They found cuts—" he indicated his own broad chest, "all the way down, almost like a ladder."

"But particularly on her breasts?"

"I've only seen the written description but you could be right. It was a bit technical."

"If a young woman is sexually abused around puberty she may blame her budding breasts as the cause of her abuse. Which of course is often the case … "

"And the abuse is more likely to be family?"

"Most childhood abuse, sexual or not," Tad said drily, "is a family crime. And if it was over a period of time rather than a one-off, then the odds go even higher."

"You are saying," Brett spoke much more slowly, "that this young woman we've been told is a daughter of our esteemed minister—may have suffered prolonged sexual abuse as a child? No wonder the papers are having a field day."

There had been some more lurid headlines along the lines of Minister's Daughter in Sex Orgy but the young people who had gone out to the farm had finally got together and made a joint statement to the media to say they had simply gone to see the farm and have lunch there. No orgies. No wild parties. No rave-ups. No sex. There might've been drugs but they weren't admitting to them. But the newspapers, and the public, preferred the juicier version. Dennis wondered if Daniel had tried to track down who had taken the news of the death and the picture to the media because he didn't really believe it had been Margaret Seymour …

"No, I'm not saying that," he said slowly. "I don't think the dead girl *was* Bella Seymour. I think she was a lookalike and we've all gone down the garden path … "

He shared some of this conversation with Fiona when he got home to dinner and also the news that Bella Seymour had gone to St Margaret's. "And you think I might've known her," Fiona said with a smile.

"Well, hardly. But d'you keep in touch with anyone there? I thought—if no one's missing from uni then maybe the connection was further back."

"Mmmm … you think the girl was a friend of Bella's perhaps?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure she's the one who drove the Porsche out—and you wouldn't just rush up to someone on the street that had blonde hair and say, here's the keys, can you drive my Porsche out to my uncle's farm?"

"No, it doesn't seem very likely. I wonder if a Porsche is an easy car to drive or whether she had tried it out before then?"

He hadn't considered that. Might the neighbours in Toowoomba have ever seen another blonde girl come round to visit Bella in her flat?

"But as for St Margaret's … I don't really keep in touch, not the sort of Old Girl who treats the old school as though it was the high point of her life … "

Dennis had hated school but he had since discovered, to his surprise, that there were people who remembered their school days with nostalgia. "So what was the high point of your life?"

"High points, not high point, and there have been lots of them. Getting my first job as manager—"

"But not the first time you met me?"

"No, sweetheart. You were rather rude to me. And not the second or third times either. But then things got better and there have been lots of high points since then … but just going back to the school—I do know someone who teaches there. I don't really keep in touch, just a Christmas card, but I'm sure she wouldn't mind me ringing her if you think it would help."

"Would you? Just sort of an off-the-record conversation. It might be a complete furphy. But somewhere along the way she met up with a girl who looked very similar … "

"And you think that similarity might've … encouraged Bella to … I'm not sure what … plan this kind of substitution. But if she wanted to sort of change places—do you think it means she has taken this girl's identity, maybe even left the country as her?"

"I'd better not mention passports to Daniel or he'll blow his top. He's still trying to check more than thirty for Japana—" But it was an idea. Had Bella simply swopped identities, or had she married, changed her name, in some way ceased to be Bella Seymour?

In the morning he rang Winville to see if they thought it worth trying to find a marriage or change of name by deed poll for Ms Seymour. DC Deane said she would trawl the idea. She didn't sound wildly enthusiastic, probably because she knew it would be more work for her, but she said the new DS had arrived yesterday "so we might soon be able to draw breath."

"Good oh. Let me know if you find anything."

*

Daniel Wang had not felt very inspired when he arrived back in Winville yesterday. But Greg Sullivan had said quite cheerfully, "Your back-up has arrived."

"Terrific. What's he like?"

Greg had given that a wry and rather furtive smile but only said, "You'll have to wait and see, mate."

"Okay, I'll just duck down to the canteen. I'm starving. And we'll need to get on to Bella Seymour's school. See if we can get a list of her friends there. Her uni friends seem too good to be true."

Daniel came back with a hot pie and a salad sandwich in ten minutes time—to find a woman in her late thirties seated at the empty desk next to his. She was on the phone and he waited for her to finish with the sneaking suspicion that she was the reason for the funny expression on Greg's face … Ali Deane might see him as mildly sexist but he certainly didn't regard himself that way and he thought it wouldn't matter so long as she knew how to do the job …

She finally made a note, said, "Thanks for that", and hung up. Then she turned to Wang and said, "Hi, you must be Daniel?"

"DS Wang, yes." He wasn't sure that he wanted to be on a first name basis till he'd had the chance to size her up. Getting all buddy-buddy in a small station could sometimes end up with the sort of embarrassing fall-out that John Brophy and Aidan Hassell had recently gone through. Hassell now referred to Brophy as 'that dickhead in his big office'; what, if anything, Brophy said about Hassell wasn't known to anyone except, possibly, Brophy's secretary. "And you are?"

"I'm Nuala Bent."

He came over and held out a hand. "Pleased to meet you. Has Greg filled you in on the case at all?"

"A bit. He also made a joke about my surname. Bent copper, all that. I get so sick of it. I'm thinking of changing my name to Bentine or Bentinck or something."

As she spoke he got the impression of someone who had possibly tamped down a fairly outgoing and lively personality because she was working with a lot of men who had egos and attitudes to women which required them to keep a low profile. She had probably become accustomed to sliding her ideas and plans through discreet gaps. Even if she at times thought some of her male colleagues couldn't solve the way out of a paper bag she had probably become adept at not actually saying so.

"Okay then, and your phone call—did Greg give you something to start on?"

"It was some more information on passport details. I've made a note for DC Deane."

He walked over to the whiteboard where he had put up a time-line in his neat printing. All the dates and times they had so far. "It is this key period here. Between when all those students left, we've got a sighting of the van but not the car, and the estimated time of death. They've tied it down to between six and seven. We haven't got a sighting of the Porsche which is a puzzle so we're going for the later time, so the driver could be sure it was dark."

"And no one saw it leave from the Toowoomba end?"

"If they did we haven't found them yet. She had a lock-up garage but no one saw or heard anything … so she may have left quite late at night. But that begs the question of where the car was the next day."

"The boyfriend?"

"It seems most likely. And we haven't tracked down the ute those kids claim they saw at the farm."

"So the nearest property owned by any of the Seymours to this place would be?"

"Mal has a place in Oakey, leased out now."

"And—has anyone been there?"

"No. We've got DS Sumpter and his colleagues checking the Toowoomba end." Daniel found himself reluctant to say he hadn't considered the Oakey end—and given it was Malcolm's property, not Ralph's …

"Then would you like me to check it out this evening? I don't mind the drive."

"I'll come. We'd better make sure it isn't a dangling thread."

"Okay. What time d'you usually finish up?"

"Anybody's guess. I usually go and get some dinner around six and come back here."

"Okay. We could have dinner in Oakey, see the farm, and head back here."

Was she just trying to look keen, he wondered, or did she bring this kind of energy to everything? Still, with luck, it would mean he would be out of the office when Ralph Seymour did his eight p.m. contact, something which he had got into the habit of doing, and which was obviously designed to put Daniel on the spot. This time he could tell the duty officer to tell Ralph if he rang rather than e-mailed that he was following up a lead …

Nuala said "My car or yours?" when Daniel finally called it a day.

"Yours," Daniel said without having to stop to think. If she was driving she might be less willing to talk all the time, let alone ask him questions he couldn't answer. And he supposed he should see what she was like as a driver in case they ever got into a situation where a fast getaway was needed. It wasn't very likely but he always felt that he couldn't get away from Japana fast enough—

The winter evening was cool and calm and still. She said, after they'd decided on their route, "Would you like the radio or a tape—or would you rather talk? I'm a Country and Western nut. I write and perform my own songs. But I'm really very easygoing when it comes to music. I don't mind Bach or Bob Dylan or Elton John or Pink Floyd if you're into something a bit heavier."

"Have you got yourself on tape?"

"Sure. But don't feel you have to be nice to me. I'll be gone again in a month."

"And you've got family in Brisbane?"

"A divorced husband. Two girls in their late teens. I was born near Charleville but I got sent off to boarding school as a kid and somehow it gets harder to come home, the longer you stay away, so Country and Western is my way of coming home in my imagination … and I found I had the right voice for it."

"Suits me fine." As they drove, cocooned in the car in a starlit landscape, he wondered if she had instead chosen this as her way of getting to know him outside the office. "And I didn't put in for help just to get an extra dogsbody. I am open to ideas. We've been following up the obvious but it's the sort of case where the obvious doesn't seem to fit together very well."

"Because Margaret Seymour claims both to have seen her niece at midnight and found her niece next morning, lying dead for the last twelve hours?"

"That's the obvious discrepancy. And several of her friends from uni say she told them her aunt would be coming home that evening so that would be the end of the party—but Margaret swears black and blue that she told no one, flouncing out of that get-together in Ralph's office when she saw her husband with his hands on one of the secretaries." He had got this information only a couple of hours ago and it added in another discrepancy. Would Ralph have wanted his secretaries to sit in on what Malcolm claimed was a very private family discussion? Should he plan to go to Brisbane to talk to those secretaries, talk to Bella's cousins, go to Bella's old school? "I'm inclined to think Bella simply wanted her friends gone before her boyfriend turned up, maybe bringing another girl. Maybe the three of them planned to have some sort of showdown."

"That makes sense."

"And I'm certain her parents have an idea who he is—or they think they may know."

"And they won't tell you—because?"

"That's it. Because what? If it was some sort of useless sod we could heavy we'd probably have it by now. But I've been told to treat Ralph and his wife with kid gloves."

"He's only a cabinet minister," she said drily, "and not even a very popular one from what I've heard."

"He's still got clout. And Brophy isn't going to risk his golden handshake."

He thought she had a quick mind but he found her obvious eagerness tiring, almost as though it constantly put him on the spot, and he thought he would rather just interview the people on the farm and come straight home. The property was on the Oakey side of Doctor's Creek and he said non-committally, "Rather than going right into Oakey for dinner—what say we just talk to the people on the farm and come home?"

"You wouldn't like a meal at the Western Line or somewhere?"

"Not really. Another time."

She accepted this without demur. They turned in the grid of the big mixed property and drove toward the distant house. This place had obviously been cared for. Jacarandas surrounded an attractive old garden with a summer house bowered under cat's-paw and an old sundial was surrounded by a circular border already bedded out with spring annuals. The front lights got turned on and a man came down the front steps to meet them. Daniel identified the two of them and said, "We've just got a few questions to ask you about the Seymours. Your name is?"

"Brett Cole." The man didn't look enthusiastic but he went on, "Well, I managed the place for them for four years and then they offered me a lease and I took it. It was a pretty good deal. They said they'd got on to another property that looked like being a snitch. They drop by about once a fortnight, bit more maybe." The Seymours had referred to him as a manager but that might only be habit.

"They don't trust you with the property or they're still picking up stuff?"

"Still moving a bit of stuff … " He made no move to invite them in and Daniel didn't press it.

"Did their niece Bella Seymour ever come out here to see them?"

"A few times. She liked to ride their horse."

"The horse is still here?" DS Bent said. It probably wasn't an issue but she wondered why the Seymours had left the horse behind.

"Yep. He's over there." Cole waved a calloused hand. "I ride him a bit."

"And Bella was keen?"

"No good asking me. She seemed to think I was beneath her level. Never gave me a smile or a wave or anything." Cole came over as a bit of a cowboy, a bit rough, but Bella's standoffishness might not have had anything to do with Cole as a person.

"How did she normally come out here? In her Porsche?"

"Heck no. Didn't know she had one. She always came out in an old Holden ute."

"What colour?"

"White."

"And—did you ever happen to notice its number?"

"Can't say I did. Why?"

"Did she ever come with anyone?"

"Not that I ever saw. Why?"

"So we're talking—how often would you say she came?"

"Dunno, just at a guess … maybe once a month."

"And how did she seem when she came? Happy? Sad? Worried?"

"You're asking the wrong person. She didn't give anything away, that bird."

"So she would just go and ride around the paddocks?" This was DS Bent who found the riding part curious. It was quite a long way to come for a ride. Daniel knowing nothing about horses would've let that aspect slip by.

"I'd reckon so. It's quite a good horse but they never did anything with him, or not that I ever saw. Seems a bit of a waste."

"Did she ever come when Mal and Margaret weren't here?" Daniel saw another avenue by which to find out something about the mysterious man slipping away from them, closing up with a dismal snap.

"Could've done. They were away a fair bit."

"And you're away some of the time?"

"Yeah. Now and again."

"And how well did you get along with Mal and Margaret?"

Cole shrugged. "They needed me more than I needed them, I reckon. I could get a job anywhere but they're a bit … well, she's a pretty neurotic sort of bitch. He pretends to be all calm, like some sort of ad guy in his Akubra—but I sometimes saw him looking pretty strange too. I reckon he drank a fair bit when no one was looking. I wasn't sorry when they said they were moving on."

When they left for the drive back to Winville, Daniel's spirits were somewhere about the level of his shoes. It hadn't really got them any further forward. He cooked himself a steak and some eggs and sat down with a glass of wine. He shouldn't feel so gloomy, it was still early days in an investigation, and the inquest, set down for a date in three weeks time, might throw up some useful further information. He had mentioned going to Brisbane and DS Bent had offered to go; he thought he might as well let her go and speak with all the Seymour cousins as well as going to Bella Seymour's old school; a woman might get people to talk. And the depression which had been dogging him probably influenced his interviewees. If he was gloomy about the outcome maybe they thought there was no point in digging deeply into their memories in pursuit of that elusive little idea or discrepancy. That the other cases he was also trying to deal with, a heavy workload for a very small team, and the undertone of racism and anti-Asian feeling in Winville that people like Saul Harding had stirred up, were seriously stressing him wasn't something he saw clearly. He just felt he was heading up to a very public and career-destroying failure …

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DS Sullivan greeted him quite cheerfully next morning. "The DNA results have just arrived. Now all we need is someone to compare them with."

"Not much we can do at the moment. Just put them to one side and we'd better get on. DS Bent will go to Brisbane so we need to organise that. There'll be three schools with cousins, plus the two siblings who've left school."

"Surely one of them wouldn't object to giving a sample? And what about blood tests? It doesn't make sense that we're still worrying over identity—"

"Well, go ahead and get a dentist for Bella. That might be easier. Try the school if her mother won't give you the family dentist."

But Colette Seymour reluctantly gave out a name when DC Deane rang her. "I think this is the most absurd thing I've ever heard!" She sounded annoyed. "We know our daughter when we see her—"

"Both the police and two pathologists have raised questions about her teeth. We just need to get that small issue out of the way. It may be that your daughter didn't like dentists or couldn't afford a good dentist or just didn't care. But we do need to resolve that before the Inquest—"

"Oh, very well. But she was just pretending to slum it, that's all. She would've finally realised the importance of good teeth."

Deane then got on to the dentist in question and asked them to fax a copy of Bella Seymour's most recent X-rays. They were six years back but with luck she hadn't had anything major done to her mouth by another unknown dentist since then.

She had just hung up when she got a call from Dennis Walsh. The other CIB officers were over by the whiteboard going through everything with Nuala Bent. Deane said cheerfully, "We need all the help we can get, Dennis."

"Well, I think I've got you a nice big fat clue," Dennis said cheerfully. "Y'know Fiona went to St Margaret's, same as this Bella Seymour, and she rang a friend of hers who teaches there now and this woman said she remembered Bella Seymour quite well and she was shocked to hear of her death. And she said that Bella Seymour was one of the most radical and angry young women she had ever met there, that the anger sort of poured out of her, that the only reason she stayed at an expensive private school was because her parents had threatened to sic the police on to her if she dared leave—she said she wasn't sure if that was an empty threat or not—but it put the school in a very difficult position because they would like to've expelled Bella but were reluctant to do something which might involve the police. She doesn't know exactly what was going on behind the scenes. You'd need to get on to the principal, I guess."

"D'you know why they wanted to expel Bella?"

"Breaking the rules—but just which rules—there you've got me. But there is a bit more. She told Fiona there is no way in the world that that Bella would ever have accepted a Porsche from her father. Bella didn't just see herself as a Marxist, she saw the only good Marxist as the one who truly believed in the peasants—I guess she could've changed—but I wonder if we all went down the garden path much sooner than we realised—"

"What d'you mean, Dennis?" Ali Deane had been busily scribbling notes. Now she thought she saw where this was heading.

"That Bella and another woman changed roles, or started playing each other, much further back than we've been taking into account."

Case No. 4: Pills and More Pills

Photos of corpses are difficult to make lifelike. When DS Bent set out for Brisbane a day later she had the best photos, discreetly touched up, with her; also casts of the upper and lower jaws of the corpse, a careful list of the clothing and the injuries done to the young woman and a photograph of the crime scene. It would undoubtedly depress anyone she interviewed but she was hopeful she could shake a memory, a query, a doubt, an idea loose somewhere …

She went conscientiously from one cousin to the next. They all said the photo was "probably" Bella; they all said, including Bella's brother and sister, that they avoided her, that she wasn't happy unless she was haranguing them about the unfortunates, the proles, the unemployed, the evils of capitalism. She said to Bella's sister, trying not to make it sound like an accusation, "Why do you think your parents never told us anything of this?"

Nanette said wryly, “Why do you think? They hated her. She was questioning every thing they stand for, everything that means something to them. They refused to let her in the door at Christmas time. They just told her she wasn’t welcome. So how do you think they feel now that she’s dead? They don’t feel guilty. Why should they? They gave her everything. But they feel upset that she didn’t have time to grow out of her mad ideas and admit that she was wrong. That’s what Dad always wanted—for Bella to come crawling back home and say she was wrong and he was right. He always said he would forgive her everything when she admitted what an idiot she had been all those years. And now that will never happen.”

“And—when she came home at Christmas time—was she alone?”

“No. I didn’t see her but they told me later that she brought this weird black guy, some Afro-American with this great mass of fuzzy hair, y’know a real Afro hairstyle like Jimi Hendrix. Mum said Dad just took one look at him and told them both to get the hell away from the house—and Bella and this guy just turned round and went away again. Mum says Bella turned at the gate and said something like ‘You had your chance and you blew it!’ I don’t know what that was referring to. And I can’t give you a name for Bella’s guy.”

“And Bella just went back to Toowoomba after that?”

“Well, I guess so.”

“But she was driving the Porsche when she came to visit your parents? That doesn’t sound like a total rejection of what your dad stands for?”

“Oh no! No, she wasn’t. Mum said they were in an old ute, a really crappy muddy old ute.”

None of the other young relatives could add anything to this. And the dentist said he would need to take the casts and try to transpose the information to what he had on file; he had never had any reason to take casts of Bella Seymour’s teeth. He said he would be in touch.

The principal of Bella Seymour’s old school, a Ms Anita Stanley, a tall, dignified woman with grey hair, met DS Bent with rather chilly politeness and asked how she could help. It wasn’t hard to see that she hoped the school would not be connected to a young woman who had been making tabloid-style headlines.

“If you could just give me the basics of Bella Seymour’s time here.”

“She came originally as a boarder, then her father got into Parliament and they spent more time in Brisbane so she converted to coming as a day girl. But she was always a problem. Where she got her political ideas from I have no idea, certainly not her father, and she was reading and talking about revolution even before she got into her teens. She wasn’t popular, from what I could see, but it didn’t seem to bother her. She just went her own way. I know her various teachers worried that she was writing polemics rather than essays. But we all felt it was something she would grow out of and we tried to take as little notice as possible. She was a very bright girl, I have no hesitation in saying that, and good at sport and art. But she just seemed to feel that unless such things were put to the service of political change then they were pointless in themselves.”

“Do you know if she had any particular friends here?” Nuala Bent found the headmistress rather daunting, and she was a lot older than the teenage Bella Seymour; for the first time she felt a deep curiosity stir. Who really was this young woman and what had happened to make her world come crashing down so dramatically? And why, apparently, had Mal and Margaret never seen this side of her?

“She usually did things on her own. She didn’t seem to need friends. But she did occasionally sit with another girl. It was strange. They looked so much alike and yet you could not have found two more opposite personalities.” Ms Stanley allowed herself a slight reminiscent smile.

“Do you remember the name of the other girl?” DS Bent felt she crept up to the question rather than pounced; almost as though at this last vital moment it would find a way to elude her if she didn’t make it sound as though it wasn’t terribly important.

“Zoe, I think. Zoe Penberthy. Her father was something big in a union, I don’t know which one … and it seems rather odd that his daughter came here, but I think her mother had been an Old Girl … I would think there was some affection for the school perhaps. But I have an idea the mother died while she was here at school. I’m sure we can fill in those details if you think they have any importance. And the surprising thing was, perhaps, that Zoe was such a quiet girl, not at all

strident—given her background—and Bella was probably more extreme than any unionist, well, certainly more so than the … what might we call it, the mainstream union movement. But I am not the right person to advise you—"

"But you *have* been extremely helpful." DS Bent took out a photo of the dead girl and passed it across. "Is that how you remember Bella Seymour?"

The principal gazed at it with faint distaste. Then she said slowly, "Well, I suppose it is. But Bella, for all the problems she gave us, did have so much—energy, so much, I'm not sure what to call it, such a life force."

"But you considered expelling her?"

"No. We never considered expelling her. It was possibly what she wanted us to do. But we had no intention of doing so at her whim."

"We did hear there was some talk of it."

"No. It was never discussed or considered. But then I imagine you have been hearing a great deal of rumour and innuendo."

DS Bent accepted that something said to Fiona who had passed it to Dennis who had told DC Deane who had shared it … well, something might have got slanted or exaggerated. But she also felt Ms Stanley might not now wish to say that she had seriously considered expelling the dead girl. "So—would you say she was a disruptive force in the school?" DS Bent, when her own family imploded had spent time, paid for by a great aunt as a border at Somerville House before returning to the public system; now she felt the value of it was not in terms of education but in understanding more clearly a place like St Margaret's.

"Disruptive?" Anita Stanley considered the question without haste. "No, I don't think I would say that. Some girls, even some staff, seemed to avoid her in the way they might avoid anyone proselytising for any cause, but she wasn't a chaotic sort of person, in fact she was an extremely orderly neat person in her personal life. And she wasn't malicious. She seemed to take the position that her classmates simply hadn't reached her level of maturity and therefore didn't appreciate the truth of her ideas. She was angry, I think, but angry with her father, with the world, not with the girls."

"Neat and clean and tidy?"

"Definitely. There was nothing of the hippie or the drop-out about her. I didn't agree with her thinking but it *was* very clear thinking and I think its clarity came out of an orderliness which came naturally to her. Perhaps I am trying too hard to remember her best points … "

Was that spotless flat in Toowoomba not the result of someone cleaning off fingerprints, removing clues, but simply Bella being her natural self? As she set out on the long drive to Winville Nuala Bent found herself picturing Bella with time to spare tackling that untidy flat, perhaps even a little annoyed that Zoe had let things get out of hand. Or had she turned to and scrubbed and polished as a way of helping a friend?

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DC Deane brought herself up to date with all the gathered material, including the report of the visit to the Oakey property. Then she went over to Daniel at his desk and said quietly, "Are you suggesting that both Mal and Margaret might be popping pills?"

"Without putting them on the spot … we've been told she's next best thing to an addict though we haven't followed that up. Why?"

"Their bathroom there, I saw boxes and boxes of benzo … benzidrine, benzodiazepin … I'm not sure if I wrote it down. We were told she had taken Ecstasy before she died."

"No. I think we were given the chemical name and Wittenbach said he thought the street name was Ecstasy. You might like to check. And Ecstasy is an amphetamine."

"So if Margaret and possibly Mal are always swallowing that benzo-stuff it would surely be cheaper and easier for her to help herself? And if she had been coming to see them for a while then she would probably know it was there. It wasn't hidden or anything … you can get it on prescription … "

"What are you suggesting?"

"If the uni friends had gone, maybe after sharing a few tabs of Ecstasy, and she's waiting there for her boyfriend to turn up—and maybe she gets curious and helps herself—then what say it has some unexpected side effects? Something she wasn't expecting. She goes a bit psycho, I don't think you should take that group with alcohol … I'm not sure how it would pan out … "

"Well, get on to Margaret and get the details and see if she can tell if anyone's been helping themselves to her private store."

Ali Deane wondered how forthcoming Margaret Seymour might be—and whether she might be willing to dob her husband in too—but she settled down at her desk at the back of the room and made the call. Margaret took a long time to pick up and sounded a little bit vague and unfocused when she did so. "I wasn't expecting any calls … who is it?"

"It's the police, Mrs Seymour, DC Deane, and I wonder if I could ask you a couple more questions."

"I can't stop you, I don't suppose, but I can only hope you're nearly there."

"You keep some tranquilisers in your bathroom cupboard. We wondered if you had shared them with anybody. If Bella had been drinking alcohol when she took one or two it is just possible it caused a reaction."

"Oh, so it's my fault now, is it? I didn't tell Bella she could take anything. I just expected her to act responsibly."

"Because she always did?"

There was a long pause then Margaret Seymour said, almost as though the thought surprised her, "Yes, because she always did."

"You found her quiet and polite and helpful?" This was certainly not the image they had been given and Deane half-expected Mrs Seymour to disagree.

"I did. That's why I just don't understand how she could try and wreck our place."

"Have you worked out how much damage she actually did?"

"You mean—in money?" Deane agreed that was what she meant. Mrs Seymour sighed and said, "Not much really, just a few broken glasses and a couple of ornaments, and there's a mark on the table. It looked worse than it really was. They didn't break anything that was valuable or irreplaceable. But it's taken me *weeks* to get everything clean and tidy again."

"And nothing was stolen?"

"Not that we've noticed."

"So it doesn't really seem like gatecrashers? Surely they would've walked off with your TV or your jewelry or something."

When Margaret didn't respond to this Deane said, "Just going back to the tablets—did you notice if any had been taken?"

"I'm not sure. I don't count them. But maybe a couple were gone."

"And is it just you—or does your husband take them as well?"

This time the pause was so long Deane could picture a mulish 'I'm-not-going-to-answer' look on the older woman's face. Deane said quietly, "It isn't a crime, you know … "

But Margaret suddenly burst out with, "Isn't it!"

"If your doctor is prescribing them—"

"What does it matter how legal they are—when he has never forgiven me for offering them to him and getting him hooked too! How would you feel if your husband never let's a day go by without blaming you for his problems!"

"I'm sorry. So Bella would've known?"

"If she had eyes in her head."

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Nuala Bent energised the team on her return from Brisbane. Yes, there was definitely a man in the equation even if they still didn't have a name for him. Yes, there was a lookalike friend in the equation called Zoe Penberthy whose father was a union organiser of some kind; union not identified yet. "There can't be many girls called Zoe Penberthy," Bent said cheerfully. "We just have to find where she went after she left school. Did she go to uni, did she find a job, did she travel—or did she somehow turn into a Bella Seymour good enough to fool people?"

This also meant going back over all the interview material to see whether it now looked as though people were referring to Zoe Penberthy when they talked about her flat, about her riding, about her performance at USQ, about the friends she had made—and perhaps the most fraught thing of all: had it been Zoe who had supposedly rung her mother, even gone round to the house before Christmas, and had Zoe got away with it in Brisbane because her union background meant that she too could talk the language of Marx convincingly enough for people, for her supposed parents, to turn off rather than listen to the timbre of her voice, the mode of her conversation—

They put Zoe tentatively into all the relationships, including those with Margaret Seymour, back to Christmas. "But the ease with which the two cars seemed to keep getting swopped," Sullivan said as he ran his finger down each sighting of the Porsche and the Holden ute, "suggests that both cars were at times being kept somewhere fairly close to each other." He hesitated over his statement. "Doesn't it?"

"I'd say so." Wang wasn't sure whether they could say categorically that Zoe drove the Porsche and Bella the ute; there seemed to be some overlap and swopping.

Ali Deane came over with the phone book and said, "There is a Penberthy here on her route from Toowoomba out to the Seymours' property. Could there be a relative in the mix?"

"I'm beginning to think anything's possible," Daniel said drily. "If the morgue rings us to say Bella has just got up and walked again like Lazarus I won't be surprised."

"Should we check?" Ali turned to Nuala Bent.

"Of course. Have they ever sighted the Porsche. Do they have an old Holden ute. And the sooner the better. They might be tempted to get rid of the ute."

"But I still can't see why anyone would go to so much trouble?" Greg Sullivan sounded plaintive. He liked cases to make sense. And at a fundamental level this one didn't …

Case No. 5: The Folk Next Door

Constable Kelly had given a lot of thought to what he might invite Sister Hitchener out to, not least so that he wouldn't have people watching and gossiping. He thought Dennis's suggestion that he might learn to ride was a good one—except that he wasn't sure he wanted to try the learning in company. If he fell off with Iris watching he would feel a bit of a fool. And if she fell off he would feel guilty for suggesting it in the first place …

Iris had also given the matter some thought and she wondered if she could gently persuade Warren Pounder to have them both come round to 'play' with his model railway. Warren was a middle-aged autistic man who hardly ever went out. Many newcomers to Buckton were surprised to learn of his existence. He had developed diabetes and as he found it too stressful to come to the hospital or the doctors' surgery his parents had arranged for someone to come from the hospital twice a day to give him his injections. Although his mother had offered to learn what to do he seemed to find the quietly official ways of the sisters much easier to deal with. They had worked out a roster for each week and Iris went round regularly. Warren did less with his railway now, which they all felt was a bad sign, they were only just keeping pace with his illness, but he still seemed to like just sitting in the room with it as though it was a source of many happy memories. Whether he would feel comfortable with Brent was another matter …

But Kelly had finally got up the courage, or whatever was required, to invite Iris to come round to his little flat to have dinner with him. She still lived in the Nurses' Home and although she had occasionally gone to look at places to rent she hadn't seen anywhere she particularly liked. He wasn't much of a cook but he thought a tinned soup would be okay and he had bought a takeaway pizza at Domenico's and he had made custard to go with a tinned fruit pudding and he had bought a bunch of cream and russet crysanthemums from a bucket in the op-shop. He wished he had thought to buy a few cushions in Jack Alexander's showroom—because now, as he waited for Iris to arrive, he felt awkwardly aware of his bed. It seemed to take up almost all of his small bedsitter.

He had two small armchairs and a TV, also two stools by the bench that separated the tiny kitchen from the bedroom, but there was really no way to get away from it. Iris, when she arrived wrapped up in a blue tweed coat and a long, lighter blue scarf said she had always been curious to see what sort of accommodation the police had given him.

"It's quite okay, just not very much room. We could go through and eat there if you'd prefer." He indicated the waiting area in the station.

"Oh no, this is fine. I'm used to sharing everything. We have a dining room for all the staff as well as a room where we can watch TV and make a snack but it always means fitting in with everyone else. I've got myself a little TV because most of the girls don't really want to watch … well, I suppose I shouldn't say the better stuff … but I'd much rather watch the ABC or some of the movies on SBS now that we can pick it up."

He had heard that some of the other nurses didn't like Iris very much, perhaps because they were jealous of her, but he wondered now if it was simply that the gap in outlook was too wide. Iris was very tactful but sometimes tact wasn't enough. Some of them probably thought she was seriously weird for wanting to watch movies with subtitles. He didn't see himself as at all highbrow but he was coming to understand that it was hard to fit in to somewhere like Buckton; even people who had been here much longer like Fiona Greehan and Karen Dalton were still seen as outsiders; and somehow, if you were seen as an outsider, there was also this feeling that you didn't like the same music, you didn't drink the same drinks, you didn't listen to the same programs. There was no meeting point, so it was assumed, of shared pleasures.

They had eaten the pizza and he was just about to say there was custard and plum pudding when the phone in the station rang. He could let the tape pick up but he thought it might be simpler to answer. With luck it wouldn't be anything urgent … He still thought he would take the risk this evening and kiss Iris as they relaxed after dinner. Father Colgan might think he was a 'pure lad' but he certainly never regarded himself as pure …

It was John Benson saying there was a terrible barney going on at Mrs Morton's house next door to him. He could hear children screaming and crying and he didn't trust her not to hurt her grandchildren. This was a difficult one. Lynnell Morton would probably send him away with a flea in his ear if he tried to tell her how to treat her grandchildren but he could possibly get her on the noise levels. Dennis had told him about her abusing her daughter Tara and Tara's baby so it was certainly possible she was now abusing other grandchildren …

"I'm sorry. I just have to go round to see what's going on at Mrs Morton's house. Would you like to help yourself to the sweet and boil the jug? I shouldn't be very long."

"I could come with you if you'd like. If it's Mrs Morton it'll probably be a hospital case somewhere down the track." It hadn't taken Iris long to hear some of the stories doing the rounds about the family …

"Would you? It would be nice to have company."

He turned everything off in the kitchen and they went out to get into his own car which he usually left on the street. Mrs Morton lived the other side of the town but it was only a couple of minutes by car. The sky overhead sparkled with chill stars and he wondered why Mrs Morton wasn't cosily ensconced in her home with the heaters going and none of her neighbours capable of hearing anything. Not a very public-spirited attitude but then he didn't want to have to deal with the public tonight …

Instead they could see a child lying face down in the Morton drive and more sounds of squealing and crying coming from indoors. Both old Mr Benson and Mrs Pounder were standing out on the street and looking worried. "Thank God you've come!" Patsy Pounder said immediately. "We didn't know if we should go in."

Brent didn't stay to talk, unlatching the gate and hurrying to the child on the ground. He squatted down and felt for a pulse before turning the child, a girl of perhaps ten, face upwards. She groaned and opened her eyes slowly, then seemed to fade back into a comatose state. He couldn't see an injury on her but he didn't doubt that she would need to go to hospital. He stood up and called to Iris to come and check her out.

He didn't want to face Mrs Morton. He knew even Dennis didn't much fancy facing Mrs Morton. But equally he knew it wasn't something he could weasel out of; not least with Iris and the two older people watching. "Could you try and see what's wrong with her? I'll see what's going on in the house."

The door was open half way but he was reluctant to barge in. He knocked loudly but no one came. He called out "Is anyone at home?" It struck him as a supremely stupid question when he could hear the noise coming from somewhere. But to go in to a private dwelling without permission was always a charged situation. If Mrs Morton was simply yelling at a young relative because they weren't behaving … then she would certainly try to get him for an unauthorised entry …

It was the child in the driveway who gave him the necessary courage to say again, "I'm coming in, Mrs Morton—" What with nerves, annoyance, worry, his already strong Belfast accent probably meant Mrs Morton would not have caught it all.

But she came out of some back room and said angrily, "And what d'you think you're doing in my house, you bloody little perv! Who gave you permission! Go on—get out!"

"Not until I can make sure that child is okay." He couldn't miss the wobble in his voice. Mrs Morton was a big woman, red-faced and angry, and her whole demeanour suggested someone who wouldn't have the slightest scruple about hoeing into him with her fists or anything which might come to hand.

"I will treat my grandkids the way they deserve! If they play up, the little bastards, then they know what to expect. So you can get straight out of my house or I'll be on to a lawyer."

"The child in your drive is unconscious. What have you done to her?"

"None of your business, you little creep. Now get out before you find out just what I think about cops!"

He continued to stand there, not sure whether a tactical retreat might be wise or whether she had made enough of a threat for him to charge her. While he stood there in an agony of indecision a boy of about seven appeared in the doorway behind Mrs Morton. He attempted to run past her and get out the front door. But she turned and caught him by one arm and yanked him towards her.

"You don't go out of that bedroom till I say you can! D'you hear me?"

Brent Kelly moved over towards her. "Let that child go, Mrs Morton, or I will—"

"You will what—a pathetic little perv like you wouldn't be game—"

All three people outside had heard most of this conversation. Iris said to them as she helped the girl carefully to her feet and supported her with an arm, "D'you think you could ring Dennis?" Brent might feel this wasn't much of a vote of confidence in him but she felt that both children would need medical care and Mrs Morton would probably need to be charged with something … she wasn't sure what …

Mrs Pounder understood her thoughts. "I'll get on to him, love. She's a tartar, Lynnell is." She hurried away and Iris slowly brought the young girl over to the car and helped her into the back seat. Brent had left the keys in and now she said to old Mr Benson, "Could you tell them I'm taking this young girl to the hospital? I think she's concussed."

Mr Benson didn't fancy being left here in case Lynnell came charging out but he said valiantly, "Don't you worry about anything here. I'll tell your young man."

'Your young man'. She thought it over as she got into the unfamiliar car and drove slowly round to the hospital. The child seemed to have relapsed back into … perhaps not unconsciousness but a lack of awareness of anything. Iris found it deeply worrying. Without a proper examination she could not be didactic but she suspected the child had been hit on the head.

Sister O'Brien and the matron, Susan Denby, helped her take the child into the 'doctor's room' behind the matron's office and seat her in a comfortable chair. "Yes, she doesn't look good," Susan Denby said briskly. "I think we'll need a doctor and we might be wise to send her straight on to Winville."

"I'll need to go back," Iris said. "I think there'll probably be another child needing medical care."

"Do you know who she is?

"I think—but I'm not sure—she's Mrs Morton's granddaughter."

Sr O'Brien said sharply, "That woman! Honestly!" But the rest of what she had to say was lost to Iris who hurried back out to the car. She had the horrible thought that Mrs Morton might not be fussy who she hoed into next; Brent, even old Mr Benson … given that it would not take an Einstein to realise he was probably the one who had called the police in the first place …

But by the time she drew into the verge near the Morton home again it was to see Dennis Walsh there. She was not immune to the sense of relief he could provide: Dennis is here, everything will be okay now. She suspected it probably wouldn't be for the two children, that this probably wasn't the first time their grandmother had abused them, but at least it might now be out in the open. She came over to Mr Benson and said, "What has happened?"

He said rather quaveringly, "Dennis has charged her with assault. And Patsy has taken the lad down to her house to get her car and take him to hospital. But I don't understand. How could a *granny* do that to her grandkiddies? It just doesn't make sense … "

Iris was tempted to say it wasn't unknown. But she didn't pretend to understand Lynnell Morton or the dynamics of this family. Instead they stood out on the chill footpath and listened to the voices, now muffled as Dennis had gone inside somewhere and Mrs Morton's shrill abuse had faded. It was nearly ten minutes, and Mr Benson had begun to wonder if he should invite the nursing sister back to his house for a hot drink, before Dennis and Brent came out and walked down the drive. Dennis said briskly, "We've charged her with assault. I can leave her here, she won't run away, but I'm worried about you, Mr Benson, she just might try some sort of comeback."

"I … I don't mind … there's nothing she can do … " But he didn't sound very confident as he said it. Lynnell had poisoned his dogs with snail pellets but that had probably been an accident. It wasn't clear whether she might try something beyond coming round and abusing him.

Dennis stood a moment in thought. She would more than likely just ring her eldest daughter Cherry and indulge in a big hate session. But Dennis had put young offenders in his cell. Now he said, "What the heck, why shouldn't she have to go through what the kids go through. She's a bloody menace. She can see how she likes being banged up." He looked from Brent to Iris and back again. "Sorry about spoiling your nice private evening but I'll take her round now and shove her in. You can check on her later and take her to Winville first thing in the morning."

It took him several more minutes of yelling to get Mrs Morton to pack a change of clothes, lock the house, and get into his car. Patsy Pounder came back and stood beside John Benson to watch. Mrs Morton yelled, "Yeah, that'd be right! Perve all you like, you buncha creeps! But you'll be sorry." And then Dennis had her in his car and was driving away. The other four people looked at each other and felt a kind of shared wrung-out emotional state. Then Mrs Pounder said more briskly, "Why don't you all come back to our house and have a nice hot drink?"

Brent looked at Iris. She nodded. The thought of going back to Brent's flat and having Mrs Morton yelling and abusing them … she didn't doubt that they would be able to hear her even with both the cell door and the door into the station closed … the cell had bars but also a thick curtain on the outside …

Mr Pounder welcomed them in and bustled round putting the kettle on and getting out a tin of oatmeal slices and half a Johnny cake. "Would you just like to pop in and see Warren?" Mrs Pounder said as she got down mugs.

"Would he mind Brent coming in, do you think?" Iris said. It seemed strange that her half-hatched plan might work out so easily.

"I'm sure he wouldn't mind. Just introduce him and say he's a friend of yours. My son is autistic," she turned to say to Brent. "He just likes to live a very quiet routine sort of life, he listens to cricket on the radio in the summer and music in the winter … and he has his railway … "

Brent said he would like to meet Warren and Iris took him away to the big almost self-contained flat at the back of the house and old Mr Benson sat down and said rather wearily, "What a night, but I hope everything will … " 'Work out' somehow didn't seem to fit with what he knew of Mrs Morton. Patsy nodded. "I know what you mean. Some families are just like that. But I really don't understand why Lynnell loves Cherry and would do anything for her, Cherry just can't do anything wrong in her mum's eyes—and yet she seems to hate the other two girls *and* their children."

"Something to do with Bob maybe," Mr Pounder said thoughtfully, "that she realised she had made a mistake and hated the other children because they tied her to him … or she wanted boys and got more girls … I don't think I really want to know what goes on in Lynnell's head."

John Benson nodded slowly. He had copped various bits of verbal abuse from his next-door-neighbour. Myrtle Grundy, one time when he had mentioned it to her, had very kindly said he was welcome to come and have a room in her house. He thought it was a noble gesture because Myrtle probably wouldn't relish the sort of gossip people like Betty Cronk would spread. But he was fond of his old house with its wide verandahs and jungly garden. He just wished Lynnell would move.

And if they actually sent her to prison, he wasn't sure if that was a possibility, then Cherry would probably come and live in the house and Cherry was as sharp-tongued and abusive as her mother …

Warren was sitting peacefully in his usual armchair as Iris tapped on the door and came in. She wasn't sure what he thought of her but he accepted her presence, just nodding and continuing to listen to the radio he had playing very quietly. Acute hearing was said to be a factor in some cases of autism, that sufferers retreated from the world because they couldn't stand the noise of everyday life and relationships. When she took in the very low volume Warren liked to have everything at she always thought there was probably something to the idea. Even his railway ran more quietly than conventional model railways.

She introduced Brent who said something polite and held out a hand. Warren ignored it but didn't seem upset by his presence. "I have been telling Mr Kelly," Warren, she knew, liked people to be very formal, "about your wonderful railway. I don't know if you'd mind showing it to him."

Warren seemed to take his time over the request and Brent thought that even without seeing the trains actually run and the signals move it was still a wonderful thing to look at. The complicated yards and turntables, the little sidings with their flowers and water towers, the hills and valleys and bridges and little creeks … and the various trains themselves … "It is just amazing," he said, bringing his voice down with an effort, "you must be very clever to do it all." He spent the next few minutes just walking round the very large table and exclaiming over everything.

Warren made no move to turn anything on, just continuing to sit and watch Kelly's delight, but when Iris said she supposed they should go and have their tea he said suddenly "Come any time, if you like. I switch everything off at six o'clock."

"I would love to see the trains running … " Brent had never had anything to do with model railways and now, in less than five minutes, he had become hooked.

"You've got a funny voice," Warren said, his own thoughts apparently running on another track.

"I grew up in Northern Ireland, in Belfast," Brent said without rancour.

"Belfast." Warren seemed to roll it around his mouth as he repeated it several times; and his pronunciation was uncannily like Brent's own. "Belfast. I like that."

Kelly didn't know what he meant but he said he would look forward to meeting Mr Pounder again. For the first time in the whole evening Warren put on a slight smile. Afterwards Iris said to Brent, "He almost never smiles. He must like you."

"Which is more than Mrs Morton's going to do." Brent hated the thought of taking Iris back to his flat now and as he drew up outside the station he could see Dennis still there. "Perhaps, if we said goodnight here—and we could—we could have dinner another night."

Iris felt that would be better; she didn't think she wanted to face either Dennis Walsh or Mrs Morton again … and there were still the two children to check on … They might want her to go in the ambulance with them to Winville or something. She put both hands briefly round his neck. "At least the first part of the evening was lovely." She kissed him softly on the cheek but he felt his moment had come and turned it into something rather more passionate. They were still in each other's arms when Dennis turned out the main light, just leaving the bulb over the front door on, and came out on to the street. He was tempted to come over to the car and say something but instead simply turned and headed home.

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"Bingo!" Ali Deane said to Greg Sullivan. It didn't answer all their questions. But it was another step … "What is it?" Greg came over to look at the fax. Joseph Raymond Penberthy was currently doing time for the sexual assault of a nine-year-old girl. Joseph Raymond Penberthy had a daughter called Zoe who had sparked concerns and doubts about her identity because of the long history of what was probably self-harm written into her body.

"It doesn't *prove* anything," Greg said cautiously when he had read the information.

"No, but little by little … what odds he abused his own daughter?"

"Could be. When's Daniel going to be back?" Daniel wanted a new inquest to be held into the deaths of Mr and Mrs Savage and three of their children fifteen years ago. He had just been told it wasn't going to happen because the arrest of Tom Savage a.k.a. Brendan Cooney had not brought 'new' evidence to light on the deaths, how they had been brought about; what this really meant, in Daniel's increasingly jaundiced outlook, was that the police didn't want the first investigation hauled into view. It was breath-taking in its casualness, carelessness, and simple assumptions. There was a general feeling that anything in the public domain would reflect badly on Winville. Yet again.

Ali Deane shook her head. "And Nuala?"

"Said she'd be back at three." Nuala Bent had gone to Toowoomba to re-interview all those uni students in company with DS Sumpter. As it became increasingly likely that the girl at the University of Southern Queensland wasn't, and never had been Bella Seymour, they needed to re-jig their questions … And she would call into that Penberthy farm on her way home …

As Deane and Sullivan began to work up the background and profile of Zoe Penberthy, Brent Kelly and Iris Hitchener were sitting down to lunch with Father Colgan and Father Meagher. As they were usually busy of a Sunday Dennis had reluctantly allowed Kelly to take a long lunch on Friday as Iris had said the day would suit her. Dennis didn't think it was a particularly good idea. It didn't require a BA to see that Brent was hoping the two priests would somehow help him deal with the biggest stumbling-block in his relationship with Iris. The simple fact that she was anti-religion and Brent was a deeply observant Catholic. He was just surprised she had agreed to go there for lunch.

Colgan and Meagher were not particularly familiar with Iris so they hadn't found her agreement to come all that surprising. It was after all only lunch and Carmen Cavanagh was a good cook and they thought Miss Hitchener might appreciate a pleasant hour away from the hospital.

But Iris, if they had all assumed she would simply put herself out to be pleasant company, didn't mind to tell John Colgan straight out that she would not even consider becoming a Catholic because she didn't like the way they regarded women, their second class status in the Catholic Church—

"Separate but equal," the old priest said mildly.

"Separate and unequal," Iris said also deceptively mildly. "Handmaidens … but since when were the men handmen? The men may call themselves servants of the Lord but they don't really mean servants with the menial status that implies."

Father Meagher caught the worried look on Brent Kelly's face but didn't feel he needed to try and intervene.

"The Biblical status of women was not as priests—"

"Other peoples, less sexist, had priestesses. But Jesus took money and food and everything else he needed from women. How d'you think women had money to give him and the disciples?"

"Which suggests he saw women separate but equal."

"In the way the Church has seen slaves, has seen witches, but then some things are no longer acceptable, even if the bible does sanction them."

"The Church changes slowly. You can support those changes."

"It's not my business to change the church—it's yours."

The old man gave that his sardonic smile. "So you won't be joining us?"

"No." Then she too smiled, her heart-stopping smile, and complimented them on a delicious lunch.

"It isn't us, it's Carmen." Michael Meagher put it in almost apologetically.

Brent several times turned the conversation on to the good things the church was doing locally, the convent, the pastoral care, the help at the hospital, and each time it was Father Colgan who turned the conversation back on to church history. It didn't occur to the two younger men that he genuinely enjoyed locking horns with Iris Hitchener but he also saw that she had rejected everything because of her experiences as a child.

He wasn't sure how to bring the conversation to bear on what he saw as the key difference between Iris and Brent; Iris saw very clearly what was the church's fault and what was her parents' fault and blamed them both. Brent couldn't unravel the two. But for the first time he thought they had been remiss, simply accepting the young man's eager piety and support as their due and as something the local church urgently needed. Now he saw that Brent Kelly needed to talk a lot of things out and maybe it would be better if he talked them out with his priests, not with the young woman he was obviously very keen on. To ask her to take on that role ran the very real risk that it would end up as her only role …

But a short lunch, not a long siesta, wasn't the moment to resolve anything. Brent ran Iris back to the hospital (she had walked down) and said, "I'm sorry you didn't enjoy it."

She considered this but didn't respond to it. Perhaps she had interpreted some of Father Colgan's rather ambiguous statements incorrectly but she thought he understood what she could also see increasingly clearly: that Brent had effectively embraced his father's abuse and seen it as a surrender to the power of the church and the value of perfect obedience—when in fact it was simply an inadequate and abusive father using the church as his excuse to let his sadism have full rein …

She thought she probably needed to think everything through much more carefully; not least because Brent's experiences brought back some of the humiliating and hurtful memories of her own childhood. "It was kind of you to ask me," she said without any particular inflection, "and they only made it mildly obvious that they were looking at me in terms of another soul to be saved."

"I'm sure they weren't." But his words lacked conviction. "I'm sorry. I just thought—because I like going there—that you might."

Iris took her handbag and opened her door. "Don't worry about it … and I'll see you soon."

It had the feeling of a brush-off and he took it as that, sitting on rather miserably after she had disappeared along the landing. Of course it had been a stupid idea. And nothing he could do or say could bridge the gaps between them. But the thought of just going back to get on with work … and Walsh would probably say something crass like "turned Iris into a Catholic, the three of you?"

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By the time he came into the station his spirits had plummeted and he had something suspiciously like a lump in his throat. Of course he had been a fool to think that a beautiful woman like that would want a gargoyle like him anyway, let alone everything else …

And Dennis *was* looking very cheerful. "Just had a ring from Fiona," he said without preamble, "and she's found a web-site. Come and have a look." Dennis gestured to the computer where he had pulled up a site in the name of Peter Abzug. The name meant nothing to Brent but he pulled his chair over and started reading.

Mr Abzug had written up pages and pages. He said he had published a book called *Capitalism: The Hollow Victory* and had received a letter from a young woman in Australia to say how much she had appreciated the book. She said it was the same in Australia; that people regardless of their place in society had been seduced by materialism. They didn't want to look at the underlying structures and inequalities of society. They all just wanted to get rich and got angry when it didn't come easily. And she also had made the suprising suggestion: why didn't he come to Australia and write a book on the inequalities of *race*. Not the gap between rich and poor but the gap between black and white and the way it played out in economic terms …

He then looked at the various ways people, for medical or cosmetic reasons, had lightened or darkened their skins. He mentioned John Howard Griffin and his famous metamorphosis into a black man in the US, he looked at the various side effects of the drugs used. Brent skipped some of this technical background. And then the electrifying journey Abzug had made through outback Queensland.

"To turn myself from white to black was the easier part of it. To try to replace my American accent with an Australian one was hard, so hard I doubt if I ever got it 'true blue', but the many people who spoke to me when I first arrived as a brown-haired, brown-eyed, Middle European male assuring me almost aggressively that Australia is a tolerant happy country with no racism and in which money is poured on to Aboriginal communities, proved to be wrong.

"Just how wrong came close to taking my life."

He chronicled his travels, some with, some without the young woman, and a range of stresses; the 'windshield' had been shot out, he had suffered from tail-gating, the driver's door had been rammed, he had been verbally abused, and he had been told by Murri elders in one town that he was making life more difficult for them, though he didn't specify exactly how; certainly his attempts to ask local people about the level of racism might not have helped …

He finished up his main country tour in the electorate of 'Bella's father' though she first used a friend's name and then took on a 'very simple forgettable name'—

Dennis said drily, "Jane Smith, I s'pose."

The tour was carefully dated and the route spelled out. The visit to Ralph Seymour's office in his electorate was described in detail. Abzug claimed to have gone in to ask for some help in getting a Housing Commission house in Brisbane—to which Seymour reportedly responded that it wasn't his business "and I would need to get on to 'your mob'." When Abzug asked how he might do this he had been fobbed off on to a young woman on the front desk who said simply she had no idea.

Abzug said it might be ignorance but he had become used to poor service in shops and businesses and this was 'more of the same'. He had then made a point of re-visiting a couple of the people he had initially spoken to as a white American, now as a black Australian. Only in one case did he feel he had been received and greeted with the same level of courtesy. The crowning moment of the 'tour' was his decision to visit, with Bella, her father and mother in Brisbane for Christmas. After some discussion, he had gone there wearing an 'Afro wig' and still brown-skinned but starting to look a bit faded and blotchy.

"We were turned away at the front door. It was made clear to Bella that she wasn't welcome. Because of me? Because of her strident Marxist beliefs? Both? I found it a terrible moment, but more terrible for her than for me. I would be going home to take up my everyday work as an editor at a small radical publishing house once I was my own normal self again. Bella would need to decide what she was now going to do with her life and whether forgiveness might be a part of it."

Brent looked up and said, "So—d'you think Bella might have gone to the US with him?"

"It doesn't really sound like it." Dennis wondered whether Peter Abzug had actually left the country already. "And was he the man Margaret Seymour says she saw?"

As he spoke he lifted the phone and punched in Daniel Wang's number. But it was the new woman, Nuala Bent, who picked up. She wasn't used to his way of pitching straight in but she said she would check that web-site.

"Ring me back when you've had a look." Dennis hung up.

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Dennis wasn't there to hear DS Bent say to Greg Sullivan, "Is he always so rude?"

"Who?"

"Dennis Walsh."

"I've never thought of him as rude … exactly … just someone who hates to waste time."

"Then I'll take it that he had a good reason for ringing." She booted up Daniel's computer and typed in the site Dennis had given her. Dennis instead busied himself with putting the kettle on and telling Brent that he'd had a ring from Cliff Brady who just might be able to give them a clue to the ringbarking of the oak tree up by the Cenotaph "when he decides whether he really wants to dob a neighbour in."

"A neighbour?"

"Someone he knows." This widened the field considerably. Cliff Brady, the elderly RSL president, knew almost everyone in town.

"And—this stuff, this Peter Abzug, d'you think this is all for real, not something Bella made up?"

Dennis hadn't considered it from this angle but finally said, "It can be checked I guess. If he really was driving round with a broken windscreen and needing to get a big dint knocked out."

"But even if it's true—why would he and Bella kill Zoe Penberthy, if it was her? I thought they were s'posed to be friends."

"Oh, I think they were. That's why I don't think it was murder or … well, I s'pose you could argue that it was suicide but it wasn't intended to be suicide. I think Bella and Zoe were always in close touch. Maybe they just swopped identities so people in Ralph's electorate wouldn't be influenced by the name—but maybe it happened before then. Zoe got the Porsche. Bella bought an old ute for Peter to travel round in. You can see it on the web-site. Pity it doesn't show the number plate. I'm not sure how much car-swopping went on. But Margaret told Zoe they'd be away a while and she was welcome to come out in the holidays before the second semester or whatever started."

"And Zoe invited some friends?"

"Looks like it. She came in the ute. Did Bella want a last drive or was it something to do with Peter? Anyway, her friends came out, they had a look around the farm. Zoe knew where the bunkers were because Margaret and Malcolm had told her. The other kids left to go back to Toowoomba. And Zoe stayed there waiting for Bella and Peter to turn up."

"Why were they meeting there?"

"A nice quiet place to all sit down and decide what they were going to do about identities, about the future, about the Porsche, about Zoe's career … maybe some other stuff we don't know about. But Zoe didn't handle tension any too well. She had to decide if she wanted to stay as Bella Seymour. I can understand her not wanting to be Penberthy if her father had abused her. But it would still be a difficult situation. And she started to stress out maybe."

"And those were the times when she was most likely to self-harm?"

"Looks like it. She had a drink of wine, and she'd maybe had coffee and more alcohol earlier on, but then she saw all Margaret's boxes of tranquilisers in the bathroom cupboard and she thought 'she won't miss one'. So she helped herself. But they reacted with the grog or maybe they were just wrong for her and she started to feel really really … it's a bit hard to try and think what she might've been like, sort of her head going to blow apart. But Bella and Peter turned up in the Porsche. Maybe they were wearing gloves and only slightly smudged Zoe's existing fingerprints, maybe they suggested she take it round behind the shed so it wouldn't be visible from the road, if they were all planning to spend the night there. But Zoe is getting worse and worse, she is going into a—what would you call it?"

"A psychotic episode?"

"Okay, that sounds serious enough. They come inside and she's really starting to beat up on herself. Bella's seen it before and maybe just says to Zoe to calm down but Peter hasn't, maybe, and he starts to panic and that makes Zoe worse—and she starts bashing her head with all the tension and pain going on inside it. Maybe they try to stop her, get the ornaments or books or whatever she's using away from her. She falls down. Maybe they think of picking her up and carrying her into a bedroom. And then they realise she's dead. So they really panic. They remove whatever she hit herself with."

"And they decide to make it look like some ravers have come in—because they don't believe anyone'll believe Zoe could kill herself like that?"

"They wreck the house—but try not to do damage that Margaret can't fix fairly easily—they take the ute and rev it up and down to make it look like lots of cars with drunk drivers. They leave the handbag with a few things that have Bella's name on it like her driving licence and the key to the flat. And then, out of the blue, just as they're preparing to leave, up comes Margaret. Maybe they don't hear the Merc or just think it's something on the road, a nice quiet engine. She says she never saw a ute there but I don't trust her to see it if it was in the shadows of those trees. They could try and run and hide but she's coming in, so they simply drop some clothes and go into a tight clinch. Margaret is very tired, she doesn't feel up to tackling a strange man, she goes to bed and hopes that the morning will magically clear her head and tidy the house. Bella and Peter drive away."

"And go where?"

"Who knows? We'll have to find if a Peter Abzug has left the country. It sounds like it but I suppose he could send stuff to his web-site from anywhere. But there is one discrepancy in there—"

"Such as?"

"The gun. Why did they get it down from wherever it's kept? The other things are just party mess but I think it's s'posed to be a message of some kind, I can't think just how."

Brent couldn't either. But whereas Brent would merely puzzle over the question in odd moments Dennis simply picked up the phone and rang the Seymour household and asked Margaret if they had checked the gun thoroughly before putting it away. She said, "No, I don't think so."

"Well, can you just go and get it and have a close look over it? I'll hold on." His first thought was that it might be one of the things Zoe Penberthy had picked up to hit her head with …

Margaret Seymour was gone nearly five minutes and while he waited Dennis said to his junior, "Nice lunch?"

"It was okay. But I don't think Iris really wanted to be there. She doesn't like the Catholic Church because it doesn't treat women … " He couldn't bring himself to say 'very well'.

"Well, when they run out of young men wanting to become priests they can either fill the church here with Filipinos or get serious about accepting women."

Brent didn't like this very casual blunt statement. But then Dennis Walsh was a pagan. What would he know? He decided it wasn't something he had to respond to. And Dennis said, "You'd best nip round to see Cliff Brady. If he can't give us anything more we'll need to send that Crimestoppers stuff on to George Hickman, he'll be wanting to get the *Bugle* to the printers pretty soon. Someone else might've seen something—"

Margaret Seymour came back on the line and said in a disbelieving way, "You won't guess what I've just found?"

"Well, I hope it's not some hair or something grisly."

"Oh no! Nothing like that! Pushed right down the barrel I found two hundred dollars and a note which just says 'Sorry about the mess'. What do you think it means?"

"Exactly what it says probably. Bella and her boyfriend made the place into a mess because they didn't think anyone would believe the other young woman died accidentally."

"But that was Bella, I'm sure it was—"

"The young lady started coming out to see you a few months back. But how long since you'd seen Bella previously?"

"Oh, quite a while. Maybe three or four years."

"And did the young lady ride your horse the way Bella would've ridden your horse?"

This seemed to puzzle Mrs Seymour because she finally said, "Well, no-o-o, perhaps not. I'm sure Bella could ride well. But she only ever poked round quietly, going up to the back paddocks, and then coming back and thanking us for the opportunity to have a little ride, she always said a little ride."

So Margaret Seymour had not tried to mislead them; she genuinely believed that was the Bella she had come to know, if not well, then at least well enough to recognise immediately. It raised much more difficult questions about Ralph and Colette …

*

Winville faxed Buckton Nuala Bent's report on her visit to the Penberthy farm. Donald Penberthy was the cousin of Joseph Raymond but was seriously deaf; his son David was mentally retarded, a good farm worker but not a man to question anything about his cousin Zoe. And more than that—he loved the times when Zoe turned up in the silver Porsche and let him sit in it. He had a driver's licence but it was a restricted one, only to be used for short local trips. But he seemed to just like sitting in the car or standing looking at it, perhaps because it was such an exotic thing to sit in the yard beside a rather tumbledown old house and sheds. But Nuala knew enough about country life to see that there was nothing wrong with the way the two men were running the farm, they just didn't see any kind of show of prosperity as being important. And a friend of Zoe's sometimes came out to see them but she only drove an old Holden.

David Penberthy described it in detail, down to a door which had obviously been roughly knocked out at some time. "Which door?" DS Bent had asked. David Penberthy had given this

some thought and then said, “The driver’s door.” And the friend? He said she looked very much like Zoe and he called her Bel but he didn’t really know anything about her and he didn’t know where she lived. He said ‘out’ only because he thought she came ‘out’ from Toowoomba.

It wasn’t definitive proof and a good lawyer would probably soon get David Penberthy flustered. But it did suggest a simple way that things might have happened that last evening. That Zoe had driven out, leaving Bella and the Porsche at the flat. Bella maybe wanted to look through any belongings of hers she still kept there, perhaps quietly think things through before she made a major decision in her life. And while she thought things through she set to work and cleaned and polished the flat. In the evening she drove away in the Porsche to pick Peter up … from where? It would be a hard one to try to pin down if he was in the habit of sometimes wearing wigs …

And Buckton was able to tell Winville about the message in the gun barrel.

“I think,” Daniel Wang said calmly, “we need to e-mail this Peter character and simply ask him to tell us what happened that evening. He may refuse. We may be on a totally wrong road. But if we give him a written assurance that we won’t try to charge him for failing to report a death—then maybe he’ll agree to spill the beans.”

The rest of the CIB team agreed it was worth a try. “But we have got a big big problem,” Greg Sullivan said in the words of a party-pooper. “Did Ralph and Colette deliberately mislead us—or did they genuinely not realise that wasn’t their daughter?”

“I think—and it’s only think, that they always knew Zoe and Bella had done some swopping. I don’t know how or when they knew—but they suddenly found themselves in the strange situation of either having to admit their daughter didn’t want to be Bella Seymour any more—even maybe have their name linked with Joe Penberthy who is hardly a man Ralph Seymour would hobnob with, even without the prison term—or they could simply say ‘yes, that’s Bella’. And once they said that there was no going back.”

The others gave this qualified agreement. “But how do we pin Ralph down?” DS Bent said rather gloomily. “He’s hardly going to admit he was wrong.”

“We’ve got the report from the dentist. He says the cast doesn’t fit with any information he has on Bella Seymour. That surely should be good enough to convince him the game’s up.”

“There’s another thing,” DC Deane put in cautiously. “That photo in the paper. That can’t have been Ralph’s doing.”

“No, I think that was Bella’s doing. The two of them must have made that decision while they were setting the scene. That Bella would stay as Zoe … or whatever name she took while she was traveling. And once it was all over the papers it was an added pressure on Ralph to say it was his daughter. It maybe even convinced him psychologically that despite some discrepancies it really was Bella in the morgue.”

“So who will go to Brisbane and confront Ralph and Colette?” Nuala Bent said rather drily.

“I guess I should,” Daniel Wang didn’t sound enthusiastic. “It *is* my case, even if I don’t feel I’ve done much of a job with it. But we still need to get as much supporting evidence as we can. There’s no guarantee Ralph’s going to roll over. He’s more likely to accuse us of making a hash of it all.”

But when everyone else had gone on home in the evening Daniel continued to sit there thinking about it all. It *was* a hash and there were still a great many unanswered questions and there was no guarantee Peter Abzug would deign to answer them. After all, the way he and Ms Seymour had responded to the death of Zoe Penberthy was hardly something to be proud of …

Then he picked up the phone and rang Dennis at home. “I’m going to Brisbane to see Ralph and Colette and I wonder if you can spare the time. I’m not looking forward to it and there’s no guarantee they’ll roll over and admit they knew what was going on. He’s more likely to try and get me demoted or something.”

“Could be.” Dennis didn’t rush to say he’d like a trip. “When’re you thinking of going?”

“Wednesday. Down and back in the one day if we can.”

“Okay, I’ll see about getting Brent organised.”

It didn’t take a brain to see that Constable Kelly was seriously down-in-the-dumps. Dennis had some sympathy. He too sometimes had moods which plummeted into the black depths. But he

wasn't sure that his simple suggestion to his junior—'just invite her out again and stop fussing about all this business with religion'—had gone down terribly well. Still, being in charge would take his mind off his personal miseries. Briefly.

"So how're you going to tackle the Seymours?" Dennis said as they sat over an early breakfast in Toowoomba. It was a foggy morning and Daniel hoped it would lift before he tackled the road down the Range.

"Just say we've got clear evidence that the body they identified as their daughter is in fact Zoe Penberthy. I won't go into details unless they get sticky."

"Fair enough."

Daniel could never decide whether Walsh's cryptic comments were a sign of full agreement or just something casually tossed out. He had the unexpected hope that Ralph Seymour would also find Dennis just that little bit daunting. Ralph had some wealth and power and influence behind him. But he always thought Dennis Walsh had something more valuable; he just wasn't sure how to describe it. 'A passion for justice' was a bit corny. It was more that Dennis didn't let his self, his ego, his desire to be proved right, get in his way. He liked running his little patch but he accepted that he was only a small cog in the wheel and that other people didn't always agree or support him. But it was the getting there, the outcome, that mattered more.

It might be taking his life in his hands but Daniel suddenly said, "Dennis, I know this is a bit personal, but have you thought of promotion? You should at least be Senior Sergeant Walsh by now."

"It'd be more money, maybe people'd take more notice of the things I say. But I decided I was content with what I am and where I am. So I reckon I'll stay as I am till I retire. I know there's people in Buckton who'd like to see me move on … and maybe it's good to have a change in style every so often … stops people second guessing you … but you get into more of a rut as you get older, you don't want to be taking on board all this departmental stuff cooked up in Brisbane, telling you to do things in new ways, and it's easier to ignore some of it if you've got a good record where you are … and it's hard to keep up with all the new technology. I'd be a bit lost surrounded by all these young johnnies with all their i-pods and all the stuff I haven't caught up with yet. One young kid at a time is okay. I don't know how I'd go if I was surrounded by them."

They went first to the Seymour home but as soon as they told Colette it wasn't her daughter she had identified as Bella she got very upset and said she wasn't going to discuss anything with them until she had Ralph with her. "And where is Ralph right now?" Daniel found it strange that she seemed to find no sense of relief in the knowledge that her daughter was probably still alive.

"He's—of course he's at the House, I'm sure they're sitting today."

"We can take you there—"

"He'll be very busy. I know he will."

"We need to get this sorted out before the Inquest. Otherwise it will probably end up embarrassing you both."

"I don't understand." But she finally agreed to drive into town so she could be with Ralph when they told him about Bella. Surely everyone would understand that it wasn't possible for her to fob the police off? It was after eleven when they arrived to be told that Ralph was in a Cabinet meeting.

"You'll have to ask him to come out for half an hour. We've just come from Winville."

One of the Parliament House staff went away to get him and the two men from the Downs were shown into a small room to wait. Dennis thought he would much rather go across the road and go for a wander in the Botanical Gardens but Ralph had to be tackled …

Seymour said, "This had better be good," as he came in and his wife who had been walking restlessly to and fro in the entrance hall came in to join him.

"Well, it's good news for you," Daniel Wang tried to sound cheerful. "We have been able to prove definitively that the woman in the morgue that we all thought was your daughter isn't. We have identified her as Zoe Penberthy."

Ralph and Colette turned and looked at each other but neither said anything.

"You don't seem surprised," Wang went on quietly. "So you always had doubts—or you knew your daughter and her friend Zoe were in the habit of changing identities. Which was it?"

"Neither." Ralph came to life. "We just feel astonished. I could have sworn that was Bella."

"Even though your daughter had no history of self harm?"

"I didn't take that seriously. I have never come across the problem before."

"And how do you know it isn't Bella?" Colette said.

"We've compared the teeth. They are nothing like."

"And you're saying that this Zoe, whoever she is, was driving our daughter's car?"

"You must surely know Zoe. She was your daughter's best friend in all her years at St Margaret's."

Ralph and Colette looked at each other then shook their heads. "No," Colette said, "Bella wasn't much of a one for making friends. She never invited anyone home."

"Perhaps she thought Zoe would not be welcome in your house," Dennis said non-committally.

"We aren't monsters," Colette said more tartly.

"But Bella wasn't welcome when she brought home a man just before Christmas," Dennis still sounded casual.

"Well, considering the man she brought home—what can you expect?"

"You knew something about him?"

"No, of course not! Just the look of him was enough."

"And you could tell everything you needed to know just by looking at him." Dennis sat back like a man with all the time in the world.

"He was rough, he was dirty, his hair looked like—God knows—he had some old crappy car—"

"And you based your decision solely on his appearance?"

"Wasn't that enough?"

Dennis merely raised his eyebrows. "But you had met him before?" He turned and directed the question to Ralph.

There was a slight hesitation then Ralph said only, "Not as far as I know."

"But you're not sure?"

"I meet a lot of people. It's part of the job."

"And if you met him, say in your electoral office, you would've treated him with much more courtesy—not told him to get out?"

Ralph again hesitated. "Are you saying—he *did* come to my office?"

Dennis looked at Daniel who gave him the slightest of nods. "Yeah, he did come to your office, he said he needed to know how to get a Housing Commission house in Brisbane. You told him to talk to your receptionist and she told him she had no idea where he should go or who he should see. I assume you had a waiting room full of constituents and it was too much trouble to find him a phone number."

As Dennis spoke the knowledge grew on him; not only that Ralph knew who the man was but that he was increasingly uneasy that they also knew. But Ralph only said, "It's possible. I'm a busy man."

"But not too busy to remember the man in question."

"Are you saying," Colette suddenly burst in, "that he went to Ralph's office and then tried to come to our house to bother us at home?"

"Does that seem likely to you?"

"People can be very annoying." She made it sound rather prissy.

"And you knew absolutely nothing about this man or your daughter's life?"

"Well, of course we knew about our daughter—"

"You went to Toowoomba to make sure everything was okay with her?"

"No."

"Then how did you know?"

"She rang up a couple of times and said she was okay."

"You had a conversation with her?"

Colette Seymour seemed to see this as a trick question. Finally she said, "No, she left a message on the machine."

"A message to say—what, 'I'm okay, mum, don't worry about me'?"

"Something like that."

"But you didn't ring her back?"

"I tried … but she was never there."

"But she had an answering machine, Mrs Seymour. Did you leave a message?"

"I must have, mustn't I?"

"Not if you didn't think it was your daughter at that address."

"I don't understand … "

"I think you do." Dennis let the words hang. It had gradually struck Daniel as he spent more time here that the Seymours were very confident, they had always had the things confidence is built on, but Dennis Walsh made them uneasy. "I couldn't understand why neither of you seemed to care much one way or the other—but then there was no reason to care particularly about Zoe Penberthy, was there?"

"Of course we cared. She was our daughter." Colette sounded angry rather than passionate.

"She *is* your daughter. She is still somewhere around."

"Well, seeing no one knows where she is—can we move on?" Ralph looked rather ostentatiously at his watch. "If this young woman is nothing to do with us and she wasn't murdered then it isn't anything to do with us any more. We'd like to get the car back. I assume it is now in Winville, and we hope you will handle the whole thing with *some* discretion."

"Are you sure she wasn't murdered?"

"Isn't that what you're saying?"

"And you're sure your daughter had nothing to do with her death?"

"Hardly our business if she did. She was brought up properly. We've got nothing to reproach ourselves with. She had every advantage. That car alone is worth twenty thousand even if she hasn't been looking after it. And I hardly think it's up to us to get worked up about Joe Penberthy's daughter. So if you don't have anything else to tell us we'll organise to get the car back and the whole miserable mess is nothing more to do with us."

"You gave or you lent the car to your daughter?"

"Gave," Ralph said after a long pause. "And the ungrateful little miss didn't even say thank you."

"And she gave it to Zoe Penberthy, Joe Penberthy's daughter that you know nothing about. But as she deliberately left the car for your brother and sister-in-law it would seem she wanted them to benefit from it."

"Like hell she did! There's no way those pathetic—those *junkies*—are going to get it. I will be straight on to my lawyer. Now, if you will excuse me—" He got up, gave a brief taciturn nod to Wang, and went out.

Colette Seymour looked lost for a moment, then she picked up her handbag and went to rise. It was chancing his arm but Dennis said briskly, "Just one more question, Mrs Seymour, what firm did your husband use to check up on your daughter?" It might not be something so formally organised but both Ralph and Colette had always given the impression of people who were at least one step ahead …

Again she couldn't stop her gaze suddenly widening. Then she said testily, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Private enquiry agents of some kind. You're not a good liar, Mrs Seymour," Dennis said calmly, "which we'll take as something in your favour."

"Business Search." It had the feel of something being dragged from her. She walked to the door then stopped and said to Wang, "If you drag my husband's name through the mud I will make sure the Commissioner and the Minister and everyone gets to hear about it." On that parting shot she turned and hurried out.

Wang asked in the front office for a telephone directory. Business Search had an upstairs office only a few blocks away. “I wonder if they’ll be willing to tell us just what Ralph asked them to do?” Daniel said rather gloomily as they set out to walk.

The brochures they picked up and read as they waited to see the boss of the agency said Business Search specialised in business investigations including ‘employee theft’, ‘financial fraud’, ‘computer crime’ and ‘industrial espionage’. “Sounds rather exciting,” Dennis said casually, “sort of James Bond stuff in the factory or the office.”

“Yes, following Bella seems a bit out of their comfort zone—” But the receptionist said brightly, “If you would like to go in now, gentlemen, Mr Broadbent will see you now.”

Paul Broadbent was in his late thirties and had the slightly nerdy look of someone who preferred to do most of his investigating on his computer. Daniel Wang identified them and said they would like to know what Ralph Seymour asked them to do.

“That is confidential.” Broadbent put on a slight give-nothing-away smile.

“We are investigating a case,” Wang said, “in which Bella Seymour and Peter Abzug remain the key persons of interest. If you can tell us why Ralph Seymour wanted them investigated then that could have a bearing on the case.”

“I thought Bella Seymour died.”

“Mr and Mrs Seymour told us the body in the morgue was Bella. We have since discovered that it wasn’t. It was a young woman called Zoe Penberthy,” Daniel felt a reluctance to say all this but it would be common knowledge soon enough and it might loosen Mr Broadbent’s tongue, “and Bella Seymour and Peter Abzug were the only people with her when she died.”

“So she’s a suspect not a victim?”

Daniel Wang nodded.

“Well, I can’t tell you where Ms Seymour is now. But I can tell you that we were hired to keep an eye on Peter Abzug. It was quite a big operation. We had three people on it. Mr Seymour paid us up to the end of January. After that—I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

“Why did he want Mr Abzug monitored?” Wang assumed it had something to do with Bella but Broadbent surprised him by saying simply, “Because he’s a Communist.”

“It’s hardly a crime—”

“Mr Seymour believed he was being recruited to stir up trouble in his electorate. He wanted to know where he went and what he did and who he spent most time with.”

“Recruited? Who by?”

“His daughter—and a union.”

“Which union?”

“The Wharfies, the Waterside Workers—”

“Which used to be run by Joe Penberthy?”

“Until he blotted his copybook, yes.”

“And you know for certain the union was involved in recruiting him?”

“No, that claim did not stack up.”

“Mr Abzug suffered several attacks while in Mr Seymour’s electorate. His windscreen was shot out. His car was rammed. I assume your person who was keeping an eye on him saw who did those crimes.”

There was a long silence. Then Paul Broadbent shook his head slowly. “I’m sorry, I can’t help you with that.”

It was Dennis Walsh who leant forward and said slowly, “Bullshit. You knew exactly what was going on.”

At last Broadbent said, “The best I can do is give you the numbers of the vehicles that were involved.”

“Which you took to police as a witness to the attacks?”

“No. They were given to Ralph Seymour. He said he would handle it.”

“And your operative was called as a witness when police investigated the attacks.”

"We heard no more about it." Mr Broadbent turned to his computer and tapped away at the keyboard for a minute or two. Then he wrote down three numbers. "The first one is the car Abzug was driving. The other two were passed on by my operatives."

Daniel took the slip of paper. "We'll be in touch." He didn't try to sound grateful. He stood up and Walsh followed suit.

As they went down in the lift some minutes later Wang said, musingly, "Somehow, I don't think Ralph Seymour has a long and happy political career ahead of him … "

*

NOTES: There has not been a Minister for Minerals and Energy in Queensland called Ralph Seymour. Nor a Joe Penberthy nor such a sad student at St Margaret's …

Country Casebook: Book Thirty-Four

Case No. 1: An Unexpected Confession

The little hamlet of Dinawadding on Queensland's Darling Downs no longer had a resident police constable. It made do, as best it could, with a visit about once a week of a constable from the nearby large town of Winville and a local group of residents who regarded themselves as an unofficial Neighbourhood Watch. This situation was far from ideal because the times when people were most likely to create problems, such as coming out of the small Railway Hotel on a Saturday night, rarely coincided with the times when the constable was present. The small town of Buckton to the north could provide someone within twenty to thirty minutes in an emergency. But people who smashed windows, lit fires, punched hotel patrons, or had hit-and-run accidents, were often well and truly gone by the time the police turned up.

A rather different and problematic situation was brought to the usual young constable, Yusuf 'Sam' Hussein, on his regular visit. The man who came to see him was a rather diffident and inarticulate man in his mid-twenties who introduced himself as Simon Proctor. He said simply, "They say they are going to charge me with manslaughter … at least … because they say I caused a death. But I didn't. I *know* I didn't."

"Who is going to charge you?" Sam sounded puzzled. He had heard nothing about any such case and he felt sure he would at least have heard a rumour if the death had taken place on their patch.

"They're s'posed to come from Brisbane any day now. I thought of running away."

"You mean—someone died in Brisbane and you're getting the blame?" Constable Hussein continued to frown.

"They say I punched him and I knocked him out—but that's not true!—and he was in a coma and now he's died. What'm I s'posed to do?"

This struck Sam Hussein as likely to be an extraordinarily complex case. For a start who would have jurisdiction? And the worried young man in front of him didn't strike him as someone

who would normally pick a fight; not unless he had a strongly masochistic streak or was seriously provoked or acted in self-defence.

While he tried to get his own thoughts into some sort of order, Sam said to him, "Take a seat and we'd better run through the whole thing." He got himself an incident sheet and a pen and wrote down the man's name and date of birth and address. Then he said, "So who is the man who died?"

"Chick Marrow. I don't know what the Chick is short for. He's been working to build some of the new sheds across the line."

"The extension to Japana?" Japana was the local name for the big feed lots owned by something called the Neurand Trust, a family trust for two young men Neumann and Randall Hoysted. This had led some local people to dub the business 'Hoysteds' Horror'.

"Yep." Proctor started squeezing and cracking his knuckles in an irritating nervous gesture. Sam concentrated on the sheet in from of him. "So when did you meet Chick Marrow?"

"That day. See, I've been out here working for my uncle, well, he's my great-uncle really but I call him uncle. And mostly I just stay at the farm. But I came in that evening to have a drink at the pub. He said, my uncle said, I needed to see someone besides him and Jeremy, make friends, you know. So I did. And these guys start picking on me. I didn't know their names and I just tried to ignore them. But it went on and on, just calling me all sorts of names, and I started to get—"

"What sort of names?"

"Everything. A sissy and a weed and a townie and a poof and … I don't remember them all. Does it matter?"

"No. Go on."

"They tried to get me to come outside but I wasn't going to do that. At least, inside the people that run the place—I thought they might tell those men to back off, but they didn't." He was starting to get breathless. "And then I thought—I'm going home. Why should I pay to put up with all this stuff. And I got up and went outside but they came after me."

"How many d'you think?"

"Three, maybe four. The lights were on but they're not that strong … and I just wanted to get to my car and drive away."

Sam nodded and waited. The sequence seemed quite clear but Mr Proctor obviously found retelling the story pretty stressful. He sounded like someone who had just run away from a charging bull and the nervous movement of his hands continued unabated.

"I think I said something like, just leave me alone, and he came up close and said why should he, and he sort of gave me a push and I stumbled a bit, but then I got mad and made a swing at him and I missed completely and nearly fell over and he came right up to me and it was like he wasn't scared or anything, just sort of casually taunting me, and he put up his hands—" he demonstrated putting his fingers out rather stiffly and pushing them to and fro in the air, "like this, like he was going to poke my eyes out. And he called me a pathetic little creep or something and all the others were laughing like anything and saying 'yeah, yeah, show him who's boss'—or something like that. And I swung my fist again and I caught him on the jaw. I think he thought I would miss again and he didn't try to duck or move back or anything. And he fell right over backwards. It really surprised me. And I think it was then with the others going at me, really trying to knock me down, that the pub chap came out and he sort of yelled at us all, told us to bugger off, and not come back."

"And did everyone leave?"

"I did! Christ! I just ran to my car, it's not my car, it's the farm ute, but I wanted to get away while they were looking at him and making out it had nothing to do with them … and it was parked just a bit along from the pub and I just turned there—" The pub patrons could go round the block but that would take them past the police station. It had its lights left on every night even though there was rarely anyone there. But the heavy drinkers had got in the habit of doing a U-ee by the pub and heading back that way. "And I saw them lifting him into another car. It seemed amazing to me that I could knock someone out … and maybe it wasn't me, maybe it was when he fell to the footpath … and then they took off with him and headed over the railway line. I didn't know where they were taking him. I … I don't really think I cared. Because I knew I couldn't risk coming back

to the pub again, there was just no way I was going to go through that again … and if I didn't come to the pub there wasn't much else to go to … so I mostly stay on the farm and watch TV of a night."

"How many drinks had you had?"

"Only two. I really just went for the company, maybe meet a girl … "

As he had spoken Sam Hussein had gradually put together an image of a quiet retiring sort of young man, not someone who would be at home with the rowdy element in any pub and someone who would never find the best way to deal with the teasing and the taunts. Probably conscientious and willing to be helpful without being educated or particularly bright. Probably someone who in his quietness was like a red rag to those young hooligans.

"So you didn't meet a girl there?"

"Not really, no. There were two young women there when I came in and I smiled at them, but they got up and went away a few minutes later. I didn't even find out their names."

"So—when did you find out what had happened to Chick Marrow?"

"I heard it next time I was in town to get a few groceries. People were saying he was in a coma and that his dad was going to come round and *get* me and I'd wish I'd never been born … and they said he'd been taken to Brisbane. I don't know if they took him there or if it was a hospital sent him. And then I didn't hear anything more for a few weeks and I thought maybe he was getting better and I stopped thinking about him, well, not much, just hoping I'd be gone again by the time he got home—"

"But he wasn't getting better?"

"It was yesterday. I came in quite early. Uncle Abe wanted me to do some bank stuff at the post office," which acted as a Commonwealth Bank agency, "and Mr Marrow, his dad, was there and he came over and said he was going to see I was charged with his son's death and he was going on and on about it, about how I thought I was clever and he'd wipe the smile off my face. It wasn't like that. I was pretty shocked. And everyone was standing there listening. It was really awful. But he wasn't the sort of person you could say you were sorry to, that it wasn't meant to turn out like that. And I could see him wishing it was the other way around. That his son had killed me. He kept calling me a useless waste of space." His voice seemed to run away back down his throat, and his adam's apple worked uneasily. Constable Hussein half expected him to give out a little whimper.

"But no one's been in contact with you officially?"

"Not yet. But he seemed so *sure*—like he absolutely *knew* … and they will, won't they?"

"Will what?" Sam tried to think through what the charge was likely to be.

"He said it would be murder but someone else was standing there and they said it would be manslaughter. How long will I need to wait?"

"Did the father sound like he'd just come from seeing or hearing about his son?"

"Yeah, I guess so … I think that's why everyone believed him. And then I went out and someone came out after me and said something like, don't worry about it, they'll know Chick was hassling you … I dunno what I said, I just wanted to get home … and I've done nothing but worry ever since."

Would it be involuntary manslaughter, Hussein wondered, as he said he would look into it. "I'll be in touch." He didn't relish talking with Des Peck at the pub or with Mr Marrow, Senior, but it would probably give him an idea as to whether he would be called on to collect evidence—and if there were seriously mitigating circumstances then it was always better to know them upfront before charges were laid …

Or did Mr Marrow mean he was going to take out a civil case for compensation …

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The small hotel, really just a large square weatherboard house, was quiet as Constable Hussein went in. The room was warmed with a couple of wall-mounted heaters. Mr Peck and a couple of middle-aged men sat at the bar; perhaps salesmen for a drug company trying to talk Japana into buying their products. The pleasant smell of steak and onions grilling and hot coffee suggested it was nearly lunch to Sam but he thought he would like to get the two interviews over and then relax.

"Mr Peck," he came over to join the men at the bar, "could I just have a word with you about the night Chick Marrow was bashed in your pub."

"He wasn't bashed *in* my pub," Mr Peck said sharply. "And I am not responsible for what those young thugs do outside."

"Did you see what happened?"

"They all went out. A bit later I heard a lot of yelling and I went out and told the lot of them to clear off. I saw Chick was down on the ground and then a couple of his mates picked him up and put him in a car and drove off. End of problem, so far as I was concerned. I just came back inside."

"Did anyone say anything?"

"One of them said something like 'he hit him' but there was that much noise going on and some of the ones inside had also come out to see what was going on."

"What time would this have been?"

"Bit after eight, I'd say. Ten past. Bit more."

"You've heard that Chick's dad has told Simon Proctor he's going to be charged with murder?"

"Hot air, I'd say. Why?"

"So you didn't see any need to intervene?"

"No. Pretty much the usual."

Sam had the feeling that the only thing Mr Peck was concerned about was his pub and his licence. That a young man had died after being on his premises didn't seem to be bothering him. But then he maybe regarded Chick Marrow as the waste of space.

Hussein finally tracked Les Marrow down at the site of a new shed across the railway line. The place still had open paddocks but sheds and yards and silos were going up apace. Sam thought the people of Dinawadding were probably grateful that a couple of them had got jobs on the site.

"Mr Marrow," Sam wondered if he would be able to talk over the din as sheets of corrugated iron were settled into place and hammered down, "I've come to talk to you about your son. I'm sorry to hear he died."

"Yeah—and if the ruddy police had been doing their job he might still be alive."

"I would be here more often if they would let me." This was putting it squarely back on the shoulders of Superintendent Brophy as Sam saw no reason to feel personally guilty; Brophy had promised Dinna a permanent officer months ago but nothing had happened.

"Yeah, yeah, so what're you going to do about it?"

"You told people that Simon Proctor is going to be formally charged with murder. Have you been officially told that?"

"Course I have. I made sure the hospital got straight on to the cops the minute Chick died. And I said there's no way I'm going to let my son be buried till I've got some satisfaction. When that little pipsqueak's gone to jail I'm going to take out a case against him. I'll make him pay up too, you'll see." It was the compensation, not the idea of justice, which seemed to give him the greatest sense of satisfaction.

"D'you think he's got much money?"

"Course not. But Abe's got a long stocking. I'll make sure he dips into it."

"And you're sure it was an unprovoked attack?"

"Whaddayou mean—course it was!"

"Your son didn't say or do anything?"

"Course not."

Sam merely nodded. He would need some advice on whether he should be doing anything specific on the case. "So could you tell me what hospital your son was in? I'll need to look at what charges they're going to lay."

"The Royal."

"Okay. We'll see what's happening."

"Yeah, and you make sure they get him for murder, none of this watering everything down, or I'll have something to say about it."

Sam considered saying ‘is that a threat?’ and the more conciliatory ‘we’ll be in touch’ but in the end he just said ‘good afternoon’ and went back to his car. Les Marrow yelled after him “What’s good about it!” Sam pretended not to hear and opened his car door.

The Royal. Should he ring them and make sure no one was leading him up the garden path? He agonised over this for several minutes as he made himself a coffee back at the station. Then he thought of his time working under Dennis Walsh in Buckton and thought, yes, it’s better to know straight away. The hospital switchboard put him through to a woman who said cautiously, “Yes, we had a man called Hayden Marrow here.” Just how Hayden had been turned into Chick was a mystery but Sam had already found that small country towns were full of nicknames with no obvious link to the original.

“And can you confirm that he died there?”

She eventually gave him a date and volunteered that he had died just as he was going down to the theatre. Hussein hadn’t known this and said, “What kind of operation was he going to have?”

“Oh, his father had given permission to donate a kidney.”

Sam hid his moment of surprise. Did this change anything? “And—so the operation didn’t go ahead then?”

“Oh, it did, in fact they removed both kidneys and donated them to people on our waiting list. I’m sure it’s what the son would’ve wanted.”

“So there was no problem about taking them after he had died?”

“He was put on a heart pump for the few minutes necessary. And two people will have a better life because of him.” She hesitated and then said, “Can I ask why you are concerned about him? I can assure you everything was done by the book.”

“The young man who punched him will now be charged with manslaughter rather than assault, it looks like. So I wanted to have confirmation from your end.”

“I see. Yes, it is tragic in that way but life-saving in another way.”

“Could I ask—who was given the two kidneys? Would it be the same person?”

“No. They went to two people. Two lives improved. Spending hours and hours a week on a dialysis machine is no picnic, I’m afraid, though we do our best. I am not sure that I can give you the names, at least not without permission. Do you see it as necessary to your investigation?”

Sam tried to decide what, if anything, to tell her. At last he said carefully, “I’ve just come from interviewing his father. I found it extremely surprising that he would even think of donating a kidney. He didn’t strike me as a person who would think along those lines. So I wondered if he’d heard of a family member being on the waiting list. Something like that … ”

“Well, the planned gift was to go to Milo Forman and I’m sure he’ll make it public as soon as he’s safely back at work. The other one went to a woman and I don’t think I should give out her name. She may be unaware of the circumstances behind the donation and she might not feel comfortable with knowing.”

Sam accepted that and thanked her. But then he sat over his coffee for several minutes wondering about that sequence of events. Forman was a Brisbane talk-back host, one of the most aggressively macho of the shock jocks. Sam had sometimes heard his program when he was in Brisbane and couldn’t help other officers wanting to listen in. That they couldn’t see that he might find some of the calls and some of Forman’s comments upsetting never seemed to occur to some of the men. Quite likely Hayden’s dad listened in when he was in the cab of his truck or on a site where it wasn’t too noisy but that didn’t mean … he tried to think what would be involved in actually donating a kidney to a specific person. It probably could be done. He’d heard of parents doing it for children, other relatives, best friends. But would Mr Marrow even know Milo Forman? It didn’t seem very likely.

And beyond that he could see a legal quagmire. Who had actually killed Hayden ‘Chick’ Marrow? Young Simon Proctor? The people who bundled him into the back of a car for a very long journey? The hospital? … Les Marrow? …

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DSC Ali Deane had struggled hard to make it in the tough blokey world of the police. She had two strikes against her, being a young woman and being Aboriginal, and she had worked long hours

to get to her current position as a Detective Senior Constable. She had struggled with previous bosses to be seen as anything beyond the girl who made the tea. She still found her overall boss, Superintendent Brophy, ready to dismiss her as someone to mind lost children and type letters and put the kettle on. Worse, in a way, was the position taken by DS Sullivan and DSS Wang—perhaps because she quite liked them both and thought they quite liked her.

She felt that they failed to give her opportunities to show her initiative, to make a real contribution with knowledge and ideas, for reasons which they probably didn't recognise as sexist. Greg Sullivan seemed to want to wrap her up in cottonwool; a kind of chivalric impulse to protect her from the nastier aspects of human conflict. He probably felt that he wouldn't like his daughter Jasmine to have to see dead bodies and so he slipped that attitude on to her. She sometimes felt like saying, "Greg, in your house, who changed the babies' nappies and cleared up when they vomited everywhere and needed bleeding cuts bandaged?" Greg would probably admit it was always his wife Narelle but he wouldn't see what she was getting at; because to do so would be to feel she was pushing his kindest impulses back in his face instead of appreciating them …

And Daniel Wang seemed to be so intent on proving something to himself, of getting a big name case on his record as a way of getting a quick transfer out of Winville that it never seemed to occur to him that there were times when she would like to do something more than the donkey work. And he wasn't immune to Greg's kind of attitude. He had even said to her a couple of times, "This probably won't be nice. I'd best take Greg."

Sometimes she wanted to stand up and scream. Sometimes she wanted to slash her arm and say "See! I don't fall apart at the sight of a bit of blood!" And marrying Sam Hussein had added another person into the mix who seemed to want to protect her from … things …

DS Nuala Bent had been in Winville a couple of weeks helping them with the Seymour case and she had managed quite well, making sure they listened to her and took her seriously. But she hadn't been here long enough to really make a difference. Nor had she really made much effort to understand the situation in the Winville office. Deane had invited her to come round for dinner one evening but she had just said casually that she already had a date. There were women who would go out of their way to help and support women below them on the ladder but Ali Deane didn't think DS Bent was one of them.

When Sam came home late from Dinawadding and told her the story of his day and confirmed that Brisbane had been in touch with Winville to find out the status of any impending case against Proctor, only to be told, according to Sergeant Hassell, that no one in Dinna had contacted the police either at the time of the fight or since. They had apparently cleared it with Brophy to have Proctor charged although Hassell didn't know whether the charge would be manslaughter or murder.

Ali Deane listened carefully to his story before saying, "And Proctor hit him in self-defence?"

"That was my impression." Sam Hussein had been in Australia for more than ten years but he still tended to sound a little more formal than his colleagues. 'Policespeak' sounded more natural in his mouth.

"And you think Les Marrow is out to get him?" Sam agreed to this. He probably didn't know enough about the background of the fight and the people involved to go out on a limb with anyone beyond Ali. He said slowly, "What else do you think I should've done?"

She didn't answer directly. "D'you think the hospital might try to get out of any responsibility for the death—and that they took both kidneys when they only had signed permission to take one, by simply getting the police to focus on the man who put him in hospital in the first place?"

"It's a bit hard to say. But there was something about Proctor … sort of a bit pathetic … I s'pose I could feel like I was in his shoes. I know what's it's like when people gang up on you outside a pub."

"And the father never came to us to lay a complaint? Not in Dinna or Buckton?"

"He didn't say so." Sam, now that he considered this, found it odd. There was something fairly pushy and aggressive about the father. Would he really just sit back and hope that someone else would report his son's situation to the police? "But he seemed to really like the idea that

Proctor's now going to be charged with something more serious. I wonder if there's another agenda there I didn't pick up on."

"Sure to be," she said almost cheerfully. "If he's got a connection to Japana … "

"You're like Dennis. You always believe the worst of them."

"And we're nearly always right." She sounded sober rather than triumphant. "But that's maybe the way to go. Charge Proctor with assault, make sure he gets the sequence of events on to the official record, and then it will be that little bit harder for them to upgrade the charge."

"You mean—you want me to charge him?"

"He came to you?"

"Yep. He came into the station. That was the first I knew of it."

"Okay, so now he has to do an official confession and get charged. Tell him to come here tomorrow so it can all be dealt with. Send him to the Watch House for the night. Have him up in court as soon as he's had a chance to get Legal Aid or whatever. He may get a very short sentence but it's more likely he'll just get a Good Behaviour Bond or something. It obviously wasn't premeditated, he wasn't armed, and it should come over as self-defence. He might only get a caution."

Sam thought this through and thought it might be a way of staving off the big guns. "So what should I do now? And what if my summing-up of it all is wrong? Maybe he just put on an act so I'd feel sorry for him."

"It's not too late. Ring him at home and ask him to come in first thing in the morning and do his confessing. And even if he was exaggerating a bit—it was still three or four men ganging up on him, wasn't it?"

Whether Simon Proctor understood that coming to Winville would be to his benefit or whether he was secretly wishing he had never confessed to anything wasn't clear from his response to Sam's call. But he turned up in Winville early next morning and Sam had him charged with assault by 9 am and on to the end of the court list for the day. It might get adjourned but at least it was now official.

What Sam had not taken into consideration was the possibility that two men from Brisbane would turn up in the late afternoon to arrest Simon Proctor for murder. Superintendent Brophy called Constable Hussein into his office and said simply, "You might like to tell these gentlemen why you've tried to undermine their case."

There was a time when such a request would have seen Sam go weak at the knees. But he had gained greatly in skills, in experience, in confidence, over the last couple of years. Now he said quite calmly, "He came to see me in Dinawadding yesterday and confessed to hitting Hayden Marrow outside the pub there. I checked with the hotel licensee, Hayden's father, and the hospital, to make sure he wasn't just making a story up. Everything seemed to check out about the fight though I didn't contact the other men who were with Hayden at the time. I asked Simon Proctor to come to Winville to make a formal confession which he did first thing this morning. I arranged for him to go to the Watch House but we were able to get him into court today and he was put on a Good Behaviour Bond."

"You knew the charges were going to be up-graded?"

"Not personally. My boss only said it was a rumour. And I saw my job only as seeing that he got charged for the crime he had confessed to. I assume you will be re-arresting him now."

"You're too right we will." One of the men from Brisbane gave Sam a contemptuous look; Sam had learnt the hard way that there were different kinds of looks: some were about him as a cop but this one said very clearly 'What the hell are they letting into the Force now? Some greasy woggy little cretin?' "And let's just hope you haven't mucked anything up for us. We want to see a conviction on this one. Were you in court for the hearing?"

"Only the first part. He talked with a lawyer but he ended up speaking for himself. I don't know whether he said the same things to the magistrate as he said to me when he came in this morning."

"So where is he now?"

"Gone home to the farm I would think."

"Okay, you can go, Constable," John Brophy could see that they had finished with Hussein; he could also see that his young constable had not made a particularly positive impression. "And next time you hear rumours that a larger charge is pending check with me first."

"Yes, sir."

Brophy nodded towards the door and Sam went out. There was something that made him a little uneasy about the brief meeting. It might be to do with his background. But there was also another puzzle: why were they so certain it was murder when they had not even talked with Simon Proctor or anyone in Dinawadding? Or did they plan to start at the top and ease it back to manslaughter or even aggravated assault somewhere down the track? He felt uncomfortable about it all. Would they come all this way just because there had been a bit of a punch-up outside a country pub? Or was there some vital information he had missed?

He was still agonising over it when he got home and found that Ali had beaten him home. She listened to his account as she began cooking chops and boiling vegetables. At the end of it she said, "Don't worry. It's on the books now. And once they've checked with everyone in Dinna they'll see you were right."

Sam could see it was out of his hands now and there was no point in worrying but he still felt a vague sense of unease, as though there *was* another agenda and he just hadn't managed to untangle it from the obvious …

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The two detectives from Brisbane took Sergeant Hassell with them next morning to Dinawadding; mainly to direct them on unfamiliar roads it would seem. Although they had discussed with DSS Wang and DS Sullivan the outline of their planned interviews they still managed to leave a slightly ruffled feeling behind them. It was Greg Sullivan who said rather plaintively, "Shouldn't they have taken one of us—seeing it is a CIB case now?"

Wang shrugged. "They obviously think we're a lot of hicks."

"And it's just as well Ali didn't hear them calling Sam a greasy wog, she would've scratched their eyes out—"

"Sometimes, Greg, I wonder why my parents were so keen to come here." Daniel drew a deep breath. "Still, at least we look like getting somewhere with that Japana business. I think Whitelaw may end up wishing he'd taken us more seriously."

They had received a fax of a page from an old Rhodesian newspaper to show that a Humphrey and Anne Whitgreave had recorded the birth of their baby son, Sebastian Paul Whitgreave, on the date and place which tallied with the Whitgreave passport Whitelaw was using. But what had happened to that little boy? Oliver Hone's father had not been able to find a death in the paper, nor did anyone seem to know anything of the child. He might've died very soon after birth and the parents had been too distressed to send another notice to the paper. Mr Homan-Mortlake had not left it there. He had wandered round the most likely cemeteries looking at the children's graves and the family mausoleums but had not come up with a burial. Either the child had grown up in another family for some reason or no one remembered just what had happened …

He hoped Oliver's father would not take any risks. He thought that even without a cause of death, or a date, they would be able to put together enough to back up Seb Whitelaw's confession. He just hoped the stuff about identity would not confuse a potential jury of ordinary country folk, not sophisticated in the ways of passport fraud or mercenary contracts. But could they tie it down further without putting the Homan-Mortlake family into danger?

Greg Sullivan's thoughts were still running along the grooves of the Proctor case. "I wonder if Sam let his sympathies for young Proctor get in the way? He might seem a bit pathetic but maybe he's secretly a karate black belt or something."

"And we'll have Andrews and Carney steaming back in here to tell us we've mucked up their case? Yep, it won't surprise me. But looking at it from a legal point-of-view—doesn't it strike you as a bit suss? I thought they could only take organs if you had personally given permission?"

"You hear of families donating them when their son dies in a car accident."

"But that is different. There was no suggestion, or not that we've been told, that this Marrow bod was dying—so how could his dad legally give away his kidney? And how could they take both kidneys without his permission after Hayden Marrow died?"

Greg considered the questions in his rather slow methodical way and finally said, "Maybe the hospital isn't leveling with us? They knew he was dying when they took him down to the theatre."

"But to take a kidney when someone was very weak—then that was almost signing his death warrant, surely? And how would they know that death was inevitable?"

"Maybe his kidneys weren't working any more?"

"But would you want a kidney that wasn't working?"

"Not particularly, but maybe they can flush them out or something and get them working again. And the whole thing is a bit suss—because if you take organs before someone is dead, knowing that'll kill them—then aren't you killing them? I don't see how it differs from mercy killings of terminally ill people. The people still end up dead because of something someone else has done. Or am I missing something?"

"We bend the rules to harvest organs simply because we're desperate to get more of them. If we didn't need people's hearts and livers we'd frown on it all. But you can't take the high moral ground if you've got a waiting list for hearts from here to Buckton. And if they're dying anyway—"

"But people can recover from years of coma. And all these near-death experiences we hear about now that people can be saved … who makes the call?"

"The doctors and the hospital administrators, I would assume. But you're not seriously thinking of taking on the Royal?"

"No." Greg Sullivan rarely went out on limbs even when the cases were small and local.

DSS Andrews and DS Carney were none too happy when they came back to Winville in the late afternoon. Sergeant Hassell had gone without the station key and they hadn't been able to get in to check whether anyone had ever reported the fight outside the Railway Hotel. They had re-interviewed Mr Peck at the hotel. They had found and interviewed the three other men present at the fight, who all said Proctor had just gone 'mad' and gone at Chick like a 'wild bull' and similar expressions. One of them, Jerry McCreadie, said, "Chick was only playing with him, only teasing him a bit, and he just suddenly lost the plot completely. It was a bit scary."

Jerry had also been the one to put Chick in his car and take him across the railway and, first, to the Marrow home. Mr Marrow had not seemed very worried but had reportedly said, "We'd better not try to move him. Can you get him to hospital?"

McCreadie hadn't really wanted to take him anywhere, not feeling very keen on taking the unconscious body on a long journey, and having had a fair few drinks himself. He had finally taken him to the hospital in Oakey but they had then sent him on by ambulance to Toowoomba. When he showed no sign of recovering consciousness by the end of the week he had been sent to Brisbane for MRI scans and other tests.

And they had gone to the farm where Abraham Proctor, his son, and young Simon sat round the small shabby living room and listened to the two Brisbane men spell out the case. Simon Proctor had not become any more musclebound or confident in the interim and Adrian Hassell if not the other men felt a twinge of doubt; Simon Proctor might be able to pack a punch but it wasn't likely to have much force behind it. If he had knocked Chick Marrow out then he had just got 'lucky' or Chick had hit his head on something as he lost his footing and fell back—or the long drive on not very good country roads had jarred and jolted something in his brain.

But Simon Proctor admitted he had caught Chick Marrow on the jaw and he had fallen backwards; the story of the events of that night was very similar to what he had told the magistrate in Winville. He added one small detail. "I walked away from them, I just wanted to get away and get home before they came at me again—and I saw his mates sort of slapping him around, trying to get him to wake up I guess. And then they gave up doing that and pushed him into the back seat of the car. I drove home then so I don't know if they had another go at him."

"You're trying to say, son," Andrews said aggressively, "that it wasn't you that hurt him, it was his mates?"

Simon wished he could say that but his honesty came to his aid and he said, “No, I did take that swing at him. He was laughing at me. Just like he knew I couldn’t hurt a fly. I was very surprised when he fell down.”

“You didn’t do anything to help him?” Andrews liked to go in hard. He often had his suspects admitting to things before they knew where they were. But old Abraham Proctor and his son were big impressive men; they were probably as good as any lawyer when it came to protecting the young man from intimidation.

“No. His mates were all there. I was scared they would have a go at me. One of them kicked me in the shins and they sort of jostled me a bit. I just turned and ran to the ute.”

“And why did it take you all this time before you came forward?”

“I didn’t know I had done any serious damage, not till someone said they heard he had died. I went to the police. But it isn’t easy to go to the police there. They’re only there one day a week and it isn’t always the same day. To drive into town and find the station locked isn’t much … much good.” If John Brophy was hoping to make the situation in Dinawadding look good he had missed the boat. Other people confirmed that the police did not come on a regular day. That Constable Hussein only came when Superintendent Brophy thought to send him.

But it was Abraham Proctor who asked the question his great-nephew was too nervous and worried to ask. “So why are you after this lad like this? He took a swing at a bully and managed to connect. It’s hardly a hanging offence. He didn’t do anything more than what happens at that pub week in week out.”

“Hayden Marrow, let me remind you,” Andrews said grimly, “did die. And your great-nephew was responsible for his death. Maybe that isn’t what he intended but that’s the way it worked out. We’re going to have to charge him with murder and it will be up to the court to decide whether it was premeditated or not.”

There was a slight pause then Carney said more mildly, “I would suggest you look for some good legal advice.”

None of the Proctor family were particularly adept at reading the sub-text, they didn’t go round discussing ‘body language’ and such terms, but it still struck them as over-kill. They were treating Simon with the sort of attention they would turn on a dangerous escapee ‘thought to be armed’; not a young man like Simon. “I don’t know,” old Mr Proctor said gloomily, “what’s going to happen but I s’pose we’d best see if you can get Legal Aid. I don’t know how these things work but I’d say you’d have to be earning a lot more than we can spare … ”

Greg Sullivan called into Buckton early next morning. Constable Kelly had opened the front door of the station to let out the smell of his burnt toast, along with the front windows. But he was still putting his shoes and socks on when DS Sullvan came up the path. “Sergeant Walsh isn’t here yet,” he said apologetically. “Would you like me to ring him?”

“No need. I’m just on my way out to the station in Dinna to make sure Hussein’s left everything there up to date. We’ve got these two heavyweights from Brisbane looking into the death of Chick Marrow. They want to know why Simon Proctor was never charged with anything. Same reason why we let most pub fights go by—but they seem to think there’s something suspicious about it all.” Kelly had heard a rather garbled story from someone who’d been in Dinawadding yesterday.

“But this is more serious?”

“Between you and me and the gatepost, mate, I think something happened in the hospital that they’re not owning up to. Probably gave him the wrong injection or something. This way they can dump the responsibility well away from them. But that’s just my own idea.”

When Brent Kelly passed this on to his boss half an hour later Dennis Walsh just shrugged and said, “Could be. But no point in getting fussed about it. They’ll charge him, it’ll come up in court, he’ll probably get involuntary manslaughter, something along those lines. Did Greg say he’d stop by on his way home?”

“Probably.” It was possible to get from Dinna to Winville without coming through Buckton.

“Just wanted to know if that case with Seb Whitelaw is going to trial any time soon. I s’pose they’ll call us seeing we dug the poor bugger up.” Dennis seemed to take court in his stride whereas

Constable Kelly in the couple of times he had needed to go to Winville to present evidence had found it fairly nervewracking.

"He said James Hove appealed his sentence and lost his appeal. He thought you might be pleased to know that."

Dennis sketched a smile. He was surprised that the appeal had not been able to paint the judge as seriously out-of-order in the way he ran the trial. "I wonder if they'll deport him? He's not a citizen here."

Greg Sullivan, when he called by in the late afternoon, looked rather tired and irritable. "What is it with those guys? It beats me but they seem determined to make young Proctor out to be some sort of monster. He'll come up next week and he won't get bail unless old Abe can stump up some dough. But they're treating him like some major drug dealer who's going to skip the country if they take their eyes off him."

"Japana wants Abe Proctor's farm." Dennis said it almost casually. Both Kelly and Sullivan looked at him but couldn't immediately see any connection.

"So?" Greg sounded peeved.

"Proctor got a letter from Whittaker to say his fences weren't on the surveyed boundaries. He supposedly told Whittaker to take a running jump. Get him to sell up, get him to knock the price down, Japana benefits. Don't know what's in it for the Marrow family but the dad is currently working for them."

"I still don't see what that's got to do with the Marrows."

"Maybe nothing. But make sure that you get someone who knows their arse from their elbow to have a look at all the medical records for Chick Marrow—"

"They're covering up some sort of mistake or malpractice? Yeah, I wondered about that. And this business with the dad giving away one of his son's kidneys while he was still alive, still maybe a chance to get better—and then them taking two, maybe it's legal but it seems a bit suss to me."

"Head trauma could knock Chick cold—but would it kill him three weeks later? I don't know about you, Greg, but I'd like to have a sniff round inside that hospital."

"And that's not going to happen, not with Andrews and Carney sure they've done all they need to do, now that they've got young Simon."

Dennis nodded without showing any particular emotion. "You hear of a black market in body parts … God knows if anything suss goes on here … but did the people who got a kidney actually *pay* for it?"

"I wouldn't think so." Greg felt his own ignorance. "But maybe there's other ways of showing your appreciation? This guy that got a kidney, this Milo Forman, could probably help your career along—or get you sent to the doghouse. He's got a fair bit of clout."

"So the question is—did Chick or more likely Les Marrow know Forman or have any connection to him? Did they ever ring in, maybe write him a letter, maybe he's got a fan club."

When Dennis mentioned this later to Fiona she said, "He *has* got a lot of fans. It's hard to know why. I hate that sort of hectoring style of radio. But people do ring in and tell him he's doing a great job for Australia and more people should have the guts to stand up like him and tell it like it is, that sort of thing. There's quite a lot of people round Buckton listen in to him I would think—so the station might know if any of the family had ever rung in."

He thought he would like to know if there was a connection between the Marrows and Milo Forman but it didn't seem to be the key question. Milo Forman could not have gone into the hospital and done something to Chick Marrow … could he? Or was he already in the hospital? If he was going for dialysis and other treatment several days a week …

But he had already been told he was going to get a kidney …

"I think Les Marrow was willing to sacrifice his son for the sake of this sleazy character … and the question is why."

"Because he agreed with his politics?"

"But he would still have to have a pretty poor opinion of his own son … "

"Ye-es, it does seem a pretty drastic way of showing your appreciation … "

Dennis rang Greg next morning to hear that Andrews and Carney would finish up in Dinna today and head on back to Brisbane. He said only, "I'd say you need to have a very close look at the Marrow family and their connection to Milo Forman."

"You think I've got no work in front of me, Dennis? It's out of our hands now. Brophy's already carpeted Sam for charging Proctor with assault. He's still prowling round looking for some more scapegoats. I wouldn't be surprised to find he's got his eye on Ali. He thinks she and Sam cooked it up between them, as a way to get Proctor off the hook."

"And—did they?"

"Probably. Sam would be sure to run it past her."

"Well, bugger Brophy. We still need to look into the Marrows—"

"Not me, Dennis, now I'd best get on." Without waiting for a reply from Dennis Walsh DS Sullivan hung up and drew a file over. Dennis, even in a nursing home, would probably still be telling people what they should be doing …

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Dennis was busy during the day but in the late afternoon he got on to John Simpson in Dinwadding. Simpson and several other people ran a small Neighbourhood Watch style group. He asked Simpson if he knew the Marrows.

"Well, a bit. He had a farm the other side of the railway. But it wasn't much of a farm—at least the farm was okay, I just don't think Les gave it much attention."

"Why is that?"

"He drinks. His son drinks. Well, his son drank. And the two of them got keen on what Saul Harding is doing—or saying, more than doing. It didn't seem to leave much time for the farm and when Japana made him an offer he jumped at it. He said he would sell if they gave him and Chick a bit of work on it—and he's bought that old house out on the east side of town, the place that's practically falling down. I heard he paid two thousand for it."

Dennis took this in. It all might fit. "And he offered a kidney to Milo Forman?"

"So you heard that story too? Yep, he spread it all around town, how he was going to donate a kidney to Forman, his hero."

"His own kidney, you mean?"

"That's what he reckoned. I don't know that I took much notice. He's always been a loudmouth and a skite. But if he wanted to give away a kidney, that's his business."

"Except it was his son's kidney he gave to Forman, not his own."

"D'you know that for a fact?"

"That's what the hospital told Constable Hussein."

"So his son's death saved him having to put up or shut up? I heard he was in the pub last night saying he was going to sue the pants off Abe Proctor. But I don't reckon he'll get any money there."

"Any particular reason. Or just Abe being a tough old cuss?"

"Well, he's that all right. But it's his son, Jeremy. I'm not sure what's wrong with him. Probably his liver gone on him, he's another one who's always drunk too much, but I heard it's something pretty serious and that he'll be in a wheelchair for keeps in a year or two. That's why Simon's been out there. It was getting too much for Abe and I don't reckon Jeremy can do more than a bit of cooking and light stuff round the place. It's sad. Abe left the farm to his son but now his son may not outlive him. So bloody Les going round telling everybody he's going to sue the pants off Abe hasn't been going down any too good with anyone who knows what's what."

"Well, they've charged young Simon Proctor with murder—so the town might like to get behind the Proctor family."

"Murder? That sounds like serious stuff. I thought it was only a punch-up outside the pub."

"S'far as I know, that's all it was. But as Chick Marrow has now died—it's a whole different ball game."

"And if Simon goes to prison—then Abe'll probably have to give up the farm. I see."

Dennis didn't ask Mr Simpson what he saw but he said briskly, "Simon'll come up next week in Winville on the new charges. You might be able to get a few people together to support him."

After they had both hung up John Simpson sat thinking. Maybe Dennis Walsh merely wanted to hear a bit of local gossip but maybe he was discreetly suggesting something quite different. After all, it wasn't likely he'd want to undermine a police case, not overtly anyway, so maybe he was saying he thought Simon Proctor needed all the local support he could get in case there was no simple way to get the charges dropped back to something much more minor. After sitting in silence for several minutes he picked up the phone again and rang the Proctor farm and got young Simon. He introduced himself and said, "We're all right behind you so let us know just when you'll be in court and I'll get together a car load to come to Winville to support you."

Simon Proctor had been on a rollercoaster ride these last few days. The knowledge that he was looking at major prison time was pretty hard to take. Now he found himself overwhelmed by emotion. He had not thought he would ever find himself briefly shedding tears of relief. But in all this awful business to know there were people out there who believed he wasn't a monster and were willing to take the time out to come and support him …

Except that it probably wouldn't sway the court …

Case No. 2: In the Wild Wild Woods

Fiona Greehan quite often popped into the little café on Buckton's main street while the children were at childcare on a Monday; it was nice to be able to treat herself to something simple without worrying about mess or children being seduced by the gleaming packaging of lollies and chocolate. And she almost always met someone there to share something with. This particular morning it was Iris Hitchener, a sister from the local hospital, who came in. The café was deserted otherwise and Jess, after providing them with salad rolls and a pot of tea to share, disappeared out the back.

Iris was a very beautiful woman but certainly not one to talk much about her private life. Fiona knew something of her rather topsy-turvy relationship with Constable Kelly, via Dennis's occasional comments. But she felt that both Iris and Brent suffered because the gaps between them seemed too large to bridge. Brent Kelly was a Catholic from Northern Ireland and it sometimes struck most of the people of the district that it was the defining aspect of his life. Fiona was careful to only say something very general about their relationship.

"You went through many ups and downs, didn't you?" Iris said in response.

"Well, we *did*, but it was partly Buckton … sometimes, I couldn't bear the thought of living here permanently—or maybe getting transferred to somewhere even harder to take. Some little dot in the far west. I still find some days hard, when it feels so dry and dusty … but we manage."

"And you don't regret … anything to do with Dennis?"

"No. But then we knew each other quite well before we married." 'Quite well'? Was that an adequate description? "And religion wasn't an issue."

"Yes, I believe Father Colgan told Brent that your husband is a pagan. I don't know what Brent thought he would find when he got round to the station when he arrived."

Fiona smiled. "Someone covered in blue paint perhaps." She reached out to top up her cup and offer Iris a re-fill. Iris smiled too at the image but she finally said, "I wish I knew the answer. Sometimes I am almost willing to go along to church with Brent just because I know it would make him happy. There is something about him—I don't know how to describe it, some hurt, some sort of deep need, it sometimes feels like someone twisting a knife in my heart. I would do anything not to hurt him more but other days I know it's not going to work, that I can't pretend to be someone I'm not just so that he won't be hurt … " It sounded melodramatic but Fiona felt she did understand. "And I sometimes think," Iris went on more slowly, "that perhaps he is looking for something that's a mothering kind of love and I don't know that I want that … "

Fiona could see that this could well be true. "If he met someone who would fit better—how would you feel?"

"I suppose I would be a bit hurt, I do love him in a way, but I know it isn't enough. I'm not young enough to go on believing that love conquers every problem. Sometimes the problems destroy the love, most of the time perhaps … I think, *if* he did find someone else, I would have the strength of mind just to quietly slip out the back door."

"But he isn't going to look for someone else—not while you're here—"

"And I don't really want to leave Buckton yet. I know it isn't terribly exciting nursing here but I like almost everyone there and I believe they like me. Some hospitals are just so bitchy—you wouldn't believe what goes on."

"Like this strange case with the Royal they've got over at Dinawadding. I don't know all the details but it certainly sounds like something was going on inside the hospital."

"I haven't heard the details. Is it something you can talk about?"

"Oh, I think it'll be very public soon. They've charged a young man with murder so it'll go to court." Fiona sketched in what she knew of the situation and Iris shook her head slowly. "That can't be right surely? They couldn't take two kidneys if they had only been given permission to take one. You'd have family members breathing down your neck—"

"I think—but I may be wrong—that it was the father who offered a kidney to a talk-show host. But then they gave the other one to an anonymous woman. The hospital says it can't give out her name because she doesn't know anything about the background, the fight and everything."

But again Iris said mildly, "But that can't be right either. People are told. They have a right to know if they want to. Sometimes they like to thank their donors or the families of the donors. And most organs from young people *are* the result of accidents or crime or fights or something. I wonder if it's someone in the hospital system who's minding his back, or maybe her back."

"It could be. Perhaps that's why they're concentrating on the young man who swung the punch. That side of things seems more straightforward."

"I see. And I wonder how straightforward their paperwork for those kidneys really is," Iris said quietly.

After they had gone their separate ways Fiona found herself wondering that too.

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Buckton Police had an unexpected visitor, in fact two of them, late that afternoon. Mr and Mrs Seymour. A young woman initially believed to be their niece had died on their farm. The Inquest would come up next week and would most likely bring in a verdict of Accidental Death. That would possibly make it easier for the Seymours to deal with everything.

They came in and accepted the offer of a cup of tea from Constable Kelly. "Sergeant Walsh should be back any minute—if you'd just like to take a seat in the interview room, it's a bit more private." He had mixed feelings about them, probably most people did, but they gave him a slight smile as they sat down. A lot of local people saw them as snobs. Their brother and sister-in-law had described them as junkies. Dennis Walsh had said it looked like they knew what was what when it came to farming.

Brent Kelly wasn't sure whether to just let them sit there while he got on with a couple of reports. It wasn't his job to entertain their 'customers'. But Mrs Seymour said, "I never met anyone from Ireland out here. Do you find it very lonely?"

He considered the question then said, "People have mostly been very kind and friendly." This didn't apply to people like some of the Goodrick clan or Mr Coleman or Don Binnie or a few other people who had barely given him the time of day. But then there were people like the Barnards at the service station and the two priests, even the Reverend Chandler had been very pleasant when he went round to check out a small problem at the Anglican church.

"We made a mistake when we moved here," Mrs Seymour seemed to be in an unexpectedly garrulous mood. "We only looked at the farm, we didn't stop to ask what everything else would be like. And it's lonely out there."

Mr Seymour seemed to be thinking about other things because he only nodded vaguely.

"Sergeant Walsh said it's really good to see the farm being brought back to being a good farm." Constable Kelly wasn't sure if this was the right thing to say. But it had an unexpected

response. Mrs Seymour suddenly smiled, not a tight little social smile, but a smile of genuine pleasure. “Well, I’m glad we’ve done *something* right.”

Before Kelly could think of anything else to say Dennis Walsh came bursting into the station in his energetic rather overpowering way. His junior said, “The Seymours have come to tell us something—”

“Good oh. A lot of dangling threads in that case.” He tossed his cap on to the filing cabinet and went in, saying, “Has Winville got the Porsche back to you yet?”

“No.” Malcolm Seymour seemed to spark up; almost as though Dennis had shared some of his own zest for life. “Ralph has told them he’ll come to pick it up when they finish with it.”

“It isn’t Ralph’s car. He gave it to his daughter and she gave it to you—”

“She didn’t exactly *give* it to us,” Malcolm sounded regretful, “she just left it there.”

“Same difference. She could’ve driven away in it. But she chose to leave in the old ute.”

“I—I don’t really think Ralph sees it that way. He looks down on us. He certainly wouldn’t want us to benefit.”

“Yeah, he called you two a couple of junkies. But you’re still missing the point. It isn’t Ralph’s car to take. His daughter apparently paid the rego and kept it in good nick. And it is registered in her name. He can’t just click his fingers and say, I’ll have it back now.”

“But no one knows where she is—so she isn’t here to say she wants us to have it.”

“We’re looking for her. But as no one seems to know what name she’s using now it’s a bit tricky.” They were still hoping that Bella Seymour’s friend in the USA would contact them with some information but he had taken his web-site off the net and a letter sent via his publishing company had not so far received a response. “Anyway, the car isn’t why you came, is it?”

“No. We’ve got a little bit of … we think we know what that poor girl hit herself with. When we were asked if anything was stolen … we couldn’t see anything obvious … but we didn’t really like to go into that room … we just closed the door and sort of left it. I know they took the rug with the blood on it but I sort of felt it was still … you know what I mean. But then I thought I should finish tidying it and not be a wimp.” Mrs Seymour hesitated over ‘wimp’. “Some of the books from the top of the case were on the floor behind an armchair and when I picked them up I saw that the two book-ends were missing.”

“I see. What were they made of?”

“They were lovely really. They were made of fossilised wood. They were fairly heavy … and we wondered … well, I don’t like to speculate … but maybe they … ”

“What young Zoe Penberthy hit herself with? Yep. I’d say they could fit the bill pretty well. So no sign of them anywhere?”

“We haven’t come across them round the house or out in the garden.”

“So maybe Bella took them away with her. Anyway, if you find them anywhere round the place, get straight on to us.”

“It … it seems so sad. I felt very angry then,” Mrs Seymour said quietly, “but I can understand how young people might panic and do something silly … and they did try to make amends … for us, anyway, by leaving that money for us.”

Dennis had mixed feelings about the whole sad affair. Could anyone have got Zoe Penberthy real help? Would she have accepted it? And did Bella think she was helping her by changing identities with her. Now he said only, “Well, you two have done the best you can on the case. Now you’d best get yourselves some help. Get the both of you off whatever drug you’re taking, join up to some local things. People need all the support that’s going.”

Neither of the Seymours seemed to appreciate this blunt speaking. They both got up and moved towards the door. Dennis didn’t feel it was his job in life to sort their lives out but he said, “Same as that young girl. No one helps you if you keep your problems to yourself. And Ralph and Colette obviously enjoy being able to do the two of you down.”

They didn’t respond to this provocative statement, simply turning and going out. But unlike other people who resented being on the business end of a bit of tactless advice from Sergeant Walsh the Seymours actually went round to the local doctor’s surgery and made appointments. Perhaps they were merely curious about the local medics but it was a start. Then they went round to the

Bakery to get themselves a fresh loaf. As they came out to get in the car again Julian Chandler was just locking up the Combined Church's Op-Shop. He smiled and came over and said pleasantly, "You're Mr and Mrs Seymour, aren't you? I'm Julian Chandler. Could I tempt you into getting involved with the Op-Shop? We've always got gaps on the roster." The roster wasn't looking too bad at the moment but people could drop out unexpectedly.

Both the Seymours hesitated and a polite refusal obviously trembled. Then Margaret Seymour said suddenly, "Why not? If you'll show me what to do?"

"Of course. Would you like to set a time to come in and see what's involved?"

Karen Dalton and Fiona Greehan often spent their shift, if it was a quiet one, discussing ideas on how to make the Butter Factory more profitable and how to draw more people to Buckton in general. But on their next shift together they found themselves showing Margaret Seymour what would be involved and assuring her she would have someone to help her. After Margaret had gone over her erstwhile duties and asked several questions and driven away again Fiona said quietly to Karen, "I didn't really expect to like her, everyone seems convinced they're both awful snobs, but I think she'll be an asset once she settles in and starts to feel at home." Then she took her two children and the little box of farm animals she had bought them out to the car and drove home in the rather bleak winter's afternoon; bleak not from the chill in the air but rather the sense that Buckton was the tiny snatch of green and the great dry brown world around it was creeping ever closer …

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Dennis Walsh only had a very short stint at the inquest into Zoe Penberthy's death. They had found the girl's own dentist and were certain the identification would not be challenged. Dennis simply described his role in coming to the farm, what he and his constable had found there, and that they had then called in the CIB team from Winville. He felt his attendance was virtually superfluous but the magistrate, Marian Vohland, (who had secretly felt a reluctance to preside over this case given a few things she had heard about Ralph Seymour MLA) asked him to describe how the girl was lying in greater detail. He did so using his own body to demonstrate how her arms and hands had been when he first walked in and saw her on the floor. Now that he went over it again he could see much more clearly how it was possible that her stance *could* suggest someone who had just bashed her own head with two book ends.

It still struck him as a hard thing to believe—and hard to believe that it had killed her almost instantly. Surely it would just have given her a gigantic headache? But all the tests done on the body might throw further light on the actual death.

He wasn't in court when the Government pathologist, Dr Steyne, took the stand and began the long rather gruesome reading out and explaining of what they had found. Zoe Penberthy, from about one o'clock onwards, had ingested black coffee with sugar, sandwiches, an orange, at least one tablet of methylmethamphetamine, also known in some circles as Ecstasy, around two glasses of red wine, two to three tablets of a benzodiazepine, possibly Valium, and a small slice of fruit cake. Dr Steyne pointed out that none of the benzodiazapine group should be taken with alcohol. It had occasionally caused severe reactions, even death.

The court, struggling with the technical details, all latched on to this. Mrs Vohland said calmly, "And was there any sign of a reaction in Zoe Penberthy?"

"There was. But I wouldn't like to be categoric. If she had got to a hospital probably within half an hour and had her stomach pumped she would almost certainly have survived."

"But you cannot say it contributed to her death?"

"Without being able to put Ms Penberthy on the stand we can only talk in probabilities. But I would say that it probably played some part. As she began to feel increasingly unwell she, or someone else, picked up two heavy blocks and hit her on both sides of the head, damaging her ear drums and causing a limited amount of bleeding from both ears. We also need to factor in what appears to be a long history of self-abuse. To what extent emotional tension exacerbated her physical symptoms is extremely difficult to say but I don't think it can be excluded."

"So you are saying that substance abuse, physical abuse, and emotional stress all played a part but the exact part each played cannot be determined with accuracy."

"That is correct. Not unless we can find someone who was there, someone she spoke to in that last hour, or something she wrote down."

It wasn't a clear leading; how many of her actions might be regarded as deliberate and planned and therefore suicidal in intent? Zoe Penberthy instead gave the impression of someone desperately wanting to find something which would help her deal with a build-up of pain and stress.

But the following day brought an even more electric source of information. Bella Seymour turned up unannounced at the small Court House in Winville and said she had come to tell them what had happened to Zoe Penberthy.

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Daniel Wang rang Sergeant Walsh that evening and said without drama, "I thought you might like to know that Bella Seymour has turned up and spoke to the inquest today."

"Well, well, that's a turn-up for the books. What's she like?"

"She is rather terrifying," Daniel said slowly. "But she is also rather magnificent. You just can't imagine her lying to save her skin. But she did confirm that most of our conjectures were pretty close to the mark."

Ms Seymour had been on the stand for several hours. She was far more articulate than most witnesses, she seemed to carry her confidence with her like something casually tossed on, but she also showed real distress and misery when she spoke about Zoe's death.

"We came out in the Porsche because Peter wanted a chance to drive it and Zoe came out as soon as we arrived. She had parked our old ute down by the trees. She said she would put the Porsche round behind the shed because there had been somebody driving in a really crazy way up and down the road past the farm the previous night. When she came back from parking it we could see she was looking really sick. I said maybe she'd like to lie down and we'd cook something and she said she couldn't bear to eat, she felt sick, and she went into the living room and sat down and then she got up again and she was going round and round the room sort of punching her head."

"What time was this?" Mrs Vohland said mildly.

"A bit after six, I guess, maybe half past."

"Yes, go on."

"Peter hadn't seen Zoe in one of her episodes and he said could he get her a drink. She didn't take any notice of him and I said I'd get some aspirin. I didn't know what my aunt might have in the house. I had seen Zoe like this before, but never so bad. She was pale and she was sweating, and she was saying "My head, my head—I can't stand it!" I said something about getting her to hospital but she said no. She would never go to a doctor because she said they wouldn't believe her."

"Wouldn't believe her about what?" Mrs Vohland was well aware of the complexities behind the case, the confusion over identities, the bad blood in the Seymour family, political arguments, Zoe Penberthy's background of self-harm, and she was determined to keep it as focused as she could. But there was background which was probably relevant to the death.

"Zoe was abused by her father for many years. Her mum was chronically ill and in and out of hospital and she died when Zoe was twelve or thirteen. But when she tried to tell it to a doctor he didn't believe her. She refused to go to anyone else and be disbelieved. She got some stuff from a naturopath that was supposed to soothe her down but I don't know if it helped very much."

"So she was walking round the room in distress?"

"Yes. Yes, she was. I tried to find a way to calm her down so that we could talk. That's why we had all come there, so we would have a quiet place to talk about the future, what we were going to do. But she wasn't listening to me. And then she suddenly snatched up the two book-ends that were on the top of a shelf and I didn't realise what she was going to do—and she just—" Ms Seymour raised both hands as though to demonstrate, "she just started bashing her head! It was so terrible. I managed to get to her and grab them away from her but she just sort of staggered round the room still hitting herself on the head with her fists and then she fell face down. I bent down to try and help her up again but her eyes—" She raised her hands to her face and when she brought them away again her face was wet with tears. She scrabbled in her old cotton shirt and brought out a handkerchief and scrubbed her face. It was the gesture of someone who doesn't want sympathy. But Marian Vohland said, "We can take a short break if you would like."

Bella Seymour just said, “What good would that do? I’ll see her face to my dying day. The way her eyes had rolled up and just stared. I tried for a pulse but there was nothing. I felt her chest and there was no heartbeat. I tried to give her mouth-to-mouth but it didn’t do any good. I laid her back with her face into the rug just because it was better than looking at her face. The blood kept trickling out her ears and I thought of wiping it up but I knew it didn’t matter what I did.”

“Then what did you do?”

“Peter said, we came and she died, will it look like our fault, that we did something to her. And I said, maybe it is our fault, maybe we should not have asked her to be here in a strange house on her own, that something happened before we came. But I understood what he was saying. How would we prove we had nothing to do with Zoe hitting herself. My prints were on the book-ends … And then Peter said, what if we made it look like a wild party, gatecrashers or something, I don’t think we were thinking very clearly. It wasn’t meant to … Zoe was my best friend, I couldn’t take in that she had died in such a terrible way … I suppose we argued a bit about what to do, not argued exactly, but we couldn’t do anything to save her so we thought somehow … maybe it doesn’t make sense but I didn’t want people to blame Zoe for what had gone wrong … I can remember people, teachers, telling her to pull herself together and not be hysterical. How could she not be emotional after all she had lived through, the poor darling, and I wanted other people, people with no identities, to get the blame. We made that house into a big mess but we were very careful to not break anything we thought my aunt and uncle would value. And then we put some money and a note poking out of the barrel of their rifle that we left in the kitchen.”

She was not to know that Dennis Walsh had picked it up, pointing the barrel upwards, more concerned about whether it was loaded or not, and inadvertently caused the money and the note to slide down inside the barrel.

The magistrate went back over a few small points then let her go on.

“It was a horrible shock when we heard Aunt Margaret’s voice and her footsteps. We had been told they would both be away another day. There wasn’t time to hide. We just pretended to be … sort of having a big pash and we had turned out the other lights, only the one inside the front door and the standing lamp in the dining room … maybe she didn’t see the mess everywhere … because she just walked past us to her bedroom. We turned out the lights and took our things, just leaving Zoe’s handbag there—”

“Which didn’t have her true identity in it?”

“No. It had my licence and maybe other things in it. We just wanted to get away. But my aunt seemed to go straight to bed. We went out and drove away. I know we did the wrong thing, just leaving Zoe there for her to find … but it all seemed too complicated … ”

It was another half hour and more questions before she was allowed to stand down. As her last question, Mrs Vohland said, “Did you choose to be friends with Zoe Penberthy because you looked so much alike?”

“No. Zoe came up to me the first day I came to school and she said we looked so much alike, maybe we were meant to be friends. She was miserable there. A lot of the girls teased her because her father was a wharfie. It wasn’t nice. I said … no, I don’t remember exactly what I said. But we were friends all through school and afterwards.”

She was told to remain in Winville in case she would need to be called to the stand again. Daniel Wang had sat in on her session in the hope that she would throw light on the things which had puzzled the police. As she came out into the late afternoon he went up to her and said, “I’m sorry, Ms Seymour, but I am going to have to charge you with failing to report a death.”

She looked at him in silence then said rather sadly, “I know. I’m not planning to run away.”

“And can you tell us where Peter Abzug now is?”

“He’s gone up to a little shack in the mountains to finish his book, in the States I mean. He did the first part of it here while he was waiting to come back to his normal colour. He hopes it will have some impact here. I hope so too.”

“You did it to get back at your father in some way?”

“Of course not! I did it to try and change the way people see things in this country!”

From seeing it as merely a young woman's attempt to spite an intolerant and overbearing father he had come round to believing Bella Seymour didn't tell lies. She might not always understand her own motives, after all she was not yet twenty-two, but that was another thing altogether …

He hesitated then said, "Would you like to come to dinner with me this evening?"

"You've got more questions?"

"Well, I guess I have. But I *would* like to take you to dinner."

"Okay, Dutch. And these are the only clothes I've got."

"There's nowhere very fancy in Winville. Would The Steak House do?"

She seemed to think it through very carefully then she smiled and said, "Okay. Why not?"

"Where are you staying? I can come by and pick you up."

"They had a free caravan at the park." The place wasn't busy at this time of the year though it would liven up in the school holidays. A little. And then she surprised him. She might look a bit down-at-heel yet there was an innate neatness about her which seemed to offset the shabbiness and he could well believe that she had tidied Zoe's flat, that she had a 'tidy mind', even that Zoe's sometimes wild and uncontrolled behaviour was doubly distressing. But she had a lovely smile and she gave it to him now and he suddenly found himself wondering how easy Peter Abzug had found it to detach himself from Bella Seymour and go home to the States to work on his probably controversial book …

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If Daniel Wang occasionally drifted off into strange daydreams over the next few days he managed not to make it obvious. Bella Seymour would come up in court, she would plead guilty, she would probably get a small rap over the knuckles. She would pack her small bag and take the next bus out, having left the old ute with Peter Abzug who had in turn given it to a charity (which possibly didn't want it) before flying out of Brisbane. And Daniel would continue on with the struggle to find out just what was going on with the Proctor case—because he had been told that there would not be an autopsy because Chick Marrow had died in a hospital—and that Simon Proctor would again come up in Winville, charged this time with murder.

The magistrate, Graham Kelso, had been told that he should've checked on the current status of Mr Marrow before charging Mr Proctor. Had he discovered then, and Simon Proctor could also be charged with lying to the court, that Mr Marrow was already dead he, at the least, could have held the case over until some more investigation could be done.

Graham Kelso said to a couple of cronies at the golf club, "I think someone is on a witch hunt, I just can't see why … or only through a haze." Possibly he had been remiss but it wasn't the natural question to ask. He saw cases of assault, week in week out, and if the police said the perp had done it and the perp pleaded guilty it wasn't something to waste much court time over.

One of the cronies was John Daly, editor and part-owner of the *Winville Courier*. Daly now said, "A lot of backs seem to need watching in this case, Graham, including Brophy's. We were told months ago that there was going to be a full-time-person in Dinna—yet nothing has happened. But I have tried to set up an interview with Mr Milo Forman—see if he really was best mates with Les Marrow. A bit hard to believe, from where I sit, but stranger things have happened. I would also like to interview a few people in that hospital—but I imagine they tend to speak through their lawyers."

"You're suggesting Proctor is just some sort of pathetic little bunny that sat up in the headlights?"

"I don't think I've ever set eyes on the kid. I know old Abe Proctor had a run-in with Gavin but I don't know the details. I do know Japana wants that farm."

"Haven't they got enough land?" Graham Kelso said drily.

"No. Some people don't know when to say no. But I don't know who's making those sorts of decisions. That American company that's got some overlap with the Neurand Trust maybe. The more freehold they get hold of … well, I can't answer that question. The Hoysted boys'll get full control of their Trust quite soon but I've heard that the Trust is three-quarters made up of Ansvar

shares, I don't know if they're free to sell … but it's hard to see how any of this links up with a moron like that Marrow youth. Opportunistic maybe."

The other crony was retired local businessman Richard Archer, currently president of the local National Party branch, who said rather moodily, "A lot of people seem to be looking for opportunities to gain some mileage. I thought Saul Harding was going to give a gasp and go down the gurgler when they pointed the finger at his son for that anthrax scare—but they both seem to have wriggled out of it … the son gave some cock-and-bull story about hormones and Saul says he wants nothing more to do with his son until he gets off drugs and gets back on track. I don't believe either of them—"

"Is Saul standing as a One Nation candidate?"

"No. As an Independent. It's hard to believe but he's actually got a lot of support. Doesn't seem to matter what he does, people sort of forgive him and keep coming along to his meetings so God knows what it'll be like once he gets into campaign mode." This was true. Saul almost by instinct seemed to know what buttons to press; people supported him almost no matter what he did or said. For a variety of reasons they took him at face value, as 'one of us', and the person who really understood and cared about their problems. Archer wasn't the only person to wonder how Saul Harding seemed to be able to ride over each problem and come down the other side of the bump on both feet …

"And this story about Les Marrow giving his son's kidneys to Milo Forman—has that got a political side to it?"

John Daly steepled his nicotine-stained fingers. "Odds on. He said only yesterday that he's always had his finger on the popular pulse and now he's got the kidney of a good decent hardworking young country bloke who didn't deserve to be cut down in the prime of life by some poofy kid who resents anyone who's a fair dinkum Aussie."

"Did he say 'poofy' on air—" Graham Kelso started to say as Archer said, "How d'you know all this? He's not your cup of tea, is he?"

"Well, he did say 'poofy' on air and I heard him because I got my housekeeper to tape his program. He's just come back to work part time and I thought he just might say something about the donated kidney and mention the Marrows. I thought it could be useful to see how he's presenting it."

"And he was presenting it as an act of great generosity, was he?"

"Oh, for sure. He came right out and said it's what mates do for mates—and what would all these new arrivals know about mateship—"

"So if the police say the paperwork wasn't up to scratch—it'll now sound like sour grapes? A generous impulse thrown back in the donor's teeth, something like that?"

"It's probably worse than that," Daly said drily. "Because if the police do or say anything which makes the number of organ donors go down instead of up—they'll be seen as worse than spoilsports—"

"There's another aspect, you know," Graham Kelso said quietly and rather reluctantly. "Hussein did the initial investigation and charged young Proctor with assault—and Wang's now taken over the investigation this end. They'll be like a red rag to a bull so far as someone like Forman is concerned."

This aspect of the case had not really occurred to Daniel Wang, not least because he still had not received any clear guidance from the Brisbane end, and he was spending most evenings with Bella Seymour. He was a quiet person and he didn't flaunt their dinners together in anyone's face. He knew she wouldn't want to stay in Winville—who would?—and she had already mentioned that she was planning to go to Sydney to look at what groups there were doing and saying.

It was one thing to go out to fairly anonymous eating places; but another to invite her to come round to his place with the offer of a stir fry. "It won't be a conflict of interest or something?" Bella Seymour said. "With me up in court the next day? Will you have to be in court?"

"No. It should just go straight through. I've done the paperwork. And it's not a conflict in any other way, not unless you'd rather have the evening to prepare yourself."

"No. I know what I'm going to say."

Wang didn't see himself as a very good cook but with the combination of some frozen vegetables and some fresh produce he thought it would at least be edible. And he didn't really see her making a fuss about food. She spoke very frankly about her ideas but he didn't think she would ever get bogged down over things like fashion or food or the minutiae of life. She was also frank in admitting that a particular way of running communal life had not worked "but capitalism is busily trashing the planet in the name of the individual—and then it will turn round and see what it can make by offering to fix the trashed planet. Surely human beings can come up with a better way, a simpler more sharing way."

"Did Peter Abzug agree with this?"

"Mostly. He wasn't looking for the trappings of success—but he does want the success. And once that is your goal your life becomes subtly geared to it."

"And Zoe—what did she want?"

"I guess—what she wanted most—was a good education. All through school her life had been so disrupted, her life sort of revolved around her father and his abuse and his demands and trying to minimise them—and then he went to jail for tormenting another little girl—and she was just so relieved. It was like being shown a lovely paddock beyond the gate. But she had no money and no confidence. I had a job and she got a job but it was hard for her to hold down a job because she would sometimes hurt herself. And my dad tried to press the car and everything on to me and I said to Zoe would she like them both. At first she thought I was crazy but the more she thought about it the more she liked the idea. It was very stressful when she started but she liked the course and she made friends and things got a lot better for her."

"But she entered on your documents, she used your licence, she pretended to be you on the phone to your mum—"

"No. That was me. And she was qualified for the subjects she did—"

The university might not see it in that light but he let the matter go. "You think she felt more confident using your name?"

"In the end, yes. She hated being Zoe Penberthy. We used to discuss other names we might take on—"

"Such as?"

"No. That is between the two of us."

She accepted the white wine he poured for her, the plate of stir fry; she said he had a nice place. He only nodded. "It's okay."

"And *your* parents, how do they feel about you being here?" Malcolm and Margaret had turned up to the inquest but Ralph and Colette took the view that they hadn't known the dead girl and would not come unless they were specifically requested to do so. There didn't seem to be much that they could contribute; not when they continued to assert that they had never met Zoe Penberthy.

"Oh, they think I'm crazy. They came from Hong Kong twenty years ago. They wanted to come before the rush, get us a good education, get their money out and into something safe here. My father thought bank accounts might end up getting frozen. He is one of the ones who fled China in the fifties and did it hard in Hong Kong. He still thinks someone might find a way to tweak the magic carpet out from under his feet."

"So what does he do here?"

"He's a stockbroker, Davison & Wang, in Brisbane and he runs an import business. He hoped I would take it over. But I'm not very business-minded. My sister mostly runs it for him now."

He offered her the custard Danish he had bought when they pushed their plates away. "No, I'll just have a glass of water if you wouldn't mind."

"I can make coffee if you'd like?"

"No just water. You have coffee if that's what you like to do."

He thought of pressing her but simply got up and took their plates out and brought her a glass and a bowl of mixed nuts. "I won't be a minute." He went out again, rinsed their plates, and made himself a cup of coffee. Did people find her disconcerting because she tried very hard to tell things

exactly as she saw them? Most people depended on the little social 'niceties' with their insincerity, their particular kinds of pressures, their time-wasting waffle.

He took his coffee over to the sofa and sat down. She brought her glass and joined him. "Would you like some music, I've got all that," she looked over to the racks of tapes, "or TV if you'd prefer." She put down her glass and ran a finger down the tapes. He had a very mixed collection; everything from Peter Hicks to Wild Pumpkins at Midnight, from Bob Dylan to Chinese bamboo flutes and music from West Africa and Bolivia … She picked out one of the tapes of Chinese music and said, "Perhaps, as a background," and slipped it into the player. She came back over and sat down beside him.

Daniel Wang wasn't a man to rush into anything but now he put an arm around her and said, "I will miss you when you go."

She smiled at that. "Maybe I won't go, maybe they'll lock me up here."

"Oh, I wouldn't think so. They'll *do* something, they won't want to look like they're going easy on you just because you're Ralph's daughter, but it won't be anything serious." Perhaps there was something of Ralph and Colette in her, but it was hard to see. She was very strongly her own person and although her skin and hair were fresh and clean and bright with youth and energy he could imagine Colette being annoyed that her daughter 'didn't make anything of herself'; image, he thought, was very important to Mrs Seymour.

"Maybe prison time would be good—I could see how the system works from the inside."

"I don't want you to be banged up. If you can't be with me then I'd like you to be out there somewhere getting on with life."

"But life is life wherever you live it."

"Do you really think so? Even in solitary confinement or something?"

"Maybe it's easy for someone like me to say that—but yes, even in solitary confinement. I could give it a try and see if my theory works."

"I'd much rather we did this." He bent his head to give her a long kiss, still half-expecting her to protest that they lived at opposite poles when it came to society …

Bella Seymour went into court at 10.30 the following morning and told Graham Kelso she pleaded guilty to failing to report Zoe Penberthy's death. "Do you wish to say anything?" he said quietly as he continued to muse over the appropriate penalty. It didn't deserve prison time and prisons were always full. It wasn't something where someone was likely to re-offend so a Good Behaviour Bond was not appropriate. Winville had a bank-up of Community Service Orders. He thought a fine would be more suitable.

"Yes. I want to say I will always be sorry that I condemned Zoe to being found in a way that didn't have the dignity and respect I always wanted for her. If I had rung the ambulance she would not have been left to lie there all night. I would not have given my aunt a horrible fright. And it would not have taken up so much time for the police. I will always miss Zoe very much." She had considered saying 'terribly' but she couldn't project herself into the distant future and decide what degree of missing would be appropriate.

DSS Wang had fidgeted around for an hour or more in the office, trying to come to grips with their other cases, but he had finally said to Greg Sullivan, "Do you think you can hold the fort while I duck round to the court?"

"For sure. Don't be long though."

As Daniel put his jacket back on and went out, Greg Sullivan raised both eyebrows and slightly inclined his head in the direction Daniel had just headed. DSC Deane gave Greg two lots of thumbs-up and a big grin.

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Constable Kelly had taken Iris Hitchener out several times in Buckton; he couldn't really afford to go very often to Domenico's but he felt that things somehow seemed to go along more smoothly there; perhaps it was less 'personal' than the café though he couldn't be sure what he meant; perhaps he just didn't want Jess to come along and tell them they were made for each other. Jess hadn't changed her view but he knew his relationship with Iris was never going to go

anywhere. It was just nice to have her company a couple of times a week, just nice to sit and gaze into her beautiful blue eyes.

His boss, Dennis Walsh, had once or twice thought of saying something but he didn't see his subordinate's private life as his business … and he sometimes thought that Brent almost preferred to feel like a star-crossed lover. That way he didn't need to feel that he was being in any way unfaithful to the church. Iris had said the church wanted its handmaidens but not its handmen but Brent thought of himself almost as a handman, as a lay reader and helper anyway. And if he let Iris come between him and that commitment he would feel deep pangs of guilt.

There were times when Dennis wished there was someone who could give Brent a good talking to but there was probably no one he could accept. From what he could gather Brent still kept in touch with his father, almost slavishly so, but Dennis was pretty sure that it was an unhealthy relationship and he couldn't see that unknown father untying any knots. The only thing he had been able to do was to urge his junior to let his hair grow a bit. "Not a lot," Dennis had said grimly. "I saw a bloke caught by his hair years ago—but it doesn't mean you have to look like bloody Gomer Pyle or one of those Yanks that used to do the comedies … "

Brent didn't have the courage to say 'you're a fine one to talk' but he thought if his boss was saying it was okay then he might let his hair grow a bit. It wouldn't make him look like Sean Connery but Iris might like it better. And then, thinking that, he dragged himself back to the knowledge that it probably didn't matter what he did—Iris was never going to take him seriously.

But he did finally get round to asking her if she would like to come round to his flat for dinner. "We could try again maybe? Maybe this time no one will ring up."

"That would be nice. But don't go giving it a lot of special care—just in case you're called away again."

"Would you like another pizza?"

"Yes, why not? But what say I pick up the pizza on my way to you and you do the other things? That way we won't have to re-heat it."

Iris came with the box at a little after seven. The evening was mild and Brent had made a potato salad and bought a lettuce. She put the pizza down on his kitchen counter and went to take her jacket off in the warm flat and put down her hand bag. She usually wore her hair drawn tightly back but for once she had let it curl around her face and she had put on a little eyeshadow and lipstick. Brent Kelly was not a connoisseur of women and unexpectedly having a woman of such startling loveliness in his tiny flat was as heady as the best champagne.

He stammered over the words that they could eat in a moment but this—and he took her coat from her and took her in his arms to kiss her. Iris was tempted to respond in a fairly perfunctory manner and then sit down to dinner. But there was something about him which always disarmed her intention to keep him at a small distance, something vulnerable and seeking. He was a clumsy kisser yet she always felt herself respond immediately in a way that more experienced men in her past had merely left her cold. This time was no different. He got his fingers tangled in her hair but she felt herself respond to the rain of kisses.

"You are so beautiful—" his mouth seemed to be everywhere, her ears, down into the hollow of her neck, he had a couple of buttons undone on her blouse. "I never stop needing you—"

She could say something firm about their dinner waiting …

Or she could lift a hand to his own buttons and let it go on from there …

She felt her own deep unmet needs and let Brent continue to undress her. She held him and caressed him and gently and unobtrusively guided him. He came very quickly and lay briefly spent in her arms. When his breathing had returned to normal he disengaged himself and muttered "Sorry" as he stood up and hurriedly reached for his clothes. When he had dressed he went into the kitchen without looking back at her. Iris too sat up and dressed without fuss.

"If you want to wash—" he waved a hand towards the tiny bathroom. "You shouldn't have let me go so far. You should've said no."

"Why not? I wanted you as much as you wanted me."

"It isn't right. You shouldn't tempt me—not like that."

Iris stared at him. It was something her father might've said of girls—twenty years ago—but it was hard to hear it from someone of Brent's age—

"I shouldn't tempt you—and you shouldn't tempt me? Why ever not, my darling?"

"I am not your darling. I am a—" but just as he geared up to say something awful about himself the phone in the station rang. Briefly, he put a mulish expression on, then he shrugged and went to answer it. She had a moment of wishing the phone had rung twenty minutes ago then she could see the wisdom of going forward and trying to deal with their changed relationship.

It was Ken McLaren. Kelly knew Dennis refused to go out to look for his wandering stock. "I've told the old fool till I'm blue in the face that if he won't fix his fences then he deserves to get his stock stolen." Brent thought back over this and said, "If you can't find your two heifers after a good search, Mr McLaren, perhaps you could ring us back. But we really can't do anything that you can't do better—" Mr McLaren said sourly he supposed that was true but that he would be back on the phone if "my ruddy heifers don't turn up soon". It sounded like a threat.

Brent put the phone down and came back to his flat. Iris had served out the food and poured two drinks and they sat down to eat. But he was silent and moody all through the meal and her attempts to chat lightly about some of the things which had been going on at the hospital fell pretty flat. She made coffee and cut two slices of the cake he had bought.

It was hardly a sparkling social occasion and she gathered up her handbag and coat not long after she had taken her mug over to the sink and run some hot water over their things. He finally got up and said, "No, leave it, I'll do it."

She smiled and went to the door. "Will we see each other again soon?"

"Probably not." He sounded angry, almost. "Maybe after I … "

"Go to confession?" She was not usually catty but the thought of this evening being shared with Father Meagher or Father Colgan depressed her. And what business was it of theirs. He looked up sharply but only nodded.

"In that case, I think you're right. We had better not see each other any more. It is one thing to love you and want to be close—it's another having two strangers in bed with us."

"We're not in bed—we shouldn't be in bed. It was all my stupid fault—"

"It took me years to get away from the atmosphere of my home—where everything was always someone's fault, where someone had to be blamed for everything—and it was always my mother or us children—never my father. I'm not getting back into that way of looking at the world for *anyone*—not even you." She came back into the room and kissed him lightly on the cheek. Then she went out without waiting for a response.

In her car she sat a moment then said to the steering wheel—"Oh God, what a mess!"

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Constable Kelly was tense and mostly silent all through the morning. He went out on the calls his boss sent him on. He posted their letters. He answered the phone. He did a police check for a young Bucktonite who wanted to apply for a job at a childcare centre in Winville. He finalised the paperwork for a small court case. Mr McLaren didn't ring back and he hoped the heifers had quietly got themselves back into their paddock. Although a chance to go out and drive to Burleigh might almost be a relief. He had felt miserable going to bed. He had felt equally miserable getting up this morning. He didn't know what to do or say to anybody. The only clear thing in it all was the knowledge that his relationship with Iris was now as dead as a dodo … And it *was* her fault. She should have stopped him after a few kisses …

Dennis came in after seeing several people up in the shops along Main Street and getting himself a coffee in the pub. He felt he had been very patient and forbearing all morning but now he said, "Okay, I s'pose you had a disagreement with Iris but is that a good enough reason for going round all day with your chin hitting your knees?"

Brent couldn't think how to answer this question. He shook his head slowly and hoped the phone would ring and distract his boss. Dennis shrugged and went on, "Your private life is your own. But most things aren't as bad as you think they are."

"Aren't they? This is worse, far worse. I wish I was dead."

"Keep wishing. Another fifty years. So Iris said she was sorry but it wasn't working."

He thought of saying 'no, it isn't your business' but he finally gave into the force of his boss's will, or whatever the impetus was, and said, "She let me … go to bed with her. She should've said no, women should be stronger—"

"Bollocks!" Dennis sounded angry. "If you wanted to go to bed with Iris take responsibility for your own actions—don't come this business of trying to shunt your guilt on to her, on to anyone else. It's the mark of a pathetic sniveling little coward. If you chose to do something—and don't tell me she grabbed you by the dick and forced you into bed with her—then it was no one's choice but yours. So don't go blaming anyone else. Not your useless fucking dad, not your teachers, not the priests, not any woman that ever had the bad luck to end up in your life. It's *your* responsibility. Got that, son?"

"It is women who tempt men—"

"Oh, it is, is it? And you're just some mindless jellyfish that got led along by his useless dick? Is that it? Don't come that pathetic sexist rubbish in here with me. Like all those useless buggers that use it as their defence when they go up on rape charges—like they haven't got anything in their useless heads but a bit of mouldy porridge. Either you face up to your own responsibilities like a man or I'll ask to get you transferred out of here—and I won't be fussy on where they send you." Dennis got louder and louder as he spoke, angrier and angrier, and his junior shrank back nervously.

And then he stunned Sergeant Walsh by suddenly bursting into tears. He turned away and scrabbled in his trousers for a handkerchief.

Walsh said angrily, "Oh for Christ's sake! Go on, leave that, and go to your rooms till you can handle yourself, you useless little sod!"

Brent put down his pen, both hands had begun to shake uncontrollably, and got up and went through the waiting area to the door into his flat, closing the door behind him.

After he had gone, still sobbing and hiccupping, Dennis picked up the phone and rang home and got Fiona. "Sweetheart, can you come on over. Bring the kids if they're there. I need your help."

It was hardly ideal but he didn't think he could leave Brent in there on his own if he had to go out again; his junior might be able to pull himself together enough to handle the public but there was the terrible sense of watching someone disintegrate virtually while he watched. One minute his junior was angrily defending his attitudes to women, the next he just seemed to collapse …

Fiona took nearly ten minutes to organise the children and come around. Dennis looked up from the computer as his family came in and said, "Leave the kids with me if … it's Brent, I yelled at him and he just … collapsed. He's having a nervous breakdown in there probably."

"Oh dear," she came over and rested a hand briefly on his shoulder, "I'm not sure I'm the best person … if he'll accept me … " The children went into the interview room where Dennis kept a box of toys and he said under his breath, "I know, but I don't want to leave him. He'll probably go and do something stupid like slitting his wrists. I can't guarantee no one will call me out."

She wondered if it really could be this bad. Dennis *was* terrifying when he lost his temper but people got over it. And he wasn't usually angry for long. She went reluctantly to the flat door and knocked quietly. "Brent, it's me, Fiona, can I come in?"

When she didn't get an answer she had a horrible moment of wondering if Dennis was right after all and Brent had done something drastic to himself. She knocked again and then opened the door and looked in. Brent was lying on his bed, curled up tightly in a foetal position, both hands up to his face and his body still racked with sobs. Fiona went over and put the kettle on and made coffee and added milk and sugar. Then she brought it over and set it down on the small table between the bed and the TV. She knew he would hate having her come in like this, see him like this, but she felt it was better that he hate her than anyone else.

"My dear, come and have a hot drink and then we can think how best to get you some help. You can't go on trying to handle it all yourself." She felt sure he had heard her but he didn't show any sign of responding. She sat down quietly to wait.

And then, before she realised she had left the door slightly ajar, Elise came bursting in. She had been in the flat several times when Fiona was putting in a few things for an arriving person and its novelty value had worn off. Now she didn't bother looking round but homed straight in on Brent.

"Benny! Are you sick?" She came over to the bed and put a small hand on his arm.

This brought a muffled response. "Go away!"

"Benny, it's me, Ellie. You saved me from that man in the car and you gave me a kiss."

Neither Dennis nor Fiona had heard about the kiss. Fiona said, still quietly, "Sweetheart, I don't think we should bother Brent just now. He isn't feeling well. I think I should make a doctor's appointment for him."

"We could take him round there, couldn't we?"

"I think—" It was a terribly difficult situation. If it was for a different person she could simply ring the local doctors. But Brent brought up to believe homosexuals were an abomination to the Church might not feel comfortable there. And he probably needed counseling not physical care. The ideal person might be Dr Heber in Winville. He was a GP but he had found in a country practice that people needed different kinds of healing, mental as well as physical, and he had gone back to study and become a registered psychiatrist as well. How good he was she couldn't say but at least there was no stigma in going to him because many people went for perfectly ordinary everyday reasons like sore throats and high blood pressure. No one could know which was which once the surgery door closed on a patient …

But whether Dr Heber could squeeze Brent in …

After thinking it through she stood up again and said, "Come away now, sweetheart, I don't want you bothering Brent when he's not well. I'm going to ring the doctor and see if I can make an appointment for him."

"I think I should stay, Mummy, because he needs company when he's sick. He might get sicker." It was unlikely but Fiona decided not to make an issue of it. "Then don't talk, sweetheart, he's got a bad headache probably."

Whether Elise could provide any comfort or whether Brent would be upset about her seeing him in that state Fiona couldn't guess as she went out and asked Dennis for the phone book. Dennis handed it over but didn't say anything. Fiona flicked through to find Dr Heber then took her mobile phone out of her big bag. She sat down and rang the number. She got a brisk voice saying, "Dr Heber's surgery. How can I help you?"

"It's Fiona Greehan, in Buckton. I wonder if there is any chance that Dr Heber might be able to see Constable Kelly today. Even just very briefly?"

"Has there been an accident?" The voice remained brisk and Fiona could picture the receptionist gearing up to say it would be better if he went straight to hospital.

"Not exactly. He needs help, but not physical help. It's stress and everything, he's not coping very well. Even just ten minutes and to make arrangements for ongoing care."

The voice remained brisk but sounded quite sympathetic. There was a more general realisation now that police who got called to accidents, violence, sieges, could suffer serious mental trauma. Telling the receptionist that Dennis had been yelling at Brent might astonish her; on the other hand she might've heard some of the more lurid stories that went around about Dennis …

"Well, you are in luck. We've got a late cancellation. Could he be here by ten to five?"

"Yes, I'll organise that. Thank you very much."

Constable Kelly might not thank her but she went over to the counter and wrote Dennis a little note as he was on the phone to someone. Then she went to see how Robbie was coping with the toys and picked him up and went back to see Elise and Brent. The station clock said ten past two and she thought it could take a while to persuade Brent to come to Winville.

But she found him sitting up on the edge of the bed looking very woebegone but with an arm round Elise who was sitting beside him and reading him something from a magazine. Fiona wasn't particularly comfortable about this but she felt it wasn't the moment to take issue with Elise for climbing on to the bed or for Brent for allowing her to do so.

"Brent, if you'd like to get yourself organised, you might prefer to come in civvies, and we'll go and see Dr Heber in Winville. He can squeeze you in later this afternoon."

Brent said rather curtly he didn't intend to go and see any doctor and he wasn't sick.

"I'm afraid it's out of my hands now," Fiona said gently. If Dennis heard Brent refusing he might decide to give him another blast; and Dr Heber seemed the less drastic of the two options.

"We'll wait for you to get ready and then we'll get on the road. And, my dear, don't worry about anything. I'm sure you'll feel better soon." This was as much for the children's benefit as for Brent. Fiona had the sad thought that even if Dennis had said or done something to spark this crisis of nerves off the problems undoubtedly stretched way back, perhaps into Brent's childhood.

Dennis finished talking with Mona McLaren who said her husband had come back after searching for his two heifers all morning, had some lunch, and gone out again. "He said there was the sign of a … he called it a scuffle … but I don't s'pose he really knows. He thinks someone might've hit them with a vehicle and then come back to take advantage of some free meat."

He could go out and look at the 'scuffle' but Ken McLaren had probably trampled all over it by now. And there were people who didn't even bother to hit the cow with a car; they were out with rifles anyway …

"When you go out," Dennis said to Fiona, "pull the door shut and put the sign on it. And—good luck with him. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"Manage," she said with a smile.

Dennis went straight round to the house and sheds of Dan Goodrick. Most of the Goodricks were notoriously light-fingered but Dan was one of the worst. There were several pick-ups parked over near the big shed where Dennis had found the hide of a missing cow when he'd first come to Buckton. He parked and went straight over. Someone had dropped a piece of wood into the holder on the inside of the double doors. But the gap was large enough for Dennis to get one hand through sideways and under the block of wood. His hand was strong enough to lift the block out of its cradle. The next minute it dropped to the earth inside and he opened both doors with a shove.

"Well, well, well, what a nice surprise," he said loudly.

Dan was there, along with his nephew Craig and another Goodrick nephew Jake who came sometimes to do jobs for his uncles. And hung up on two makeshift gallows were two sizeable beasts; or the skinned and eviscerated carcases. Mrs McLaren had said the heifers were Hereford-Friesian crosses and due to calve within a week or two. He walked straight over to where the hides were draped over several poles. They were still faintly damp.

"Nice bit of beef," he said angrily.

It wasn't just the business of free meat, and Dan passed the hides on to a mate who did some home tanning; it was also the pointless waste of the two calves. Ken McLaren might be a testy old mule but to lose four beasts in one night was a major blow.

"And it's our beef!" Dan came back angrily. "So don't you go claiming it isn't ours!"

"You were so bloody hungry you couldn't even wait for the poor bloody heifers to calve? Don't give me that bullshit!"

Dan shrugged. Craig looked truculent but didn't say anything. Dennis continued to look around. There was no obvious sign of the heads with their incriminating ear tags. But he had noticed the old drum behind the house that served as an incinerator was still smoking. He turned and went out and walked over to the drum. Some mess in it was still smouldering. He picked up a nearby stick and poked around. The smell was of hair and flesh. With some difficulty he dragged the largest bits out and dumped them on the ground. Two skulls. Eight legs. Dan had probably poured a bit of petrol on them but it hadn't been enough to burn the bones. Just enough to remove any obvious indication of their identity.

He hauled out his phone and rang the McLarens and Mrs McLaren said wearily, "He's just come in. I'll get him for you."

A minute later Dennis said, "You'd best come straight round to Dan Goodrick's farm, Mr McLaren. They're butchering two heifers which are probably yours."

Mr McLaren didn't jump at the idea but finally said grumpily he s'posed he'd better. "If you don't come," Dennis Walsh said grimly, "you won't get another chance." But it was nearly an hour, during which Dennis Walsh simply stood watch over the two carcases and the three men sat on old kerosene tins and smoked, mostly in silence. Dennis also took the time to have a detailed look around the shed to see if any other stolen goods might be in evidence. But he mostly wondered how Fiona was getting along with Brent and the long trip to Winville and all the worry and embarrassment he had so abruptly dumped on her shoulders. But at least, he told himself this over

and over again, his subordinate might finally get round to dumping some of the baggage he had been carrying round on to someone trained to handle it …

Because he didn't think he could cope with Brent Kelly the way things were …

Case No. 3: When and If …

Ms Muriel Bennett, the new librarian in Buckton, certainly knew her job but she managed to ruffle the feathers of the Reading Group by insisting that she as Librarian should choose each new thing the group would read. It was George Hickman who said rather ponderously, "The reason we only read in the same *area* rather than the same book is scarcity. We rarely have enough copies to go round unless it's an old classic like *Robinson Crusoe*. So there is some individual choice which is rather nice. We all have some control over it all."

She seemed to slice her way into the conversation before anyone else could support George. "I really don't think that's a good enough idea. It isn't as though anyone in the group is crying poor, and we would only need to buy paperbacks."

"But that way it means we can't bring anything that's now out-of-print, something we remember from our childhoods, that kind of area," Fiona said mildly.

"Would that matter?" Ms Bennett had not expected to face any opposition. Library staff tended to be the people who ran reading groups. It was a fact of life.

"Not *matter* exactly," Naomi Duggan said calmly. "But we've created a way of working which exactly suits everybody—"

"It's much too vague," Ms Bennett said briskly. "It encourages waffle." They all felt she would much rather say something stronger like: it doesn't suit me.

"We rather like waffle," Jeannie Martin, one of the sisters at the hospital, had come along. "Sometimes the world outside seems a little … bleak … and to come in here and just enjoy each other's views and ideas … and people are less likely to be offended when you don't like their book if you're not being very brisk and … sort of laying down the law."

"Of course," George looked to Ivy Chandler, "we come to the Library because Guy Briggs helped to get us organised. But strictly speaking we could meet in someone's house. It's an informal thing and we don't need to be a nuisance to the Library. It's a pleasant atmosphere here but you would all be very welcome to come round to spend the evening with May and me."

George might think he was being very diplomatic but everyone, including Ms Bennett, could see perfectly well he was reminding her not to throw her weight around. "It was only a suggestion," she said stiffly.

"And we will certainly give it careful thought," Fiona said. "But sometimes, even if a book isn't particularly expensive, you don't really want to buy a copy of something you didn't really enjoy."

"I could possibly get a small grant," Muriel Bennett didn't look mollified, "just for buying extra copies. Some libraries sell them off again later."

"I think—though I can't speak for anyone else—that if there was any extra money going begging," Fiona knew this was equally unlikely to gain Ms Bennett's approval, "I would like to see more in the children's section—and more Large Print books. Buckton has quite a number of elderly people including those in the Hospital Annexe. It would be nice to be able to take books around there regularly rather than expecting them to come here."

"You would be wasting your time," Ms Bennett seemed determined to oppose everything, "I've heard many of them are blind."

"Not blind," George said with care, "only old Bob Henderson and Mrs Johnson. I know Nurse Pym gets extra books on her own card to take around. But it would be nice to have someone go in and be able to offer a bit more of a range."

Muriel Bennett brought everything back to the night's book and said she thought they had better get on, she wanted to close 'on the dot'. Fiona felt that she had probably always run things in

this paint-by-numbers style and she wasn't going to change now. But it would be a pity if it ruined the informal pleasant nature of their group. Yet as she thought that she wondered if there was a secret sense of loneliness behind Ms Bennett's words and manner. People had not especially put themselves out for her because they had heard she went round to share her evenings with Betty Cronk. But maybe Betty Cronk and her rather salacious gossip were something in the nature of a fall-back-position.

As they went out and waited for Muriel to turn out the lights and lock the front door Fiona said to Naomi, "You go on, I'll have a little chat with her."

"Better you than me," Naomi said. Muriel Bennett brought back memories from her youth she would rather forget; those disappointed women who taught because no one seemed to want them not because they loved children and found teaching an excitement. She had sometimes had the vague feeling that that was the way she would end up. She didn't regard herself as pretty, concentrating almost solely on her snub nose and freckles not the rich auburn of her hair or the sparkle in her hazel eyes, and she would have been surprised to know that many people liked her for the happy-natured, kind, and interesting woman she was. But when she was thirty-two she met Jon Dundas and they found that they shared a great many things. She sometimes felt a roundabout sense of gratitude to Fiona for not wanting Jon. Rae Perry, when she'd lived in Buckton, had done her very best to push Jon and Fiona together, and Rae usually got the things she wanted, but in this case Fiona already knew she wanted Dennis Walsh. It might leave the feeling of being second choice but she knew enough about Fiona's private agonisings over Dennis and living in Buckton not to see it that way.

Ms Bennett dropped her key to the side door into her bag and turned round to find Fiona waiting for her. "Is something wrong?" she said rather sharply, not wanting to have to go back in to look for lost purses or anything …

"Oh no." Fiona had not thought it might look like that. "It was just a chance to catch up with you. I wondered if you would like to come round to have tea with me, if you can ever spare the time." The Library was open Saturday mornings but that left Saturday and Sunday afternoons free. And Muriel could hand over to her assistant if she needed to be away from the Library for a while. She wasn't sure how Muriel felt about Dennis but she felt reasonably sure that Betty would have passed on some exaggerated stories …

Muriel was about to say a brisk 'no' when it occurred to her that there might be some advantage, she wasn't sure just what, in being seen to go round to have tea with Fiona. It wasn't that Fiona had any particular position or clout in this town, being on the Shire Council didn't really carry much influence with it, and yet she felt that Fiona did have some more nebulous kind of influence in Buckton. It was hard to define but some women looked to see what she was wearing and others spoke of her charm or her style and still others remembered her as a bank manager and were impressed that a woman had achieved that. When laid out like that it didn't seem much to get excited about. But she too felt that indefinable something and it was curiosity which made her say, "If it wouldn't be a bother but Saturday afternoon is my only free afternoon. Betty and I go to Winville of a Sunday."

"Then—would this Saturday suit you? Say about three?" She had been preoccupied with Brent and his problems but now she found herself with a different curiosity: what did Muriel Bennett and Betty Cronk do in Winville every Sunday? The obvious answer was: go to church. But would that take up more than an hour or two? Perhaps Muriel would tell her more on Saturday.

Muriel turned up promptly on the dot of three. Fiona had got so used to the casual mention of time and the keeping of that she was still in the kitchen filling some asparagus puffs. It was the first time she had tried making choux pastry and she just hoped it would be a success. "Would you keep filling them," she said to the children, "while I let Ms Bennett in."

Muriel looked rather dowdy in a grey serge skirt and a pink cardigan that had begun to felt up but she said briskly as she put down her coat and handbag, "You did say three."

"Yes, do come in, we're just finishing filling the puffs, I'll pop them in the oven to heat and we'll have tea."

"Your husband isn't here?"

"No, he's round at the footie. I hope they're all behaving themselves."

"I've heard he frightens them into good behaviour."

"I think," Fiona said, "that that is an urban myth. But if people like to believe it … "

The tea went off quite pleasantly, if slightly formally; Muriel Bennett gave nothing away about herself, merely keeping her end of the conversation to questions about Buckton. Possibly she still believed Fiona had an ulterior motive and still hoped to pressure her into accepting the majority view about how the Reading Group should be run. But as tea progressed she seemed to relax a little. She even said that she and Betty had got in the habit of going to Winville to the service at the evangelical church there and for the lunch that was put on afterwards.

"You mean the one that Chris Baillie runs, On Fire for Christ, I think he called it."

"Yes, over near the railway. It's got such a lovely lot of energy and enthusiasm. Not like these half-dead people in Buckton. But of course you don't go to church, do you?" She contrived to make it sound as though Fiona was being remiss. "So important for children to be brought up as good Christians, wouldn't you agree? They have such an enthusiastic group of young people."

"That's nice. I'm glad you've found something to suit." She found she didn't really want to talk about religion with Muriel Bennett. "And Betty too after her disappointment with Pastor Kramer."

"She has suggested we go to Toowoomba to hear him one weekend. We might do just that."

But Ms Bennett looked at her watch then and said she would really need to be going soon. Fiona said she hoped she would be able to come again but just as Ms Bennett with her light coat and handbag had gone to the front door the phone rang. She said to Fiona, "Don't worry, I can see myself out."

Fiona said goodbye and hurried to the phone on its little table in the hallway. A minute or two later Fiona heard the garden gate squeak. It was only when she'd finished a brief conversation with Karen Dalton who told her she had counted the entries they had so far received for their butter wrapper competition and found they already amounted to six hundred and thirteen entries. Fiona didn't have to pretend to be amazed. She was constantly astonished at the number of people who had got busy already and sent in an entry—or three or four or five.

It was only as she came back to the living room and shut the front door to keep the warmth in and turned around that something struck her as different. At first she could not decide what the difference was. Ms Bennett had been carrying her light coat and her handbag over her arm as she came in and she had said she would just pop them on the piano stool. Now Fiona realised that there was something missing from the little bookcase near the piano. She kept a couple of small but attractive items there, just out of the reach of the children, and one of the items was a French traveling clock, a pretty thing with a cloisonné enamel case. It had belonged to her grandmother and although not massively valuable she had always cherished it. Now the space was empty. She tried to think when she had last noticed it. Certainly it had been there yesterday when she dusted and she felt sure she had vaguely noticed it when Muriel walked over and put her things down on the piano stool. Not definitely noticed but *fairly* sure …

And yet the idea that Ms Bennett would steal her clock seemed absurd. She hadn't heard the slightest breath of criticism of Ms Bennett, just that she was rather strict and old-fashioned. Yet if she was going round people's houses and removing small items surely someone would have said something? She asked the children if they had noticed the clock, even perhaps taken it down for some reason. Elise had not noticed Ms Bennett leave but Robert had been standing in the doorway; he was such a quiet little boy that the librarian possibly hadn't registered his presence.

Now he said, "That lady took it. She put it … in her coat." He wasn't as articulate as Elise had been at that age but Fiona was used to his way of talking and she said, "Did she, sweetheart? I wonder why?"

It wasn't hard to make a guess but she didn't want to make an issue of it with the children; it would be rather awkward, next time they went to the Library, if they felt Ms Bennett was a thief. But Fiona saw no reason why she shouldn't say something to Ms Bennett. She mentioned it to Dennis when he came in an hour later and asked him if he could mind the children while she popped round. "No, I'll go. If I can find it do you want her charged?"

"I think—if she would hand it back and apologise, I would accept that."

"Okay, I'll see what I can do."

"Don't be too hard on her. She may not be very likeable … but I think maybe she's had a hard life … "

"Lots of people've had hard lives. Doesn't give 'em the right to pinch your things."

"No, I don't mean it quite like that. I haven't really got a handle on her, some buried … I'm not sure what to call it, perhaps trauma is too hard a word … "

He didn't see any point in hanging round while Fiona tried to decide how best to describe Muriel Bennett. And the question might be academic. There was no guarantee she would admit to taking it …

He walked over to the station to take the official vehicle. Betty Cronk, if not Ms Bennett, would hate the neighbours to know that the police had been round. Betty regarded herself as more respectable than anyone else in Buckton. She might even, if push came to shove, rat on her new-found-friend if she thought Muriel was going to make a habit of bringing the police around.

But was it a kind of kleptomania or something, some kind of resentment against Fiona, or she had simply been overpowered by her desire for Fiona's grandmother's clock? Dennis saw it as a fiddly fussy little thing, hardly worth giving house room, but he could understand that it might appeal to a woman like Muriel Bennett and it was probably worth … he found it hard to guess but certainly quite a few hundreds …

He drove into the Cronk driveway and got out. There was no light on in Muriel's little flat behind the main house so he went to the side door of the Cronk home and knocked loudly. He heard voices inside, but not the actual words, there was a sense of bustle and then Betty Cronk opened the door looking a little flustered.

"Ms Bennett here?" he said without bothering with any lead-in.

"Why?" Betty seemed to have difficulty deciding on a response.

"Because she came round to my house this afternoon to have tea with my wife and stole a clock belonging to her."

"That's—that's rubbish! Muriel wouldn't do a thing like that!"

"She doesn't need you to answer for her. Just get her and she can tell me what the fuck was going on."

Betty Cronk looked shocked and said, "I'll ask you not to use language like that in my house, sergeant, we are decent people here."

"Bollocks. Decent people don't steal."

Betty didn't seem to feel up to arguing in her doorway. She said crossly, "I'll get Muriel but you're barking up the wrong tree. I'll bet it's your kids that took it and lost it and now they're too scared to own up."

It might be a fair hypothesis for the relations of some of the town's youth to their fierce sergeant. But Dennis knew his kids weren't afraid of him and he would back their honesty over Muriel Bennett's any day.

There was a clatter of cups somewhere inside and then Ms Bennett came to the door with a face which showed no expression. "Yes, what is it, sergeant?"

"A little clock which stood on a bookcase in my house. It was there when you arrived, it was gone after you'd gone. Go and get it and Fiona says she doesn't want you charged, she just wants it back as it belonged to her granny."

"You're quite mistaken, sergeant. I did not, and I would not, take anything from your house. If your clock is missing then I suspect your children have taken it to play with."

"Nice one, Ms Bennett, but it won't wash. Now go and get that ruddy clock before I go and get a warrant to turn this place upside down!"

Ms Bennett had never seen Sergeant Walsh this angry, nor had Betty as she continued to hover in the background, and both women found it disconcerting. Sergeant Walsh could probably be heard all along their street. The thought of people hearing talk of 'warrants' coming from here horrified Betty if not Muriel. But Muriel had fallen in love with the beautiful little clock and she was not going to cave in. "That is nonsense, sergeant, and you know it. This is a respectable

household. It has never been linked to any crime and no magistrate will give you a warrant on such slim evidence."

"Bullshit! I had to threaten Ms Cronk to get her to stop letting people into that flat when Constable Briggs was here. I'll guarantee she's in there poking around every time you're out."

"That's a lie!" Betty had mixed feelings about protecting Muriel. She had none at all when it came to preserving her own reputation. "I never go into that flat except to vacuum and Muriel does that herself. So don't you dare come in here with your dirty insinuations."

"You know as well as I do that I caught you and a man in there going through Guy's personal possessions. So don't get on your high horse. Now, just go and get that ruddy clock that Ms Bennett was showing you before I arrived."

Ms Bennett shook her head and repeated her innocence and said again that Sergeant Walsh should have a good hard look at his own children. Betty Cronk just turned and went out to the kitchen. A minute later she returned with the clock and handed it over. "And I don't want to see you round here again, sergeant, or I will lay a complaint. I know what you're allowed to do and what you're not—"

"And receiving stolen goods, Ms Cronk, is a crime. Don't forget that."

"I wasn't receiving—"

"No, she was showing it to you—and then she wanted you to hide it for her as soon as I turned up. Same difference." As he spoke Dennis was turning the clock over in his hands. So far as he could see it had sustained no damage.

Muriel turned angrily to Betty then back to the sergeant. "So? Why shouldn't I take it? I've got nothing and she's got everything, the nasty patronising little snob that she is."

Dennis stood in silence for a minute. Then he said, "I don't care two hoots about the clock. If you had asked nicely she might even have given it to you. But I don't take kindly to people badmouthing my wife or abusing her hospitality. So I am going to charge you with theft. You will be called as a witness, Ms Cronk." Dennis told Ms Bennett to get her coat and handbag and come down to the station now and he would complete the paperwork. "With luck, you'll come up in court on Monday morning, Ms Bennett, so you had better notify the Library that you won't be in."

"But—you can't do this!" Betty Cronk had stood with her mouth open all through his grim recital. "I haven't done anything wrong!"

"I said witness, Ms Cronk, not accessory. Be thankful I'm leaving it at that." He turned back to Muriel Bennett. "You can come with me or drive down yourself. You'd better come with her, Ms Cronk, I might change my mind if Ms Bennett gives me any trouble."

But when the two women came into the station ten minutes later Ms Bennett had obviously had a change of heart—or Betty Cronk had pressured her to change her attitude. They found that Sergeant Walsh hadn't. His only concession was to say, "If you plead guilty you'll probably be out in five minutes. If it's a first offence, but I'll need to check that, then you'll probably be treated very leniently. You can combine your trip with a doctor's appointment or something to make it sound better. But the Council will still need to know. They may not want to continue to employ you in a position of trust." He didn't think to mention that though Ms Bennett might be in and out in five minutes she might still have to wait an hour or two to be called depending on how quickly the court managed to work through the long list of petty crimes which faced it every Monday morning.

Ms Bennett walked over to a chair in the waiting area, sat down heavily, and buried her head in her hands. Betty looked from the sergeant to her lodger and seemed somewhat lost. She finally said, "Couldn't you go a bit easy on her, sergeant? She hasn't had an easy life."

"Lots of people haven't had an easy life, doesn't turn 'em into crooks," he said grimly. "Now, take her home and see that she turns up on whatever date she is called to court." Betty finally took her tenant away, saying a few vaguely comforting things and after directing an angry look his way; and he turned to see if Ms Bennett had ever blotted her copybook before today. He could find no sign of a record. So she probably *would* be treated mildly. But the whole thing left a nasty taste.

Fiona was pleased to get her clock back but she said, "Do you think a caution wouldn't have been enough?"

"She tried to put the blame on you and the kids. I wasn't having that."

She gave that a gentle smile. It was nice having that kind of protection but, in a way, she felt an unease; having Dennis as the knight who kills the dragon and saves the maiden could be onerous and she felt a little uncomfortable that he might be using her as an excuse to vent some spleen …

And Betty Cronk wasted no time in spreading it all around Buckton that Dennis Walsh was bullying a nice respectable middle-aged woman. People heard this; quite a few didn't know about the summons to court or see the tiny bit in the *Winville Courier* that Muriel Bennett had been convicted of the theft of a clock insured for two thousand dollars. Quite a few people said 'Typical!' and similar things and offered Ms Bennett their condolences.

But the publicity was sufficient to bring two unexpected people forward several weeks later.

*

Dr Heber had kept Brent in Winville overnight but had then asked that he come twice a week for sessions. Dennis wasn't wild about apologising to anyone but in this case he accepted that he had never understood just what a parlous mental state his constable was in. He wondered why none of Brent's problems had been picked up on when he first applied to join the police but they probably explained it all away as him still settling in to a new country, that kind of excuse …

He just said, "Sorry, mate, I shouldn't of been so hard on you. I know things haven't been easy for you. But we won't have any of that nonsense in here about women making men lose control, if you don't mind. No man ever lost control that didn't want to lose control."

"Sometimes they do," Brent said gloomily.

"Bullshit. You can control yourself till you get to the toilet. You don't go wild soon's you see some food no matter how hungry you are. Men who dump their stuff on women don't deserve to have nice women in their lives."

"She isn't in my life any more. Iris, I mean."

"Well, it'd take a pretty amazing woman to put up with you. But she's a nurse. She understands what stress can do to people. And she grew up with an awful shit of a father. She probably understands that side of things too."

"I haven't got—an awful shit of a father. My father was always there for us. Strict. But good. He's a good man. I was always the bad kid at home."

"Yeah, pull the other one."

Fiona on the long difficult drive to Winville had come to a deeper understanding of Brent and she felt increasingly sure that it was the mysterious loss of his mother when he was a small boy which was at the heart of many of his problems. She was good at discreetly getting information from people and he had told her enough about his life for her to feel it might be possible to track down his mother's fate. It was possible she had been murdered and her body never found. It was equally possible she had run away from a situation she couldn't cope with. But Brent had said she was a Protestant who had converted on marrying a Catholic but then had … doubts. Just what the doubts might be … but he said his father had frogmarched his mother to church when she had tried to find excuses for not going … and later his brothers had teased him for crying when his mother disappeared. He had been told several different stories, that she was sick, that she had run away with another man, that she had been shot by British soldiers, it seemed to depend on the father's whim of the moment. But no mother ever returned to cherish her little son …

It was a difficult ethical question. Should she try to find out information dealing with someone else's life? Should she go ahead herself? Should she ask Brent if he would like to know—if and when she unearthed anything? Dennis hadn't been very helpful. He didn't feel she should spend her own money on the question. But he didn't really see other problems. She could decide later whether to pass on her information. She could wait till Brent was feeling a bit more calm and capable of dealing with *things* …

She rang the firm of investigators in Brisbane she had dealt with before and gave them the information that might help them track down Mrs Kelly in Belfast. She felt a fleeting wish that his name was something much more unusual. But they said the address and his birth date should be enough. She didn't expect to hear back within days but she received an interim report only five days later to say that a Jacqueline Kelly had been interred in a psychiatric hospital when her son was only three, that she had improved enough to leave there, and that they didn't yet know where she had

gone. The neighbours and local shopkeepers had no memory of her ever returning to the family home off the Falls Road.

And then, two days later, she got an e-mail from a woman called Marianne Maslow who said: 'I don't know why you're trying to get on to my dear little sister—but if it's to pass any information on to that shite husband and children of hers then there's nothing doing. There is simply no way I would even let them near her. They came close to wrecking her life completely. I am not letting them at her for another go. When I found they had all packed up and headed for Australia I was SO relieved'.

Fiona read this through several times and then she composed a very careful reply. 'Thank you for getting in touch with me. The last thing I would ever want to do would be to hurt or distress your sister. You probably don't know but her youngest son Brent joined the police here in Queensland and was sent to Buckton where he works under my husband. He has found it quite hard dealing with life here and more so perhaps with dealing with women. He met a lovely woman who is a sister at the hospital but he finds it very difficult dealing with any kind of intimacy. I don't like to pry but he got to the point where he needed some psychiatric care. It seemed to me that what he is missing in his life is a mother and I was shocked to learn that he has no idea what happened to his mother, that his father and brothers seem to have told him various stories but none with any back up evidence. I think, though I have no expertise in this area, that he is secretly looking for a mother figure and of course healthy young women don't want that kind of relationship. It is all very difficult and a bit traumatic. I felt that Brent talking things out with Dr Heber might be very helpful but also that if he could know the truth about his mother then that might help him lay some 'ghosts' to rest. You will know your sister's situation and whether this might become another burden on her. So I will leave it to you whether you might like to contact me again. We all think well of Brent and would like him to be happy here if that is possible.'

She had probably done the best she could and would now wait to get a report from her investigators' 'man in Ireland'. But Marianne Maslow seemed to feel that this unexpected connection was worth keeping. She e-mailed Fiona to say that she had passed on 'some' information to her sister and she would like to know more about Buckton, 'how big it is, how safe it is, what sort of work Brent is doing there'. Fiona considered taking some photographs of the town and the station, if not Brent, but she couldn't very well send them without knowing where Marianne actually lived—and she didn't like to press her for that information. She contented herself with writing about Buckton, about its surroundings, about the kinds of crime it usually experienced. She considered mentioning the strange case currently over at Dinawadding but Dennis had only been marginally involved and Brent even less.

And maybe Marianne and Jacqueline would prefer to see Buckton as the sort of place where nothing more serious than a wandering cow or a car backing into a tree disturbed the quiet tenor of their days. She contented herself with saying that much of the crime here was 'agricultural' … And Marianne eventually wrote back, giving her a post office box in a Dublin suburb. Fiona did her up a little packet of pictures including one she tempted Brent into sitting for, with Elise and Robert on the steps beside him. She thought of asking Brent if he had any memories of his Aunt Marianne but she didn't think that Marianne as a Protestant from Dublin (though she had possibly moved to Dublin after her own marriage) would have found the Kelly household and neighbourhood a very sympathetic environment. Her connection to her sister's family had probably been via letters and perhaps telephone calls. She thought she would put off telling Brent anything until she received the final report; although the whole thing did bring with it the uncomfortable knowledge that if she could find Mrs Kelly then so could Brent's father. She took some comfort in knowing that he probably wouldn't want to spend money on a search and the move to Australia might be to leave all that was involved with his failed marriage behind him …

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Superintendent John Brophy had a different but equally difficult 'need to know' problem. He rarely interfered with his officers as they went about the business of dealing with petty crime. A fight outside a pub wasn't something he would normally want to know about. But it had turned into a question that might be construed as negligence on his part.

The fight had not been reported to police in Dinawadding simply because there was no one to report it to. He had stalled on his promise to get a permanent officer into that station not least because it cost money and it didn't strike him as a priority. To send Constable Hussein once a week, choosing a quiet day for him to be out of the station in Winville, was virtually costless, just his petrol. But a petition had been prepared by people in Dinawadding, including Les Marrow, and sent to the Commissioner to complain a) that one day a week wasn't enough and b) they never knew when to expect to find someone there. They didn't believe it was good enough.

And now Les Marrow had put in a formal complaint to the Commissioner as well, to say that Constable Hussein had waited for his son to die before becoming 'proactive', and that he should be carpeted, if not sacked, for his slackness. What was the good of him coming 'occasionally' if he simply sat in the station and 'twiddled his thumbs' when he got there?

Brophy had not met Les Marrow and it didn't occur to him that this very fluent letter using words like 'proactive' was unlikely to have been written by Les Marrow. But it did strike him as odd that someone would go straight to the Commissioner *before* making a complaint to his local station to get some action. He had pulled Sam Hussein in for a mild ticking off while Andrews and Carney were in Winville. Now he wondered if he should pull him in again. A copy of the letter to the Commissioner had been passed back to him along with the request that whoever he sent to Dinawadding be seen to be out and about in the community. He could see that the main criticism was directed at Constable Hussein rather than at him. He could send someone else but Hussein knew Dinawadding better than most of his officers and he didn't think he could justify sending someone more senior. Most days there *were* pretty quiet. He wasn't sure just what his officer was expected to do on such days …

He sent a message for Hussein to come to his office and when Sam came in he said rather curtly, "The Commissioner wants you to be more proactive each time you go over to Dinawadding. There has been a complaint that you just sit in the station and twiddle your thumbs."

"No, sir, that can't be right. I always go round the streets, go into the shops and the school and the pub to check if there have been any problems. You can ask anyone there. I sometimes hear rumours about scuffles but unless someone comes with a complaint I don't normally follow up. It isn't a crime—"

"Well, it is a crime from now on. You can take it from me. If you hear any rumours you investigate them. Is that clear?"

Sam Hussein said he understood but he added, "Does that only apply to Dinawadding or to everywhere here? And am I the only one to investigate or is it an across-the-board directive?"

John Bropy hadn't thought all this through. Now he felt annoyed that one of his most junior officers was putting him on the spot. "Take it as applying to you and to Dinawadding as from today. They're going all out to get a conviction in the Marrow case and your actions in going easy on young Proctor aren't helping them get a conviction."

Sam had gradually discovered that although Brophy might want to be taken seriously every time he opened his mouth he was pretty much a toothless tiger; he rarely followed things through, he didn't want to be bothered with difficult questions of protocol or precedent or technique, and he had largely stopped caring very much about his district's clear-up rate.

"But it *was* self-defence, sir, there were four men there and no court will see Simon Proctor as the instigator of that fight. He would have done better to run away but no man wants to be branded as the one who ran away. And we don't know if it was his punch, the way Marrow fell, the way he was dragged into the car and taken sixty kilometres at top speed on a not very smooth road, that did the damage. All the trucks through Dinna have made a mess of that road. And we don't know if the hospital made a mistake. We haven't been provided with an autopsy report so we don't actually know what killed him. But it seems very unlikely that the sort of pathetic little punch that Simon Proctor could give him would be the cause of death."

John Brophy, to give him a little credit, listened to all this and was even slightly impressed. He hadn't taken much notice of Constable Hussein but he found his words clear and sensible and articulate. Still, it didn't really matter what Hussein thought; it was what Andrews and Carney, if not the Commissioner, were doing and saying that mattered.

"I know. But make sure you are out and about very publicly in Dinna. And I think those other men who were with Marrow should all be asked to come in to make a formal statement. We want to make certain our backs are covered." And that my back is covered and that I can write back to the Commissioner pointing out that a number of people in Dinawadding can point to my constable being 'proactive' …

But after Hussein had gone back to his work John Brophy sat on in silence thinking things through. He could simply leave everything to the men from Brisbane and the courts to sort out. It was largely out of his hands now. But the memory came back vividly, as it often did, of himself as a little shy retiring not very articulate and rather overweight boy, and the terror of being ganged up on in the schoolgrounds—or, what was worse, outside the schoolgrounds. He had about half a kilometre to walk home and he still thought of that stretch as the road from hell. The little dips and sheltering trees on that country road, the old shed near the road which had been the sight of some of his worst nightmares. And he thought of Sam Hussein ending up in hospital with a broken skull because half a dozen men had jumped him on a night call out. He wondered if the young man ever had bad dreams about that night.

"I think that someone has another agenda," he said musingly to the empty room, "and I'm not sure if it's just Hussein they want to see undermined … or it's something bigger and they don't mind who goes down as collateral damage along the way … "

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Graham Kelso was a part time magistrate and a member of several local boards. His two sons were grown up. One of them worked as a camerman for the ABC in Sydney. The other was a tutor at the university in Armidale. He and his wife Judith were very proud of their children—and their first grandchild. They had occasionally discussed moving south to be closer to the children but they had friends and other relatives in Winville. He also felt that there was a constant seepage of people, good people, people who were assets to the community, away from country towns unless there was some major new development to bring an influx. He didn't really want one of the big companies to find coal under Winville and turn the place into a large open-cut mine as was happening around Millmerran. But in poor seasons, and this was shaping up to be a very poor harvest, the whole town suffered. It largely depended on agriculture and agriculture depended on rain.

His wife said she would be quite willing to tape Milo Forman's program but she was surprised that he should ask. "It isn't something you would particularly enjoy, is it?"

"In the interests of being better informed—I will grit my teeth. It's a sort of lowest denominator thing but a heck of a lot of people listen and accept what he is saying as the way this country should be heading."

"You mean—he's wanting to influence the election?"

"Well, I'm sure he is. But just how isn't easy to see. People sometimes leap on a single issue and it seems to determine the outcome. But too many immigrants and too much welfare for the Murris—these are federal issues. I know he also makes a lot of play with not enough support for country towns and country people and country businesses—he makes himself out to be the people's champion but I wonder how well he really understands some of the issues. I'd like to know if he's plugging any individual or party, whether he's actually coming straight out with anything that looks like an endorsement."

She saw the interest in this. "And how does it link up to what people are saying about that business over in Dinna?"

"Maybe Forman, as they say, just got lucky. But if he was at the top of the list anyway it's hard to see how it could have any real link to him."

"But maybe he *wasn't* at the top of the list and this Mr Marrow said he would help him to bypass all the other people on the list?"

"It's possible. If it was a personal arrangement … and maybe someone who *was* on the list got upset. I'm only guessing … but maybe Forman will let something drop when he's in full flow." And he thought he might share his concerns with his sons. He waited till she was out at a meeting before he rang them both. She might think he was getting a little obsessed. 'Perhaps I am,' he

thought wryly. But after listening to the cassette Judith had left for him he thought obsession was a relative concept.

Both the Kelso sons were interested though they thought it was a little bit outside their areas of expertise. His son Jon listened carefully then said, "Are you wanting me to do something about it, Dad?"

"Not exactly. I think I wanted to run it past someone intelligent and sensible to make sure I'm not going a bit over the top with it."

"There being a dearth of intelligent and sensible people in Winville?" Jon said drily. "Apart from you and Mum?"

"I hope not. But I'm worried that I think someone and I don't honestly know who, whether Forman or someone behind him, has another agenda." He explained the involvement of Constable Hussein and the strong possibility that race came into it … somehow. "And he is married to a young Aboriginal detective here. If John Brophy was the sort of man who would really give some support to his team … but he's just thinking about how many months to retirement … Maybe I'm worrying unnecessarily but I just can't get rid of the feeling that someone's being set-up … " It sounded rather pathetic when put like that and the most obvious victim of setting up was Simon Proctor and surely race didn't come into it because the young man was a fairly average white Anglo-Saxon male who had just had the misfortune to get himself mixed up in a scuffle outside a pub. But then if Forman had called him 'poofy' on air and got away with it there might be people who would see that as a legitimate reason to give Simon Proctor a hard time. He finally put the whole issue to one side. Proctor would come up in court, his or possibly Mrs Vohland's, and he would be able to see just how strong the police evidence against the young man really was. There was nothing more to be done.

But he faced DSC Ali Deane in court the following morning as she presented evidence in a receiving case. It wasn't major but he found himself watching and listening more closely than usual. She was a good clear speaker and presented her evidence well but he accepted that she would probably face a thick glass ceiling in her chosen career. After she had gone out and he handed down a short sentence he found himself understanding his own motives much better. Both Deane and Hussein had overcome major hurdles to get anywhere in their careers; but more than that he simply liked them as two young people. He occasionally saw them eating out or walking their little Australian terrier or getting their groceries and he always felt there was something touching about their love for each other … and a kind of vulnerability that no amount of confidence and mutual support could quite overcome …

But were they intended to be victims in this case—or was their involvement purely incidental?

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Andrews and Carney were back in Winville a few days later—to be told that the three other men present outside the pub had all come in and made written statements. "You should've waited for us to handle that," DSS Andrews said curtly.

"It was our Super who told us to get that out of the way," Daniel Wang said mildly. "He probably thought he was helping you. You've got a lot on your plate."

Andrews accepted this explanation grudgingly and said they now had statements from all the nursing staff who had dealt with Hayden Marrow, as well as the theatre staff. Daniel nodded, "Good, and anything there to help your case? Have you got a cause of death?"

"Trauma. I haven't got the technical description with me. But quite a lot of people, once they're in a coma, never come out. The body just sort of … gives up the ghost. We've got your man admitting to the blow which put Marrow into a coma. It's pretty straightforward."

Daniel nodded. "And everything was done by the book at the hospital end of things?"

"Can't fault them. We've got an independent expert in to check over all the treatment he was given from the time he arrived until the time he died. Nothing suspicious or careless there."

"And who signed the paper allowing them to take two kidneys instead of one?"

"Because of the urgency it was done over the phone. The hospital rang Mr Marrow, senior, and he gave his permission."

Both DS Sullivan and Ali Deane were listening in to this conversation, not least because they too had wondered about that vexed question of permission. Daniel seemed to pick up on their unspoken questions because he said, "And you've checked that oral permission is acceptable? Legally speaking?"

"Of course."

Again Daniel nodded. "So what happens next? Do you want us to arrest Simon Proctor?"

"No, we'll go out and bring him in tomorrow. He's not likely to do anything stupid, is he?"

"Not from the bit I know about him. It will be hard on his relatives. They've been depending on him to help them run the farm. But I guess they can hire someone temporarily."

The following evening it was on the news. A young man, not named, had been arrested and charged over the death of a Dinawadding man, Hayden Marrow. Graham Kelso heard it. Sam and Ali heard it. Dennis Walsh heard it. And Martha Harding heard it …

Martha was Saul Harding's sister. She had never forgiven him for selling the family farm on the south side of Abe Proctor's farm. And now she sat at her kitchen table looking at her plate with its steak and eggs and a small helping of mixed vegetables and she knew perfectly well that the report referred to Abe's great-nephew. Almost everyone round the district, unless they were off in the world of dementia or too young to care about such things, knew it referred to Simon Proctor and his role in the death of Hayden Marrow. She ate her dinner slowly and thoughtfully and then she went to her telephone. She knew Abe liked her. It was Dennis Walsh, she remembered, who had passed that on. It was an unlikely thing for him to concern himself with but she had been left with the feeling that he was motivated by wanting to prevent Japana expanding any further. Just how she might man the barricades with old Abe was hard to envision. She got Abe eventually and he sounded old and tired; she couldn't really blame him. He had probably seen Simon as the answer to a prayer when Jeremy got sick. And now Simon was going to go away and possibly not come back. Or not in time to save the farm.

"Abe," she said in a fairly businesslike way, "it's Martha here. I just heard about Simon on the news. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"It'll be hard to keep things going, without that young feller-me-lad to help. I guess I should face facts and sell out now and be done with it."

"And let Japana get more good land to wreck? No way. Abe, I can come out tomorrow and give you and Jerry a hand. We'll talk about things then. But I don't want you to have to move till you're ready to move. Okay?"

"If you want to come … you know you're always welcome." But Abe couldn't summon up much enthusiasm even for the thought of having Martha round the place. He knew that his son, who had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis along with cirrhosis of the liver, was going to need to be hospitalised in the not so distant future and after that … he supposed he would get used to giving up the farm.

Martha was as good as her word, arriving about ten with a box of groceries and coming in to see what needed to be done around the house and around the farm. It wasn't nearly as good a farm as the one she had grown up on, and it was only half the size, but now she thought that was probably just as well. Except for Simon they were all over fifty.

It was some months since she had last seen Jeremy and she could see the deterioration in his physical condition but he greeted her quite cheerfully and said she would perk the old man up. "And how are you?" she said as she put the box down on the kitchen table.

"Still managing. But I've got the chair now. I'm learning to wheel myself around the house. So long as I can still control my hands … so long as I can still do some things around the place. Gets me down a bit but at least I'm learning to cope as I go along."

"And Simon?"

"It doesn't make sense to me—but who am I to say." She wasn't sure if this needed an answer and Jeremy went on: "It was me encouraged him to go into town there some evenings. I thought he might meet a girl, have a bit of fun, not much fun in this house these days. I didn't know they'd gang up on him."

"Of course not. How could you?"

But Jeremy didn't take this as comfort. "Well, if I'd thought it through. I used to go. I know what a few of the young blokes are like. They never bothered me but then I'm not Simon."

No, you're not Simon. Martha wasn't sure why those few words suddenly seemed to contain the whole tragedy. She had only seen Simon once or twice yet she understood the difference. Lawyers might try to frighten Abe and Jeremy into selling out. But young hoodlums like Chick Marrow didn't pick fights with them. Simon, though, was a completely different sort of man; quiet, shy, just the faintest bit effeminate. A young man who would be seen as fair game in a country pub. And yet the Pecks ran a usually well-behaved business. If people misbehaved Des Peck simply told them to get out. It wasn't the sort of place where people regularly felt frightened, intimidated, unsafe. She wondered if Des Peck had simply not noticed what was going on or whether he had some bone to pick with Simon … maybe even some bone to pick with Abe or Jeremy …

"Jerry, why didn't Des Peck do anything? It's a long time since I went in there but I remember he always got involved if he saw people getting a bit … well, a bit rowdy and unpleasant. Has he changed? Or the place? Or he doesn't like Simon?"

"I think he hardly knows Simon. He's only been into Dinna a few times. I wondered that myself but I haven't been in for ages. You're not going to believe it but I'm just about on the wagon. I only have a drink now on special occasions."

"Would you like to go again? I'm curious. Has the pub changed a lot?"

"Not so far as I know. Well, you can take me if you want, and if you don't mind taking the chair. It gets worse of an evening, just tired, I guess. But you'd best leave Dad at home. If he sees some of those Japana cowboys he'll probably tell them they're … well, he doesn't like them and when he looks down on your brother's place and what they've done to it, he just about starts frothing at the mouth."

They heard heavy footsteps on the back stairs and the next minute Abe Proctor came into the old kitchen. "Martha." He took his battered hat off and came over. "So you came."

He looked very tired and she felt he had aged greatly since she'd seen him last. "Abe, I'm sorry. Has Simon got a good lawyer?" She had learnt about lawyers the hard way: by needing one herself when she had got caught up in her brother's crazy idea to fund his way into politics by allowing his son to cook up some amphetamines on the property and sell them. She had agreed, under pressure, to store some of them in the nursing home where she used to work. But everyone needed a scapegoat and she had found herself friendless and exposed …

"He can get Legal Aid," Jeremy said calmly. "But how good they are … well, we're not the right people to tell you that. The only one we know is that bastard Gavin Whittaker."

Martha unpacked her box of groceries while she thought over the various lawyers in Winville and the things she had heard on the grapevine about them. But the other problem was money. Abe was like most farmers, or most farmers with a fairly small acreage, he simply didn't have cash sitting round. He could sell something. He could borrow perhaps …

But Abe had the grim prognosis for his son hanging over his head. If he had anything to spare it was probably being put aside for the day when Jeremy needed it. "There must be *something* we can do?" she said suddenly and with unexpected passion.

Both Abe and his son looked at her and then the old man shook his head slowly. "They say it's murder and what do we know about … what do us old sods know about anything if it comes down to the wire … " She had always felt there was a deeply rooted toughness in Abe but this statement reeked of tiredness and defeat.

"Well, let me at least make you both some lunch."

She quite enjoyed cooking and cooking for one wasn't much of an excitement. It was as she was driving home later that an idea came to her. Saul wanted to get into parliament; politicians and would-be-politicians were supposed to help their constituents. She turned off the main road and made her way through back lanes and eventually turned in the front gate and up the lane to the much smaller farm Saul and Nyree had bought.

She hoped she would find Saul there, not off campaigning somewhere. If he *was* holding a public meeting she didn't really mind to go along and put him on the spot—so long as it wasn't too far away from home—but she felt it would be better to really sit down and talk this through with

him. As she came up to the garden gate she could see his car out by the shed and Nyree saw her getting out and came to the front door. There wasn't a particularly close relationship between the two women but Nyree was always polite.

"Is Saul at home, Nyree?" Martha said briskly. "The car's there. Is he out the back?"

"No, he just came in." She stood back to let Martha precede her in.

Saul showed no sign of pleasure at his sister's arrival but he waited for her to sit down before saying, "Come to help with the campaign? I need people to letterbox round Winville."

"No, I've come to see what you can do for the Proctors."

"Because of that poofy little kid they've got there?"

"They need help, Saul. Jerry'll be in a wheelchair soon—"

"Better him than me," he said drily.

"And Abe's finding it all hard to deal with. If they have to sell the farm for sure Japana'll get it and wreck it. You know what they're like."

"Yeah, but there is a difference. No one can blame me if they wreck Abe's farm. And I'm not touching anything to do with that case—not with a bargepole."

"Why not?"

"First off, the kid's a raving queer, I'm not surprised they wanted to take him out and teach him a lesson. And second—how is it going to look if I get mixed up in something to do with that kidney donor thing, if it looks like I didn't want bloody Forman to have a kidney?"

"I can't see what he's got to do with you—"

"Don't you believe it, that joker's got clout. Maybe I was mad to run as an independent, it's not easy, but I'm not going to piss on my patch, not when I've got a spot on his program next week. It goes statewide."

"I thought it was only talkback?"

"Yeah, but I get to do the talking, a guest spot, then people ring in to tell me their problems. It gets people in. I'm not going to say … well, heck, it'll be all over the papers. People ring in and ask me what's going on out here I don't want to say I'm holding the limp little hand of Simon-fucking-Proctor to keep him safe from the big bad police, now do I?"

"No, Saul, you don't. But then I always knew you were a coward."

Martha got up and went out while her brother was still thinking of a comeback. But if she couldn't get Saul to do anything then who might she turn to? She wasn't a woman who made friends easily. She didn't have a particularly likeable personality. And she knew she didn't have the things, personality-wise or material, that drew people. She was still musing on the problems that Abe and Jeremy and Simon were facing as she reached home. But she *would* take Jerry and his chair to the pub in Dinna one evening. At least it would remind everyone that the family was doing things pretty tough. It seemed to be the best she could come up with, for the moment anyway …

Case No. 4: Goodbyes and After

Constable Hussein was home very late after his next stint in Dinawadding; it was his own conscience that made him go round every business, look at all the houses, call in at the school, stay more than an hour at the pub, not anything John Brophy might say.

Ali Deane had eaten her dinner and was thinking of going to bed when his car turned in by their little place. He came in yawning a minute later and said, "I stayed a while at the pub and had a pie there but I'm hungry again. And you'll never guess who came in?"

"Not Simon?"

"No. He's still in the Watch House. I heard he isn't going to ask for bail. But Jeremy Proctor came in in a wheelchair with Martha Harding. They tried to put Des Peck on the spot, you know, for that night, and he just said his wife was a bit off-colour that evening and he wasn't taking all that much notice. He told them he was sorry that anyone gave Simon a hard time but he didn't really see how it all started. He just told the guys to go outside later. And they asked him if those guys ever

gave him a hard time any other night and he said maybe they did but he couldn't really give chapter and verse. And then he said something about being sorry to see Jeremy being in a bad way and how was Abe coping. And Jeremy sort of snorted and said, well, how d'you reckon? It was a bit unpleasant because you could see he was really upset and feeling helpless to do anything much."

Ali, as he sat down at their kitchen table, put his plate of dinner into the microwave. They had found that it was a big help for two people who often came in and went out at odd times. She put the kettle on and came over and sat down opposite him. "I s'pose Mr Peck feels a bit guilty. If he had intervened it might've saved a lot of trouble down the track."

Sam nodded. "But I was thinking all the way home—and I kept wondering if this Milo Forman really has enough clout to get Andrews and Carney out there running round for him. And it's hard to believe anyone takes much notice of Les Marrow. And are Andrews and Carney so short of work in Brisbane that they want to make a big issue out of this? Nothing seems big enough somehow."

"But you're leaving something out, hon, you're leaving out the hospital. It's big enough."

"Well, I guess so. But could they get Andrews and Carney to keep coming up here?"

"Well, I don't see why not. But I know they're telling porkies—"

"You do?"

"I heard those guys talking to Daniel about that second kidney and they said the hospital rang Les Marrow and that oral permission is good enough in an emergency situation like this, they'd still be covered legally. But I checked and Les Marrow doesn't have a mobile phone and he would not have been home. They could ring the main office at Japana—or they might know someone else on that building site that had a mobile—but if they had to go through all that business—could they have got permission in time? And if they're telling one porky maybe they're telling a whole lot of porkies?"

"Maybe Les Marrow was home sick that day?"

"No, I checked. And I think—but who listens to me—that Les Marrow should be brought in for an interview. I think he should be asked all these questions." She sat watching Sam eat for a minute or two and then she added, "I think I'd like to see Dennis asking all these questions, not these guys from Brisbane, because I think something doesn't add up."

"I guess it's out of our hands now. Simon will plead … I guess he'll plead not guilty and that way we'll be able to see what other information they've dug up. And maybe they know things we don't know … "

And maybe they know things they don't want us to know, Ali Deane thought as she washed up and Sam went for a quick shower, but she knew it wasn't realistic to go and bother Dennis with it, not when he was having problems (and she only had a vague idea about the problems) with Brent Kelly, and while her thoughts remained so nebulous. Daniel just seemed glad to have it all in other people's hands and she understood that. It was difficult dealing with a case which was divided between two very different patches. But she could simply ring the hospital and ask how they had got on to Les Marrow. She could call it 'tying up a few loose threads' and if they refused to answer then she could make sure that Simon's lawyer knew about this angle …

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Dennis Walsh didn't see himself in the role of an agony aunt but he said he thought Brent should arrange to meet up with Iris and at least finish up their relationship with some … dignity. Brent only said morosely, "She hates me, she doesn't want to see me any more."

"Well, I wouldn't blame her for feeling like that. But has she actually said that to you?"

"No, I haven't seen her since—" he turned an uncomfortable flushed red, "since then."

"Then—mend the fences you can—and that'll leave you free to deal with the hard stuff."

"I haven't got … other … stuff, I'm just doing … what you want me to do, going along to that guy to talk."

"I've met some stubborn bloody donkeys in my time—but you take the cake." Dennis shrugged. "Still, you want to make more of a mess of your life, that's your business." He didn't say any more about Iris or Brent's visits to Dr Heber in Winville; not really seeing it as his responsibility. But it didn't exactly surprise him to hear on the grapevine that Brent had taken Iris to

dinner at Domenico's a couple of days later. He couldn't sort their private lives out for them. He just hoped Brent would make the effort …

Brent found it enormously difficult to apologise to Iris; there were even times when he wished he didn't live in such a small place with the constant possibility of running into her. But Iris said kindly, "I know we couldn't leave things as they were. But I understand that we've come to the end of our … our relationship … and I won't bother you in any way … and I know you won't bother me." She felt that 'bother' wasn't quite the right word but she left it at that, ordered a lasagna, and psyched herself up to talk lightly about things at the hospital and the movie she had gone to see in Winville with Jeannie Martin and Susan Denby.

But Brent, faced with this kind of tidying things away, faced too with Iris and the way she could melt his bones, suddenly knew he could not end things with Iris. His feelings were too confused to say something simple like "I still love you, I just need some time to sort myself out." Instead he said in a way that sounded sulky rather than loving, "It's okay, it doesn't bother me to see you … sometimes."

"But it might bother me to see you. If we're going to end things then I think it is better that we really do end things, not have them sort of drag on. You'll want to meet other people. So will I." Because it had come to her during her rollercoaster ride with Brent that it was nice to have a reason to leave the hospital behind, even if it was only to go out for a pizza.

"Will you? Other men, you mean?"

"People. Men, women, children. You made me realise I should be doing more with my life."

This was true. And even doing shiftwork wasn't a good enough excuse for simply sitting in the little room in the Nurses' Home watching TV or reading a book. When she had first arrived in Buckton Mavis Barnard at the service station had asked her if she would be interested in helping with the local Guides and Brownies because Mavis and Julie McLaren were now the only adults involved; she had pleaded busyness and getting to know the hospital but since then she had wondered if she might give it a try. It wasn't something she had experienced in her own childhood but she could see its value in giving young girls confidence and skills, and more so in a place like Buckton where there weren't many out-of-school activities.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't be jealous. I'm probably the last man … " The last man to … and to his horror he found tears welling up in his eyes. He had suffered several of these unexpected and embarrassing crying jags after that terrible set-to with Dennis Walsh—but at least they had all been when he was home alone in the flat and no one need know about them, he hadn't even told Dr Heber. And now he felt overwhelmed by this terrible need to put his head down in his hands and cry his heart out. "I'm sorry. I've got to go." He opened his wallet and pulled a couple of notes out. "Can you pay—" Then he got up and stumbled blindly out of the restaurant.

He and Iris had been the only people in the main dining room but there were a half dozen people in the garden room chatting with Bill Carboni, and his wife Anna and one of the little Roumanian children they had adopted was there with her at the front to take the orders for takeaways. But it was a Monday and things were quiet. Brent went past her without a word and out on to the street. A cool dry wind was blowing and it seemed to sober him up. Maybe he should just take a couple of minutes to get himself under control again and then go back. But the thought of facing Iris again embarrassed him too much. He would just have to learn to live without her …

Iris, faced with his abrupt departure, sighed and went on with her food. To go after him would probably embarrass him more. And she was hungry. She hadn't had anything since a bowl of soup and a roll at lunchtime. 'I know this is the end, really the end, and I wish I could feel some relief in the thought … '

Anna came in and said quietly, "Would you like some company?"

"I'd love some company. And Brent hasn't touched his food. Maybe you can re-use it."

Anna sat down and looked at the small individual pizzas with their surroundings of chips and salad and lifted a chip to munch. "I won't ask you what went wrong … I know everyone is talking about Brent going to a shrink in Winville … but if you ever need anyone … "

Iris gave that a rather wistful smile. "The trouble is, no matter what I say or do, I can't fix anything in his life. He is really the only one who can do that."

"I heard Dinny Walsh got stuck into him and gave him a real dressing-down. I don't s'pose it really helped matters."

"I think that got exaggerated along the way. But maybe it's time I started to think about moving on myself."

"But—you only just came!" Anna lowered her voice again. "I mean … not *just* … but it isn't long ago. I know Buckton's not very *exciting* but it's nice for us to know we've got good people at the hospital. I mean … I know you could get a better job somewhere else … but … all this will blow over in a little while."

"I know. But Buckton is so small. It's a bit awful to think that everyone knows my private business—and gossips about it."

"I s'pose they do. But most of us *are* sympathetic." Anna continued to nibble on Brent's abandoned dinner as she tried to think of something which would make this sympathy tangible. "I'm taking the kids to Winville tomorrow to see—whatever his name is—Feivel, or something. I thought they might like a movie about arriving in a new country. Would you like to come with us? I've got Kate to help Bill. We'll go about four and have tea there."

Iris had a moment of blankness: when was she on tomorrow? Maybe these emotionally distraught evenings weren't good for her. "Yes, that would be fine. I'd enjoy that. And I'd enjoy getting to know the kids a little."

"Okay. Come round here just before four. Now, I'd better go and see if I'm lucky enough to have a customer." Anna picked up Brent's plate and took it away with her and Iris returned to her own solitary dinner. Perhaps, in an unexpected way, the problems with Brent had been good for her because she had got to know several people better. She didn't agree with a lot of the things old Father Colgan said but she enjoyed his sardonic wit and his knowledge in all kinds of esoteric areas. She felt she had got to know Fiona better in these last few weeks. And now Anna and her new family …

As she took herself back to the hospital she thought on that vaguely mentioned idea of going out to the Donnelly farm to learn to ride and she suddenly said aloud "Why not? And I'll have a chat with Mavis." If people saw her out and about and enjoying life at least she would be spared any pity for her unhappy little love affair; the last thing she wanted was people, no matter how well-intentioned, commiserating with her.

The only problem was … she drove out to the farm on Sunday afternoon to chat to Freda Donnelly and Lyn Harding about having a few riding lessons only to find that Brent's Mazda was parked there by the side fence; Dennis Walsh had told him to stop moping and go out and do something which just might come in handy one day and seeing that Iris wouldn't be there to see him fall off he had finally decided to go out and see if they had a quiet horse. If nothing else it was a drive in the country.

There were a half-dozen people over by the yards, along with various horses, but she hesitated to walk over. It would probably be much more sensible to simply get back into the car and drive away again. But she had been quite looking forward to at least meeting Freda and Lyn and finding out what they had to offer. And to go away without even saying hullo seemed a bit craven. After all one of them would no doubt take Brent away somewhere for his lesson and she would look at their horses and discuss prices and times and they need hardly do more than nod to each other …

As she came over and joined the little group at the yards it was to see that they were being given a lesson on how to saddle a horse. She stood unobtrusively at the back of the little knot of people but Brent turned, saw her, went red, and turned back resolutely to listen to Freda. Each one of the group then made their own efforts to saddle the patiently-standing horse. She wasn't asked to have a try, for which she was vaguely thankful, and she watched each person then have a go at mounting while Freda gave calm instructions.

They then split into two small groups, three people with Freda and two with Lyn who had been saddling up several other horses; but Lyn came over to her and said "Would you like to join in? We can discuss details later." As Brent had gone in Freda's group Iris said a cautious yes, adding "I've never been on anything wilder than a merry-go-round horse." Lyn gave that a perfunctory smile and said she would saddle Marzipan. Iris had a fleeting moment to wonder why

anyone would call a horse Marzipan but at least it gave time for Freda's little group to leave the yards and walk along to a small paddock.

She quite enjoyed her first lesson. Lyn was a hard person to warm to but she was brisk and capable and Iris felt it was almost a relief to do something devoid of emotions. And afterwards she chatted with Lyn about the cost of lessons and how often she would be able to come out. She hoped it would give Brent time to get in his Mazda and drive away. But he was waiting by his car when she walked over to hers. She felt her spirits droop. She didn't think she could cope with Brent, not even to talk casually about riding lessons and what was her horse like …

He said, "Did you know I was coming?"

"No. I felt certain this was one place I *wouldn't* run into you. But don't worry. My lessons won't coincide with yours. I've arranged to come on weekday afternoons."

She wasn't sure but she thought it was disappointment on his face. "It's okay, you can come when you want. I won't hassle you—about anything."

"I know you won't. But it is a little bit awkward … "

"Why awkward? You've told me you won't … we won't bother each other any more. There's nothing more to say. It doesn't matter if we meet here or on the street or anywhere else. We won't take any notice … " As he said that his voice wavered and trailed away and he hurried to take his sunglasses out of his pocket and put them on again.

"We'll *try* not to take any notice," she said quietly. Then she came closer and took both his hands in her own. "But there'll be times when that'll be hard. But we will try … and it will get easier with time."

"No, it won't." There was a definite roughness in his voice now. "But I've got to get back. Someone might be—" He pulled his hands away abruptly and hurried over to his car. She stood and watched him drive away, twin trails of dust rising to drift across the dry paddocks. Then she followed much more slowly.

*

Dennis Walsh was unaware that Ali Deane had several times considered asking him for his take on the Proctor case and each time she had told herself firmly that if there was anything more to be done then she would need to do it, not shuffle it off on anyone else. She had rung the hospital to find out who had rung Les Marrow and when and how and been told that that information was confidential. She had spent her career being polite and deferential to more powerful figures in the hierarchy. But she had gradually developed her own quietly observant ways of looking at things—and the confidence to back her own judgement.

She said calmly, "It is only a small matter but we would like to be sure that the person who rang Mr Marrow about his son's death and the donation of an extra kidney was authorised to do so. It isn't much good us developing a case against Simon Proctor for the death of Hayden Marrow if his defence lawyer finds out it was the tea lady."

"That's being silly!" The woman at the other hand said briskly. "I can assure you everything has been done by the book."

"But I have to take you on trust, is that what you're saying? We don't like taking people on trust. It often results in some nasty surprises when a case gets to court."

"I can assure you—in this case police have already—I can say with full confidence that we have checked our end of things."

"You have told police but it is confidential. You can ring me back to check if you don't feel able to give out information to police over the phone. The number for Winville CIB is—"

"No. We already have your number."

"Then you don't speak to a mere Detective Senior Constable—only people higher on the food chain," Ali Deane said drily.

"It isn't that. We have been told not to give out information to anyone."

"Except police?"

"Only those police who have been given access to hospital records and staff. It is on a strictly limited need-to-know basis, not least so as to avoid disrupting the smooth running of the theatre."

"I understand that. But it is important that Winville be provided with some access to information. After all, Mr Proctor will come up for trial here in Winville, and his lawyer will be wanting to put the person who made the call to Mr Marrow on the stand."

"The hospital has already provided a formal report on Mr Marrow's death. We have been told that we have met our legal obligations. I would suggest, if you have any more questions for us that you route them through Detective Andrews. He has done a very detailed investigation of everything our end."

Ali Deane accepted that she wasn't getting anywhere and ended the call. But she felt uneasy. If confidential information had been provided to DSS Andrew but couldn't be provided to Winville … she hesitated to face the obvious answer. But at last she made a note for herself including her two questions:

Is Andrews not sharing important parts of the investigation with us?

Is the relationship between the hospital and Andrews too close for his investigation to be seen as independent?

Then she added another question: Are Andrews and Carney corrupt?

And then there was her question for herself: what do I do next?

*

Winville Legal Aid could usually only provide one experienced lawyer and one junior, along with someone to run the office. It was a heavy workload. Many people in and around Winville qualified, income-wise, for Legal Aid assistance but the office had been told to prioritise; cases which might see the offender do time went to the top of the list, cases which would only see a fine or a Good Behaviour Bond were shoved down the list. Mearon 'Midge' Johnston was already snowed under; she was still finalising Brendan Cooney's case. Cooney a.k.a Tom Savage was now wanting to plead not guilty to killing five members of his family fifteen years ago. She felt he had made the right decision, she didn't want to see him carry the can for his whole dysfunctional family, but it meant a lot more work for her. A guilty plea would be over and done in a morning.

And now she had Simon Proctor to deal with. And his case looked like being even more difficult, emotional, and *long*. She had already had two interviews with him and she felt reasonably sure she could prepare a good defence; good enough at least to get the charge knocked back to involuntary manslaughter. She had requested the tapes for his assault charge and she secretly blessed young Hussein for getting him into court so quickly. But was that merely a little faster than normal or did the police here know something she should know … and if they did would they tell her?

He was now on remand. But no trial date had yet been set. The impression those two Brisbane detectives had given was that they wanted the whole thing expedited. DSS Andrews had said that needing to go to and fro, long hours on the road, on an open-and-shut case was expensive and tiring and he hoped the case could come up quickly. Graham Kelso had said blandly that he could see no reason why not.

But Midge Johnston had stood in front of Graham Kelso week in week out for nearly two years now and she knew him well enough to see a glimmering of sympathy for young Simon Proctor. He had gone easy on him when the assault came up. Clearly he saw it as self defence. But it would be out of his hands soon—unless sanity prevailed and the charges were reduced.

She said to her junior, Deborah Byrne, over a late afternoon coffee, "Deb, why d'you think they've gone for murder? Why weren't they satisfied with a lesser charge? I'm sure it's not Winville who're pushing it." Midge had moved to Winville when the position came up. Deb was local. Her mother ran the local flower shop and her dad was stationmaster here. "If they'd gone for involuntary manslaughter I'd feel okay about telling him to plead guilty but there's absolutely no way I'm going to let them take him down for life."

"I think it's that Milo Forman guy, that he's stirring in Brisbane, and he told Les Marrow that his son deserves no less … that somehow Chick was a little saint and Simon has to go down so Chick'll look good."

"But Chick didn't have a record, did he?"

"I've never seen him in court but that doesn't mean he never got a warning, maybe a caution—I'm sure he ran around with those same guys for a while and that they occasionally made trouble. But with no one in the station most of the time they probably got away with it."

"That's an idea. What if we were to subpoena the duty book from the station in Dinna? Even if nothing got to court it doesn't mean they never came to police attention. Can you handle that? We'll need to go back five or six years."

"Sure. But they won't like it. It'll show the world just how poor the service has been."

"Doesn't matter."

It spoilt John Brophy's day, when he heard about the subpoena, but he tried to find some comfort in the knowledge that one day a week under him was a lot better than the one day a month it had been under Arthur Leslie.

And it cheered Ali Deane …

*

Winville had been told that Brisbane would do a follow-up interview of Les Marrow but Ali Deane asked DSS Wang if she could go out to Japana and find out the employment details in regard to the sheds Les and Chick Marrow had been building for the feed lots.

"Why? What's that got to do with anything?"

"When they started. Why they took on Les and Chick when they aren't qualified builders. Who else was working with them. What their normal hours were. I want to get a clear picture. And do they all listen to Milo Forman when they're working?"

"Sure to," Daniel said morosely. "He seems to be flavour of the month—and the stuff he gets away with. It's hard to believe. He calls it pushing the boundaries. I call it racist twaddle."

"And sexist," Deane added drily.

He nodded slowly. "I know. And everyone feels sorry for him. God, I wouldn't waste my sympathy."

'But you don't understand how to push the public's emotional buttons,' Deane was tempted to say. 'He makes people believe more money for Murri disadvantage is less money for Mr and Mrs Average, that affirmative action for women or refugees from Africa means the Guy-Next-Door is going to miss out. He knows exactly how to get people riled up on the issues he wants to run with.'

But in the end she only nodded. "So—can we leak information to Proctor's lawyer?"

"What sort of information?"

"I'd like to know who in that hospital got on to Les Marrow—and how? And I think we should be investigating Andrews and Carney."

This made Wang stare at her. "Why? What've they done?"

"They're too close to the hospital."

"I thought it was Forman you're worried about?"

"I am, but only because he's a creep. It's the hospital which stands to lose if they did the wrong thing by the Marrow family."

"You mean—Forman's on the Marrows' side, he'll help them sue and maybe take his cut, if anything gets out … but I'm not sure that makes sense."

"You think Forman's more likely to be on the hospital's side than Les Marrow's?"

Put like this, Daniel Wang wavered and then said, "Well, yes, probably. Marrow's a nobody."

"But it's what he represents, Daniel, all those ordinary mums and dads out there. They're the ones who listen to him in their thousands. They're the ones who've made him so popular. They push up his ratings. They bring in more advertising."

"So—aren't the Proctors ordinary folk?"

"Of course. But Simon's only a means to an end. And he's painted him as being gay so that probably pushes more buttons. I know, it still doesn't explain everything, but if you don't mind I'd like to keep digging in my spare time."

"Okay. Just keep it low profile. You can go and talk to Japana but just say it's—"

"I know. Tidying up a few loose ends. I'll take it quietly."

*

Ali Deane found it absurd that she would need to press an intercom at Japana's main gate to be let in. The place existed to fatten cattle, that was all, so why the hi tech stuff? Dennis Walsh believed it was more than that but nobody took him very seriously on this issue. Yet she always felt he was right. She just wasn't certain just how he was right. What layers might lie beneath layers.

There was a new man in the office, or at least a man she didn't recognise, and he said only, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing, we hope. Just a few questions about Les Marrow and that new building over past the railway." She took out her notebook and went down her list. Either he could see no reason to stonewall or no one had specifically told him to give nothing away. Ali Deane thought he probably came from southern Africa but he seemed quite polite and helpful; it might well be a veneer but if he was giving her correct information then she had no complaint.

At the end, and he looked up Les Marrow's employment details on the computer for her, she said, "It didn't bother you that he and Hayden aren't registered builders?"

"They're only feed and machinery sheds. No one's going to be living in them. And he came with reasonable references."

"Les? What about Hayden?"

"I think he was taken on because his dad said they were accustomed to working together and got along faster that way."

"So you didn't see a reference or any employment details for Hayden?"

"There's nothing here."

"And he did turn up with his dad every day?"

There was a long pause then the young man, who had given his name as Hein Sierink, said, "Probably not."

"So who kept an eye on the hours they were both doing?"

"Diefenhalter's in the office—"

"But the office is up by the railway. Those sheds would be—say a kilometre, a bit more. Did he go down and check every day?" She hadn't been to see the new sheds. She only knew their location from what Sam had told her.

"Usually."

"And he would find that Hayden Marrow hadn't turned up for work?"

"Sometimes."

"Then could you go through all your records and find out what days Hayden didn't turn up to work? I wonder if he was moonlighting on another job or had a lot of illness or didn't like to get out of bed of a morning." Had Hayden Marrow died not because of anything Simon Proctor had done but because he already had something seriously wrong? But would he be picking a fight if he was chronically ill?

He didn't jump at the opportunity to be helpful but said he would see what he could do. She gave him the station's fax number and moved on to the trickiest question. "So Mr Diefenhalter would have taken the message over to Les Marrow when the hospital rang you to say his son had died?"

"No one rang here. If they had his number they might've asked him to pass the message on to Marrow. Why?"

"Well, Les Marrow doesn't have a mobile phone so I wondered how the hospital had managed to get in touch with him so quickly that morning when Hayden died."

"That can't be right. They rang him that evening."

"You know that for certain?"

"Maybe not for certain," he looked uncomfortable, "but that's what I heard. Our lawyer came by on another matter and I told him about Hayden dying, though he didn't die at work, and he went to see Les Marrow and told him he could have compassionate leave to go to Brisbane to go and deal with all the business about his son."

"That was Gavin Whittaker?"

"Sure."

"And—did Les Marrow go? He was on the job when we went to see him."

"He said the hospital would cremate the body, it's what they do if relatives are upset about seeing a dead relative after … after body parts have been taken. It sort of saves the family money as a thank you, something like that. Mr Whittaker came back to tell us we probably didn't need to employ an extra person there. The job was almost finished. He said Mr Marrow was fine and would go to Brisbane to collect the urn with the ashes as soon as the job was finished."

"Very conscientious of him," Ali Deane said drily.

"There wasn't much he could do, I guess, and the police were called in so he maybe thought it would be a while before he could bring his son's ashes home." Except Les Marrow had spoken of burying his son to Sam rather than cremation; he might've meant burying in a more general sense.

She thought, but didn't say, that this man dedicated to his job and Japana's best interests didn't seem like the man Sam had met. But sometimes people preferred to keep busy in those few days when their grief was at its most raw. And Les Marrow might not have felt very comfortable going to a big hospital in Brisbane, not if he had always lived in and around the tiny hamlet of Dinawadding …

It would make it a long day and she wanted to get home but she felt she had to tackle Les Marrow and get this matter tidied up, not have it trail her everywhere, sparking off more awkward questions but providing no answers. She pulled on to the building site as the men were knocking off for the day. The days were getting longer but as they were paid by the hour rather than the job they probably saw no reason not to finish on the dot.

She came over and asked the first man she came to if he could point out Les Marrow. When he said 'the guy in the blue check shirt' she thanked him and said, "I s'pose you were all sorry to hear about Hayden dying like that, after working with him for quite a while."

"Didn't do much working with the young fella. Les let it go but if he'd been my kid I would've put a cracker under him, the lazy sod."

"So what did he do when he wasn't at work? Was he sick or just couldn't be bothered?"

The man hesitated. "It's common knowledge round town, I'm surprised you haven't heard."

Ali Deane stayed silent and waited. Was there something they had all been missing?

"Goes to see Pete Greener's missus. Don't tell Les I told you. He wasn't too happy about it."

"He thought Chick was going to get found out by Mr Greener?"

"Well, maybe. But Les wanted her himself. He was really pissed off when he found out she was leaving messages to tell Chick when Pete would be away."

Ali Deane nodded. And Les Marrow might not be the only man on this site who fancied 'Pete Greener's missus'. But she couldn't call a Greener to mind. So the family might keep a low profile in other ways. She walked over to Hayden's dad and said, "I won't keep you, Mr Marrow, but just one small question. We understood the hospital rang you in the morning that your son had died but Japana has told us that it was in the evening. I wonder if you could just sort that out for us."

"Must of been the morning—bit hard to remember with all your lot coming and going."

"You mean they rang you here at work."

"Well, not me but the office."

"Mr Diefenhalter, you mean? D'you think he'd remember the time they rang?"

"No, it wasn't him. It was some bod I didn't know."

"You mean someone here on the site?"

"No, I don't mean that. From the main office or somewhere."

"I've just come from the main office and they thought the hospital rang you in the evening."

"That can't be right." He started punching one fist into his other palm. "You've got me confused now."

"I'm sorry. You think about it overnight, Mr Marrow, and give me a ring tomorrow. And one other thing, while I'm here, I understand your son missed work quite frequently. Was he unwell?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes."

"Seriously unwell?"

He didn't seem to know which way to jump. "Don't reckon so, not unless he wasn't leveling with me."

"He didn't go to a doctor, for instance, or get a certificate to get off work?"

"Course not!"

"So he just basically skived off?"

Mr Marrow opened his mouth to say something then closed it again. "I guess … kids these days," he said at last. It didn't sound very convincing.

"And if I ask round Dinna people'll be able to tell me what he was up to when you were at work?"

Again she felt he was turning and twisting mentally, trying to decide which way to jump. At last he said, "Can't stop the police asking questions—but don't believe everything you hear."

"We don't, Mr Marrow, but thank you for your advice."

She drove back into Dinawadding and asked where the Greeners lived. Someone in the general store directed her to an old house next to the house she knew Dennis Walsh owned. He had told her and Sam about it. Nicky Wilcox had wanted to move to Toowoomba but her son wanted to go to the High School in Buckton with his mates and Nicky, after getting a few little bits of casual work, had finally got work she could do at home. She did lovely embroidery and appliqués for a shop in Winville; place mats, blouses, boleros, bibs, baby clothes, even an occasional wedding dress. She had told Sam, as she still came in one evening a week to vacuum the station and dust and tidy up a bit, that it didn't pay for the hours she put in "but that's the one thing I've got, time on my hands" …

Now Ali Deane went into the next door yard; she liked Dennis's house much better and it was obviously better cared for. On the other side was a boarded-up house and beyond that was a small paddock. Nicky Wilcox might've noticed Chick Marrow, if he'd come to the front door, but it would not be terribly public. She knocked and waited. She could hear children inside but it was several minutes before a woman came to the door, wiping her hands on a tea towel.

"Yes?" She looked faintly harassed.

"I'm Detective Constable Deane," Ali said. "Could I just have a quick word with you?"

"What about?"

"You're Mrs Greener, aren't you?"

"Has something happened to Pete?"

"No. It's about Chick Marrow."

"Oh God!" She put both hands up to her face. "You won't tell anybody, will you?"

"Everybody seems to know—but no, I won't tell anyone here. How long has Chick been coming round?"

"About six months. Pete gets two or three days work a week."

"Where?"

"Usually in Oakey but sometimes closer to home. They usually ring him the night before. And I would let Chick know so he could drop by once the kids had gone to school." There was something resigned about the way she said it, almost dead-pan.

"How would you leave a message?"

"I would let the phone ring twice then I would hang up. Sometimes he'd go to the pub so he didn't always get the message."

"And his dad? Did he know any of this?"

She shook her head slowly. "About Chick? I can't say. But Les several times tried it on with me. I just told him there was nothing doing. At least Chick was young."

"And you got a bit desperate sometimes?"

"Well, wouldn't you. Pete's useless. He hasn't got a hard on for a year or more. And I'm only thirty-three." A very lush thirty-three, Ali Deane thought, a bit blowsy and untidy, but probably still the promised land to some of the men around Dinawadding and she gave the impression of being a warm-hearted person. "I shouldn't tell you that," Mrs Greener dropped her voice. "It's not Pete's fault. He got sprayed with something at work once and he's never been any good since. But being sorry for him doesn't help me."

"So how often did Chick come round?"

"Once, sometimes twice a week."

"So he was skipping work once or twice a week?"

"Maybe. I never asked. But I didn't know about the fight in the pub till days later, so it's no good asking me."

"Was he ever violent with you?"

"No-o-o, just a bit rough sometimes, but I used to tell myself that beggars can't be choosers. Most of the young men leave here, there's almost no work."

"And—d'you think his dad might've been—well, jealous, resentful, anything like that?"

"If he knew I guess he would be—but I honestly don't know if Les knew."

Mrs Greener looked out on to the dusty street and a tear unexpectedly trickled down her plump face. "I didn't care very much for Chick. He wasn't very … loving. But when I was with him I used to feel I still had something, I wasn't over the hill and all dried up and done for … "

As Ali Deane drove home into the sunset she felt perhaps she was luckier than she knew; she was older than Mrs Greener but she felt she had a lot in her life. But even if she didn't she couldn't believe she would ever want a Chick Marrow to fill up the empty moments.

And did any of this change anything?

She brought Daniel and Greg up to speed the next morning and added: "I think we've got two issues, the fight in the pub and the business with the kidneys, that it wasn't done by the book, but I wonder—d'you think Les was willing to give away one of Chick's kidneys while he was still alive because he was angry and jealous that Chick was getting what he wanted—because he might've thought that Chick with only one kidney wouldn't be the great lover any more, maybe he thought Chick would have to take things really quiet, that the hospital would tell him no exercise, just gentle walks, something like that. *If* he came out of the coma, of course."

Greg Sullivan looked surprised but finally the two men said in their own ways that she might be on to something. Then Greg said, "If Les was that jealous of his son maybe he went round saying things like, I don't care if they take both the bastard's kidneys, maybe *Les* got someone to go in to the hospital and do something to Chick."

"That's a point. Did Les ever go to Brisbane to see his son?"

"Not as far as I know."

"I think you're right, Ali, I think we need to talk to Marrow—and Andrews and Carney can take a running jump if they don't like it. We'd better bring him into the station in Dinna and do a taped interview. Can you set that up? The sooner the better."

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Bella Seymour had gone out to spend a few days on the farm with her aunt and uncle before returning to stay with Daniel Wang. Discretion and quiet were not things many people would associate with Bella Seymour but she understood that that was the way Daniel lived his life and she didn't want to embarrass or draw attention to him or their relationship. But eventually she said, "I must go. I must get on with things. There's a whole world out there waiting—"

"There's a world here waiting too," he said without emphasis, "and it could do with some changing but I know I can't ask you to stay any longer. I'm not very exciting, I know."

"Not exciting?" She put her head on one side and considered him. "I think there are many kinds of excitement. And I am not sure yet what I want from life. Not what my parents wanted for me. But I can't define myself by a negative. I want to grasp something with both hands. I want to try things out, try different kinds of work, meet different kinds of people, see what people are doing, go and join protests … you do understand, don't you?"

He had come to see Bella as someone still searching. Her strident talk about equality and sharing and caring about the people down the bottom of the heap was partly designed to put people at a disadvantage; at getting people to leave her alone. But it also defined a young woman who was still searching for a life which she would find challenging but worthwhile.

"I do understand. There's times when I think about leaving here, leaving the police, going back to uni and maybe doing something more in the area of the psychology of crime, prison reform, rehabilitation … I'm not sure. The longer I stay here the more limited my horizons seem. And yet country people do have bigger needs in some ways. They need people … well, you know all that, you've spent longer out in country areas than I have."

"Perhaps. But I will come back and see you—or you will come and see me—maybe—when I get settled somewhere. I'm going to Sydney first but maybe I need to see more places, I don't know, go and live in some crazy place like Cabramatta … "

He came to see her off on the McCafferty's bus a day later. "But don't change yourself to fit in with other people and places. You're special the way you are." He wanted to take her in his arms but he contented himself with shaking hands rather formally.

She smiled at that. "And I hope no more of your bad guys and girls give you as much trouble as I gave you, Peter and me."

He was sorry she mentioned Peter right at the end of their time together; he didn't really want to think about Peter Abzug. But she seemed to understand this. "Next time I'll ring you the minute I … no, there won't ever be another time like that … I'll ring when I get to Sydney." She stood a minute and he saw the tears in her eyes, then she turned abruptly and boarded the bus.

He stood to watch it pull out. Whatever she might promise he knew, commonsense dictated it, that they had no future …

*

Daniel Wang was mildly preoccupied when he and Ali Deane went out to Dinawadding to wait in the small station there for Les Marrow to turn up; they had agreed to see him after work so he wouldn't need to lose any pay or make it obvious that the police were still interested in him.

"Do you want to handle the interview, Ali? You seem to have got his measure."

"I don't think he likes me—but maybe that's a good thing. Put him a little off-balance."

Les Marrow seemed to regard both of them as a nuisance but he sat down and accepted the cup of tea Ali made for him while Daniel set up the tape recorder. "We shouldn't keep you long, Mr Marrow," Deane said cheerfully. "Just a few small issues."

She set up the interview formally, giving the date and time and who was present, then said, "Mr Marrow, you said you would think about when the hospital rang you and get back to us. As we haven't heard from you perhaps you would like to go over that with us. You went to work at what time?"

"Dunno. About eight."

"And you took time out for smoko at what time?"

"I don't really remember. Say eleven. Bit earlier."

"Then you went back to work on the sheds and took time out for some lunch at what time?"

"The three of us stopped—dunno, probably close to one, had a cuppa and a sandwich."

"Now what time did someone come to tell you that your son had died?"

There was a long silence then Les Marrow said in a dying duck voice, "They didn't."

"No one came to tell you the news?"

"No."

"And nothing after lunch?"

"Don't reckon."

"So when did the hospital ring you?"

"I was home. I reckon I was watching the weather … nearly six thirty, musta been."

"What did they say?"

"That they were sorry that my son had died that morning and they had tried and tried to ring me but I wasn't home. Where the fuck did they think I would be?" He suddenly seemed to fire up.

"What else did they say?"

"That they'd done what I wanted and given Chick's kidney to Milo."

"You are absolutely certain they said kidney, not kidneys?"

"Dunno … I was a bit upset. But I don't reckon they did. I heard later they took both kidneys and I wasn't going to make a fuss, nothing Chick'd need 'em for. If they'd got on to me and asked me I'd say, sure, take the lot, no good to him now. They said they'd cremate him if I wished. I said did I need to go there and sign papers or anything and they said no, they'd do everything for me."

He sat back. "So I've got no complaints. I don't see why you lot keeping making a fuss about it all, won't bring Chick back, that's for sure."

"So how did you come to offer your son's kidney to Mr Forman?"

"He said on air he was in a bad way. He said people are okay with one kidney, just a couple of weeks to get over it, take things easy for a while. I thought I didn't mind, maybe I could retire early, and then when they said Chick wasn't going to get better—I said it'd be okay, he wasn't going to need two kidneys if he was only lying in bed for the rest of his life."

"You had the legal power to make that decision for your son?"

"Well, he is my son."

"Did you have—say, a Power of Attorney for him? Or he'd told you before the accident?"

"What accident? Course it wasn't an accident! It was that bloody little poofy Proctor kid."

"So why did you offer it to Mr Forman? Is he a friend of yours?"

"Course not! But I reckon he knows what's what—"

"Did he say why his kidneys had packed it in?"

"Don't reckon so. Piss artist maybe. That's usually it, isn't it?" He didn't seem to care one way or the other. "Lots of folk rang in and offered. He said we should think about it a bit more."

"So you rang the radio station."

"Yeah, I did." Marrow suddenly looked quite pleased with himself. "Only time I ever rung in."

"How did you ring in?"

"I was at home. It was just before I got the job with Japana."

"And your son got a job the same time?"

"Yeah, lazy little coot."

"You were aware that he was taking time out from work to have an affair with a local woman?"

He hesitated but finally said he knew about it; it wasn't the words, though, it was his expression which gave away his feelings. Then he seemed to pull himself together enough to say, "His business, I reckon, but he wasn't going to get a second chance with Japana and there aren't many other jobs going. I told him he was mad to get the hots for that little slag."

"What little slag?" Ali Deane wondered if there was another woman in the case. Mrs Greener was certainly not *little*.

"That Greener dame."

"So why was she a slag?"

"Husband hardly out the door and she was getting it off with Chick."

"And you didn't like that?"

"No, lady. I didn't like that. No decent man would. Not his own son. And Pete Greener's not a bad bloke."

"So what were you going to do about it?"

"What the heck d'you think I was going to do about it! Tell him, of course. I'd like to see it when Pete turned round and came back home and caught 'em at it. I'd really like to see that. It'd really make my day! See that stupid dame get what for—"

"You wanted Mrs Greener to get into trouble?"

"Well, wouldn't you?"

"Why would you want that?"

"Why? You stupid or something? I'd really like to see her suffer."

"Why?"

"What is it with you?" Les Marrow turned to Daniel Wang and said, "Can't she understand plain English or something?"

"Just answer the question, Mr Marrow," Daniel said mildly.

"What question?"

"Why you wanted to see Mrs Greener suffer."

"Teach her a lesson."

Ali Deane knew they might go round and round in circles and she still might not get anything more definite from Les Marrow but it was probably worth it to continue with this line.

"Why did you want to teach her a lesson, Mr Marrow?"

"Because I just did."

"You hated Mrs Greener?"

"Well, wouldn't you? Cheating on a decent man."

"With your son, the son you brought up to be a decent law-abiding man."

She felt she had lost him, that she should've kept her questions simple and straightforward and left Chick out of it. But he said, "Still cheating, isn't it."

"And if she'd preferred you to your son—would that have changed anything?"

"Course I wouldn't want a bar of her, she can get down on her knees and I wouldn't want the bitch."

"So why did your son want her if she was such a terrible woman?"

"You stupid or something. Nowhere else for him to go."

"So where d'you go when you fancy a bit of the old—"

"I don't."

"And your son couldn't find a girlfriend here?"

Les Marrow seemed to think this was a trick question. He sat in silence, seeming to chew it over, then he said a bald "No".

"No one at the pub, no girls?"

"Those bloody bitches!"

"More bitches? What was your son's problem with the local girls?"

"Well, what d'you reckon? When they're stupid enough to turn him down."

"Did they turn him down the night he got into that fight?"

"How would I know?"

"You never went to the pub with him?"

"Sometimes."

Ali Deane wasn't sure if this was a productive line to follow. Had Chick Marrow believed that the young women in the pub that fateful night had preferred Simon Proctor to him? And had Simon been too shy to actually do anything about a sympathetic glance in his direction? She decided to change the subject as sharply as she could.

"Mr Marrow, when did you last see your son?"

"Dunno."

"Did you go to see him in hospital?"

"Yeah, I saw him once. He was just laying there like a ruddy lump o' jelly."

"Which hospital?"

"Toowoomba."

"Thank you, Mr Marrow." She turned to her superior to see if he would like to ask a question of his own but he only said, "I think we'll leave it there. It can't be easy for Mr Marrow, going back over all this stuff."

On the way back to Winville Daniel said to his junior, "You're right. I think he hated them both, Chick and Bev Greener. But did he actually do anything?"

"If he did—then it must've happened in Toowoomba surely?"

"And what could he do that would make Chick die—not immediately but say ten days later?"

Ali could only say, "God knows. But maybe we need to know why Toowoomba sent him to Brisbane. What could Brisbane do that they couldn't?"

Case No. 5: Your Life in Their Hands

DSS Colin Andrews, along with DS Carney, were furious when they discovered that Winville was still beavering away at the Proctor case. "What the fuck d'you think you're doing?" Andrews said to Wang and Sullivan. "If you've let that stupid young kid muck up our case I'll want to see you fired!"

"What stupid kid?" Daniel often sounded deceptively mild.

"That Abo dame."

"So what exactly are you worried about?"

"We've got a good straightforward case, we'll get a conviction—*if* you stop mucking about with it."

"And that's all that matters to you? Getting a big conviction? Seeing a kid go down for twenty years."

"What is it with you? What the hell are you doing in the force if you don't want to win big cases? You should be out there doing some ruddy *social* work."

"No, mate, we're trying to prevent you coming a cropper." Daniel might be a quiet, tidy, deceptively calm person, but now Greg Sullivan saw something hard and angry come into his face. "And even if you don't feel like leveling with us I think it's about time you both answered some questions for us."

"Don't you go throwing your weight around, mate," Andrews was still angry.

"You've been a DSS longer than me, I admit that, but you don't know this patch and you haven't made any attempt to find anything out. That case of yours'll fall over the minute Proctor's lawyer gets stuck into it. You may not care about egg on your face but we do—"

"Bollocks! You're just nitpicking—"

Daniel thought of Ali's questions. They might be described as nitpicking. But they would also bring this case undone. "Then let me give you some advice, mate, and that is—never overlook the small questions. And I've got another piece of advice. Knock those charges back to involuntary manslaughter and we'll give it qualified support."

"You're joking!" It was Carney who said this before his senior. "You're going to walk away from a case this simple, a pat on the back, just because you're scared the lawyers'll do some nitpicking of their own—"

"The lawyers *know* that that wasn't the first fight Chick Marrow started in the pub there—"

"How do they know that?"

"Because they asked for all the station records going back to when Chick left school. They *know* he was skipping work to have an affair with a local married woman. They *know* the hospital didn't ring and get Les Marrow's permission to take that second kidney—"

Daniel wasn't certain exactly what Simon Proctor's legal team knew and didn't know but he wasn't about to qualify his statements. Andrews brushed this aside. "That's chickenfeed. That's not going to get him off the hook. Now we'd best be getting on. We've got to go round and see that little poofy bastard again. He'll lie down and agree when we've finished with him."

"He probably will. That's what makes this whole thing so disgusting. Putting pressure on a kid who did nothing more than try and stand up rather pathetically to four bullies."

But Daniel accepted that he was wasting his breath. Andrews couldn't be swayed from his certainty that they would get a quick conviction. And maybe he had the experience to know he was right … usually right …

After the two men had gone out Daniel lifted the phone and rang the Legal Aid office. "Has Simon Proctor got the sense to ask for a lawyer to be present," he said quietly. "I don't want him to cave in and admit to more than the truth."

The office assistant said she would get a message to Ms Johnston "but she's in court, neither she nor Ms Byrne is likely to be able to come"; she sounded regretful but she couldn't summon up extra lawyers as needed.

"Then make sure his interview is taped, can you do that for him?"

She said she thought she could. Daniel hung up, not feeling terribly hopeful, but Greg said immediately, "Did you see it?"

"See what?"

"When you said that about the second kidney."

"Sorry, Greg, what did I miss?"

"It wasn't major. But he looked uncomfortable for a moment. Don't ask me to pin it down … but I think Ali is right. There's something too buddy-buddy there. I wish I could pick it … and how we might get a line on it … " Greg looked mournful, "well, it's beyond me."

Privately, Daniel felt it was beyond him too. Even if they could get permission to go and do some digging in hospital records they didn't have the expertise to know what to look for beyond what might only have been a bureaucratic mix-up …

But Greg, though he wasn't feeling any more hopeful than Daniel, said, "What we really need is someone's who's worked in this kind of situation in a big Brisbane hospital, someone who can sort of talk us through it maybe."

Daniel thought it might take more than a bit of talking through but he could see some value in the idea. "Okay, see if you can find someone with that background … and someone who won't go blabbing either. If we've got it wrong … "

Ali Deane came in from talking with a potential witness in a different case and Daniel put their idea to her. "Do you know of anyone, Ali?"

For a moment she envisaged herself going undercover in a big hospital and then reality snapped her back to the question. "I'm sure I can find someone. Leave it with me."

*

Fiona Greehan rang the police station one afternoon and asked her husband if he could spare Brent Kelly long enough for him to come over and have afternoon tea with her. "You think he hasn't missed enough work as it is?" he said drily.

"I know. But I got a photograph of his mother today. I've been trying to decide whether to tell him and I feel I should. I don't know how he will react."

Dennis didn't know either. His young constable was like one of those Jumping Jack fire crackers which dart around, giving off sparks every so often, and generally unpredictable in their behaviour. But he finally said, "Okay, I'll tell him you've got something for him."

It was after four when Brent Kelly turned up at the front door and joined Fiona for a cup of coffee and some coconut cake. He looked wary and ill-at-ease. "What is it? The boss said you've got something I might be interested in. Is it for a case?"

"Not exactly. I don't want it to shock you but your aunt sent me a photo of your mother. I don't know how you feel about seeing her after all this time but I didn't think I could keep it to myself."

He turned startled eyes on her but didn't try to respond to this. She handed him the envelope with six photos in it. She could see his mother's likeness to him; the big ears, the narrow neck, the big sad greeny-grey eyes, but she had a weariness and a sadness about her that he might still be spared. Fiona didn't think she had ever been a pretty woman but she thought she had probably had a kind of quirky charm when she was young and vital.

He put the photos down after a long look. "How come you've got them?"

"When you told me you didn't know what had happened to her—it seemed such a dreadful thing for you to live with—"

"No, I don't care. I know what an evil woman she was. I was just glad she was gone out of our lives."

"Does she look like an evil woman, do you think?"

"You can't tell by looking. Only by actions."

"And—do you remember your Aunt Marianne at all?"

"She was another snake in the grass—"

"Because?"

"They both went out with men, they both made a fool of my dad."

Fiona felt this was beyond her to handle. For twenty years Brent had been encouraged to see his mother as the problem, the temptress, the evil one … and she couldn't undo that kind of brainwashing. That it might be helpful to bring it more out into the open, she could see, but it didn't help her decide what to do next.

"Brent, I've got copies of my correspondence with your aunt. I've also got copies of several police reports and your mother's psychiatric reports. You may not want them. I don't want to upset you but I think you should at least take them and read them before you throw them away. I don't think your mother wants you back in her life—but I may be wrong in thinking that."

Brent took the packet she gave him, stood up in an undecided way, then he tried to rip the packet across. It was too strong for this to work and instead he shook everything out on the floor and left it. “Haven’t you messed in my life enough?” He sounded angry. “But you’ve got to keep sticking your nose into my private business!”

“I wondered—”

“It’s not your business! It’s not your business!” He turned and threw one arm out, knocking her coffee mug over and sending the half cup splashing over her.

“No, it’s not my business. But you kissing Elise is very much my business. I was very grateful to you for catching up with that man but it didn’t give you the right to take that kind of advantage of a vulnerable little girl.”

“Not my fault if the little bitch wanted to put her arms around me—”

Fiona found it hard to deal with this blaze of shock and anger. Brent went to the door. She was tempted to simply let him go. She dimly understood that a whole lot of stuff, dumped on him in his vulnerable years and long repressed, had now come bubbling to the surface. But it didn’t help her to see how to respond. She stood up and came after him and said, “You were three, the same age as Elise, when you suffered a far worse trauma. It didn’t turn you into a bitch—or anything else. Just a lonely puzzled little boy.”

She didn’t know if he had heard this but he turned at the gate and yelled “All women are bitches! And girls too! All bitches!” She watched him reach the street corner and disappear around it. It had a sense of finality about it.

Dennis didn’t ask his junior any questions, just sending him straight round to deal with a problem that Jack Alexander was having in his shop. For a moment Brent Kelly looked mutinous. He felt an overwhelming need to say “No! You can stick your Jack Alexanders! I’m leaving!” and then go in and pack his few things and drive away. Drive home. Go back to his father’s house in Brisbane where at least he understood the script he was meant to follow …

But he finally nodded and went out. Jack Alexander had the carpet and tile showroom on the main street. He had bought a couple of cushions there only a few weeks ago. Now he went in and said to Mr Alexander, “What’s the problem?”

“I’ll show you.” Jack Alexander was usually a cheerful little sparrow of a man; enthusiastic about his business, unfailingly helpful to his customers … but today he looked rather down-in-the-mouth. He led the way over to where small rolls of carpet, samples, off-cuts, were ranged along the wall and said, “Look at this.”

Here and there Constable Kelly could see dark reddish marks on the material, globs and smears. His first thought, that someone had been bleeding while they inspected these samples, gradually faded. It didn’t quite look like blood …

“Did you notice anyone down this end?” he said with an effort.

“I’ve been quite busy today,” Mr Alexander said more briskly.

“And—would you remember everyone who came in?”

“Well, I can check sales, that’ll help me. Come in the back a mo.” Before he followed the proprietor Brent bent swiftly to smell the stains. Definitely not blood. It was a chemical smell. But how would something like nail polish get on to those rolls of carpet? Even if someone had been painting their nails before coming to buy a new carpet—surely the stuff would’ve dried by then?

Mr Alexander sat down at a cluttered old desk after taking the roll out of the cash register and drew over an old envelope and began to go through the recent sales and tie each one to a person. As he did so, Brent asked him if the customer had brought any family in. Jack’s familiarity with most of his customers made this a fairly easy matter. At the end of his list he said, “And Mrs … Don Binnie’s daughter … can’t think of her married name … Burchall! That’s it! She had a daughter with her and her younger son. They were wandering round out of my sight for most of the time. She bought a bath mat and had a look at some of the small rugs.” He hesitated before adding, “I don’t know if I should say this … give a dog a bad name and all that … but her kids stole some bathroom tiles from me a few years ago.”

Brent nodded slowly. “And what happened about that?”

"Oh, Dinny got straight on to it. Don paid me for them because his grandkids had damaged them. He wasn't too happy about it."

"Well, I'll duck round and talk to Mrs Burchall and her daughter. If you'd think on it a bit more. Maybe it was someone messing round who didn't actually buy anything … "

He wasn't very good at ducking round and putting people on the spot but at least it would look like him doing something. Mr Alexander said cheerfully, "Right oh, cobber, that sounds like a good idea. I'll see you later."

Mrs Burchall was renting a house over near the hospital. The place was untidy, the yard dry with a few tough weeds still fighting the good fight. He went up to the open door and knocked. It took a minute before a girl of eleven or twelve came to see who was knocking. She saw him, turned abruptly and went away again. It might merely be shyness but he took it as a sign of guilt. After all, he rarely frightened people into running away.

Mrs Burchall came into the small poky hall and said, "Yes, what is it?"

"You came down to Jack Alexander's shop this afternoon, didn't you?"

"What of it? I didn't steal anything."

"I didn't say you did. But did your daughter come with you?"

"So? What if she did? Lazy little bitch. I told her to get out of the car and come in the shop and look at rugs. Sure as eggs, if I buy something, she'll turn round and say it's cack. I thought it would be better to have her there."

"What was she doing in the car?"

"What she's always doing. Painting her stupid fingernails. When I look back—gosh, I wasn't allowed to wear varnish at that age—or lipstick."

"You're her mum. You can set the rules."

"You try it with kids these days—"

"Well, would you go and get her and ask her to bring her bottles of nail stuff."

Mrs Burchall looked both annoyed and puzzled but she went away and came back a minute later with the girl he had briefly seen. He said, "Did you bring the polish?"

The girl held out a nearly full bottle of a pale silvery pink. He felt a momentary doubt. Maybe he had got the wrong girl. "Is that the only colour you've got?"

"Yep. Can I go now?"

"Did you have another colour?"

"Nope."

"Yes, you did," her mother said suddenly. "You had a dark red in the car, I noticed it."

The girl turned and gave her mother the sort of look designed to quell her talk, if not reduce her to a quivery jelly. "Okay, then," Constable Kelly hoped he wasn't too late, "go and get that bottle of red and bring it here."

The girl flashed him an angry look but went away, mooching along the hall as though she had all day to waste. Mrs Burchall said, "I still don't understand. Why d'you want to know all this about nail varnish?"

"Someone put red nail varnish on some carpet samples in Mr Alexander's showroom."

Mrs Burchall's mouth dropped open. Then she seemed to recover enough to say, "Oh God! These kids! And it'll be more expense, won't it?"

He said, "Probably."

"You can get nail varnish off with remover. Maybe we can fix it all up for him?"

"He still won't be able to sell it for the as new price, I don't think."

"I could make up the difference … if it's not a lot."

"Up to you. But we'll see if the polish matches."

As he stood on the doorstep and talked with her he felt he was gradually regaining his small store of confidence. Even if the girl came back and said she couldn't find the bottle he felt reasonably sure she was the culprit. He would need to find out if Mr Alexander wanted her charged. He might be content to have the damaged samples cleaned and the difference in price made up …

Mrs Burchall obviously felt embarrassed standing in the doorway, unable to think of anything else to say to him, and he didn't know whether to say something about the weather or simply wait in silence. Finally she said, "Perhaps I can go and hurry her up."

"Okay." He watched her scurry away along the hall and then there were voices lifted somewhere out the back; the girl saying "I can't find it" and her mother saying "you put all that rubbish back in the bin" or something similar. A couple of minutes later the two of them came back to him. The girl said, "I can't find it, so it's just too bad," but her look had something that was faintly suggestive of sly pleasure, even triumph.

"You could try your pocket?" He couldn't very well search the pockets in her jeans but her mother turned to her, then swiftly thrust her hands into the pockets before her daughter realised what she intended. She brought an empty bottle out. It was called 'Dahlia'.

"Good. We'll be able to get enough to compare. If it matches, I'll come back and charge you."

"Lots of other girls use the same colour." She wasn't going to give in without a fight.

"But they weren't in Mr Alexander's shop—"

"How d'you know?"

"Mr Alexander notices his customers—"

"No, he just hates us, that's all."

"That's true," Mrs Burchall said suddenly. "He does."

"Well, if you come down and apologise and make restitution he might like you better."

"No way," the girl said angrily. But her mother over-rode her. "Oh, what the heck, if it'll get you off our backs. I'll just turn off the stove and we'd better go down and get it over with."

It was a grudging apology but Mr Alexander accepted it and said he would take a twenty as payment if they would come back tomorrow with some nail polish remover and have a go at the worst of the stains. After mother and daughter had left, sniping at each other about the money side of things, Jack Alexander laid a hand on Constable Kelly's shoulder and said, "That was good work, as good as your boss. Now, how about a cuppa and a biscuit before you head back to the station?" Brent declined, saying he had better finish up for the day, but Jack Alexander was feeling expansive … or curious … or lonely … because he said, "Well, how 'bout coming round for dinner one night. I'm no great shakes as a cook but I won't burn the chops. Tonight? Or another night?"

Brent accepted for this evening; anything rather than sit and stew over the information Fiona had given him and his response. "Okay, young man, I'll expect you about seven. You know where I live, don't you?"

Jack Alexander was such a cheerful man in his shop, rarely down for long, even when people gave him trouble or business hadn't been good, that Brent expected him to be the same at home. But the house had a cold unused feel and most of the rooms were shut up. "It was different when my mum was here," Jack said lightly, "the house had a different feel to it. But I just use these couple of rooms and I've got my old puss Absalom. We aren't very exciting so it's nice to have a bit of company. It'd be different if I'd married, I s'pose, but I just never got lucky. The girl I fancied when I was young was killed, or she died a while later, after her horse came down with her. She used to hunt around the shows. She was very good. But it just takes one wrong step … "

"I'm sorry about that. But then there's lots of unhappy marriages too."

"Oh, for sure. But then folk like George and May come in and I always think, I'd like to have something like that. But you get old, you get in a rut, I don't think I could cope with someone in the house with me now, we'd be falling over each other all the time. But I hear you've got a lovely young lady in your life … "

"No. We found we didn't get along." Brent didn't want to talk about Iris but he didn't know how to divert Mr Alexander completely.

"Pity. I could sit all day and just look at Sister Hitchener and I'd be a happy man. But I s'pose you young fellas look at things differently. And you're probably on the look-out for an Irish lass? 'When Irish eyes are smiling'—" Jack Alexander lifted up a reedy tenor to sing a few lines.

Brent said he wasn't looking for anyone. Alexander gave that a wry grin but said, "Well, sit up to the table and tuck in. Would you like a beer? I sometimes have a beer with my tucker."

When Brent Kelly left forty minutes later he wasn't sure if his mood was much changed. And when he got back to his flat he found that large envelope which Fiona had offered him and which he had rejected lying in front of his door. He picked it up, felt the sudden impulse to simply throw it in the station bin, but then his courage failed him. If it was Dennis who had dumped it here he felt he couldn't risk a blast from his boss by throwing it away.

He spent the next half hour going through the material and at the end of it he found he was shaking uncontrollably. "It's not true, it isn't true," he said over and over, "it *can't* be true." He wished he could turn to his cupboard and bring out a bottle of something strong, some brandy maybe. Instead he went and took a hot shower, as hot as he could bear it, and then went to bed.

*

Buckton Police had two unexpected visitors the following morning. Two elderly ladies. They came in looking rather hesitant and awkward. Dennis Walsh looked up and said "Help you?"

"We aren't certain. But perhaps we can help you."

"Sure. About what?"

"About Muriel Bennett."

"Okay, come in and sit down. Would you like a cup of tea?"

They both seemed surprised at the offer. Perhaps they didn't associate the police with cups of tea. They said politely they wouldn't want to bother him. He didn't press them, merely opening the door and sitting down at the table with a form in front of him. "You've come to make a complaint?"

"Not—not exactly."

Dennis asked them for their names and addresses then sat and waited. They said they had lived in Millmerran and had a couple of boarders there for many years and then they had moved to Winville quite recently "because it's quieter". He nodded and continued to wait. They were both dressed in a rather old-fashioned way with rather heavy-heeled black shoes and black handbags and twin sets, probably hand-knitted.

"And one of our ladies," Ms Crumb said earnestly, "was Miss Muriel Bennett. She was with us for some years while she was at the library."

"And?" They might have all day …

"We saw her mentioned in the *Winville Courier*, that she had stolen something."

"We wondered," Ms Gordon understood that he wanted them to get to the nub, "if we could … we're not quite sure how we might lodge a complaint … but we know she stole things when she was with us. We didn't know what to do about it. She seemed such a nice lady."

"She stole from you?"

"We had a lovely little clock. It had two little people who came out to tell you if it was going to be wet or dry. And then it just disappeared."

"You went to the police?"

"We did. They looked around but couldn't see any signs of people getting into the house of a night. They asked Miss Bennett and our other boarder and they both said no, they hadn't. We kept hoping it might turn up. But it never did. We were talking to a friend who had lost a little clock, a little thing with two gilt mermaids either side, and she was quite distressed but she couldn't say just when it had gone. The police said it might have been children got into her house while she was out gardening. She didn't know if this was likely or not."

"And you now think Ms Bennett took both those clocks?"

"We wondered at the time. She didn't seem very sympathetic. As though we were making a fuss about nothing. We knew the clock wasn't terribly valuable, perhaps a couple of hundred dollars, it was a bit chipped, the paint I mean … but we loved it. And then we saw she'd come up in court for stealing a clock. It just seemed very very strange."

"Well, come with me now, and we'll go round and have a chat with Ms Bennett at the Library here. It's starting to sound like she's a clock maniac."

"We did feel rather sorry for her but it didn't give her the right to take people's things, our things, and we would've been willing to leave her the clock in our wills. She's more than twenty years younger than us. She could have it to enjoy when we're gone."

"We'll just walk across, it's not far, and see what Ms Bennett has to say for herself."

Neither woman felt very comfortable with this offer of a very public confrontation but neither did they feel they could argue with this sergeant; he didn't look the sort of man to argue with.

Muriel Bennett was busy in her office ordering books from catalogues and she looked up with an annoyed frown when her assistant Christy Low came to the door. "It's Sergeant Walsh to see you, Ms Bennett." She considered trying to say she was too busy to see anyone for the next half hour but Sergeant Walsh loomed over her assistant and the moment was gone.

He came in, ushering Ms Crumb and Ms Gordon in front of him, and got a good view of Ms Bennett's fleeting anger and dismay. Then she was all business. "How can I help you ladies?"

"Don't you remember us?" Patty Crumb said in sudden surprise.

"Of course. But I didn't expect to see you here."

"We came about the clock. Our clock. You remember the one we asked you about."

"And I was sorry but I couldn't help you."

"We didn't know then," Madge Gordon said rather sadly, "that you were a stealer of clocks. We trusted you."

"I didn't steal your clock. You have my word on that."

"And did you steal a clock with two mermaids on it?" Dennis Walsh intervened.

"Of course not! What nonsense is this?"

"But you did steal a clock here," Ms Gordon said valiantly. "We saw it in the paper."

"That was different." Muriel Bennett went red. "That was from someone who didn't deserve to have such a nice clock."

"Perhaps you thought we didn't deserve to have our nice clock? Perhaps you didn't think Mrs Stirling deserved to have her nice clock—"

"That is nonsense! And I do wish you'd go away. I'm very busy."

"Well, we'll go round now, with your permission, Ms Bennett, and search your room." Dennis could see this waffling on.

"You can't do that! That's completely illegal!" She didn't try to hide her anger.

"You have two choices, Ms Bennett. You give us permission to search your flat, or I get straight on to Winville and get a warrant. Which way d'you want to play it?"

"You can get all the warrants you want. I'm still not letting you in my room. It's private."

"Right then, come on ladies, I'll get the warrant and we'll do that flat over this afternoon. I'll get my constable to come round and help—"

Ms Bennett, faced with the publicity of two uniformed officers going through her belongings in a very public way, capitulated. "You can go round," she said angrily, "just don't do it so every one sees you."

"Okay, I'll get that in writing so I don't have to argue with Betty Cronk." He took out his notebook and wrote, 'I, Muriel Bennett, have given the police permission to search my flat. Signed.' "So if you'd just sign there, Ms Bennett, we'll be in and out in half an hour at the most."

After the three of them had gone out she realised she should have objected to the two women being allowed to go into her flat. Ms Cronk, true to her reputation, came out of her own house and demanded to know what the police were up to now. "A quick search of Ms Bennett's flat," Walsh showed her the paper. "We won't be in your way so you can go back indoors. We'll just get you to open up for us, then you can go back to your TV."

Betty had no intention of doing anything so meek and mild. She got her spare key and came over but after she'd let them in she continued to hover in the doorway hoping to be told just what was going on and who the two elderly ladies might be.

Dennis had done many searches and told the two ladies to sit down and simply look around the room to see if anything was familiar. Then he started from the bathroom and worked his way through the little kitchen-dining room area and finally to the bedroom. They weren't particularly well-hidden. Two large cardboard boxes in the bottom of the built-in wardrobe yielded up more than ten clocks. The two old ladies watched as he unwrapped piece by piece from the bubble wrap and tissue paper.

It was Ms Gordon who said in disbelieving tones, "There it is! Our clock! I couldn't really make myself believe we might ever see it again."

"And that's Julia's clock!" Ms Crumb said in equal surprise as he lifted out a rather ornate little clock with mermaids at both sides and a scallop shell forming both a base and part of the back. He went on lifting out clocks and the old ladies kept on exclaiming though without linking any more to people they knew. Dennis also removed three clocks from the top of a bookcase, another from a dressing table, and two from the kitchen counter. Presumably one or two were legitimately Ms Bennett's clocks but it wasn't guaranteed.

"What will you do now, Mr Walsh," Patty Crumb said eagerly. "Will you put them in the paper?"

"Yep. And on the Internet. Whatever doesn't get claimed she may be able to keep but I'd say she's got anything up to twenty thousand dollars worth of clocks here."

Betty Cronk overheard this and couldn't wait to tell her brother Mervyn later. But she knew it was the end of renting her flat to Muriel and the end of their nice cosy little chats about everyone in Buckton; for that she felt rather sad.

Dennis re-packed the boxes, then carried them outside and re-locked the door and gave the key to Betty Cronk. He put the boxes down by the kerb and rang his constable to come round and pick them up. "We'll give you a lift back to the station," he said to Ms Crumb and Ms Gordon, "and you'll need to think what you want done about Ms Bennett."

"Oh, that's easy," they communed briefly, "we want her charged. We had her in our house for five years. We treated her as a friend. We did everything we could to make her comfortable and happy there."

"And she repayed you by stealing your clock? Yeah, she seems to make a habit of it. I'll guarantee these were all stolen from people who were kind enough to invite her into their homes."

"But why? Why would she take them—just to keep in boxes?" Madge Gordon seemed to find this the most perplexing part of the discovery.

"I think, only think mind you, that they were a kind of safety net. If things went wrong, if she got sick or anything, then she could sell the collection." And no one would have known they were here. If anyone had broken in they might've gone to her handbag but no one would associate Muriel Bennett with her rather drab outfits and dull demeanour as having anything worth stealing beyond a bit of housekeeping money. "She probably liked to gloat over the thought that she was the only person who knew they were all sitting in her cupboard."

As he helped them into the police vehicle and put the boxes in the boot before getting into the front himself he wondered if Muriel had always seen the people who invited her out to lunch or tea, who treated her with kindness, who went out of their way to be friendly, as merely being 'patronising' and if she did—what had so soured her against the world?

*

He had another unexpected visitor late that same afternoon. DSC Ali Deane came in and said hullo to both men and to Dennis: "When you finish up, could I have a word, Dennis?"

"You can have ten, twenty, a hundred. Come through and make yourself a drink while we just finish up here." She made herself a coffee and took it and the battered biscuit tin through to the interview room. She could feel something, a vague sense of tension maybe, and wondered if there had been more blow-ups between Dennis and Brent and her old sense of regret came back. She wished there was some way to work with Dennis but it was not on the cards that they would change the rules for her. And maybe working with Dennis full time would not be as nice as working with him on a particular case now and then.

She heard him say something about "leaving it for now" to Brent and then Brent went out the front door and Dennis came in and sat down. He waved his hand at the boxes. "Full of stolen clocks, would you believe? And how we'll find all the owners—God knows. But we've got owners for two so far so word will get around."

Ali nodded. "Buckton seems a strange place to store stolen clocks—but after stolen paintings, nothing would surprise me. And what I came to talk to you about is this Proctor case. It's really hard to work on it from this end when half of it happened in Brisbane—and Andrews and Carney don't want to share anything with us. They just fob us off saying everything at their end is hunky-dory. I'm sure it isn't but how to check … "

"Okay, bring me up to date with everything." Dennis sat back and listened carefully while Ali went through their whole investigation. At the end he said, "I s'pose you're listening to this Forman bod every time he goes to air—to see if he lets any cats out of any bags?"

"We do, not me usually but the others. It's pretty awful but he has said a couple of things about kidneys and about Les and Chick Marrow—and about Simon but he has to be pretty careful there if he doesn't want to abort the case."

"Would he do that, d'you think?"

"I actually find him a hard man to read. You'd better listen in, Dennis, and see what you think. Some of it's the sort of stuff Saul Harding comes out with but some of it is pretty anti-government, anti-any-party really. Some days you think he agrees with Pauline Hanson, other days you feel he thinks she is just like any other politician and out for the perks. He's sort of anti anything big, you know—big hospitals, big business, big unions, big agri-business, but he's also got all the usual prejudices, anti-gay, anti-Murri, anti-refugees unless they're from England and even then he talks about whingeing Poms, anti what he calls the 'latte set'—"

"Which is?"

"Oh, comfortably off professional people who sit in pavement cafés in Sydney and Melbourne and drink cappuccinos. Not your world, Dennis, or mine, but he thinks they have too much influence over policies."

"Uh huh. Well, I'll have another listen one day. But he's not really your problem, is he?"

"No. I don't think the hospital is going by the book when it comes to organ donations and transplants but I can't see how we can find out."

"You need a whistleblower."

She gave that a wry grin. "And they don't grow on trees."

"But you've got one ready to hand."

"What do you mean?" She couldn't think of anyone who would fit this bill.

"Milo bloody Forman."

Ali simply sat and stared at him. She couldn't see how that could possibly work. Or who could persuade Mr Forman to stop talking about his new kidney and start asking whether the hospital had done everything according to the rules.

"That's pie in the sky, Dennis, and you know it. And I'm not even sure I'd want to have to feel gratitude to that sleazebag."

"I know. But don't see it in personal terms. This is your problem. You want it solved. It's a bit like using a nark who makes your skin crawl. Sometimes you have to take help from nasty people."

"Okay, I'll think about it. And what else can we do?"

"Well, we've got a sister here at the hospital who was in one of the big hospitals there. Go round now and ask for Sister Hitchener and get her to give you a run-down on who would've been involved in Chick Marrow's care, who would take him down to the theatre, how many people you are realistically looking at, whether it's normal for people who donated body parts to be cremated by the hospital, things like that. Even if she's on duty it shouldn't be too busy. I think she'd enjoy having a chat with you."

"Okay. It's this need to get my teeth into something, not stand back and feel helpless."

"There's another thing. You keep saying Andrews did this and that. What about Carney? Does he strike you as being very buddy-buddy with Andrews, or just along for the ride? Like Greg going out with Doug Towner and wishing he didn't have to stand around watching Doug make big messes all the time."

"He's pretty quiet. He just seems like Andrews' yes-man, he never really offers an opinion or does anything off his own bat. I got the impression he mainly comes along to do the driving and make Colin Andrews look bigger and tougher. I really don't know what he's thinking about everything. But they must talk it over on their long drives. So I don't think Andrews would bring him if they were having major disagreements."

"Makes sense. Okay, go on up and ask for Iris Hitchener. Then if you're not in a hurry, drop round to see us on the way home." Ali Deane said she would. Dennis had mixed feelings about

Fiona's attempt to help Brent but he thought that his junior might, some day, come to appreciate it. The trouble was, in the short term, Brent seemed determined to put just about everybody offside.

Ali was looking quite cheerful when she came back nearly an hour later. "It was a help. Just to be able to ask those very basic questions about procedure. I've never even been in a hospital."

Fiona made them all a drink and came in and sat down for a little while with Ali and Dennis and with Robbie on her lap. Elise sat herself on the armchair opposite Ali and did some more knitting—to Ali's amazement—and listened in.

"Because you've always been healthy?" Fiona said quietly.

"That, mainly, but no Murri goes to a country hospital if they can help it. My granddad was left to sit and wait for ten hours when he had a smashed leg. They didn't even offer him a painkiller or a cup of tea or anything while he waited—and he said some of the white folk there were only there because they had colds or sore throats or were coming for a check-up with a baby."

Dennis nodded. It happened. It did happen. He hoped the bad old days were gone.

"And Sister Hitchener says that people who accept a donated organ have a right to know who donated it now. So when the hospital told Sam they couldn't give out that information they weren't being quite honest. I got on to them while I was with her here and asked for the name again. And they still said they couldn't give it out. So I am going to tell Simon Proctor's lawyer."

"Better not make that too public. They've got a right to see all our investigation—when we're ready to let 'em have a squizz, but that's not the same as helping. I hear Brophy's getting very antsy, stuck between a rock and a hard place—"

"He did listen to Sam and tell him he'd done a good job."

"Wonders will never cease."

"But, Dennis, do you really think the people who got a kidney had anything to do with Chick's … " She was going to say 'death' but she knew Dennis and Fiona preferred to use other words in front of the children, "with his expiration." She couldn't help saying it with a bit of a grin.

"If they're making a big thing about hiding names I'd say yes. It's not like we're going to go and shout it to the world. And a heck of a lot of people know already and I'll guarantee they haven't been sworn to secrecy."

"Okay, I'll follow that up."

*

The following day was a perfectly ordinary work day. No one came in to ask tricky questions; no one called on the Buckton officers to attend an accident, a break-in, a corpse. Brent was behaving reasonably calmly and getting things done without fuss. Dennis said, "We might as well listen in to the blabbermouth in Brisbane." He got out an old clock-radio which had sat unclaimed in the store room for a year or more and plugged it in and tuned it.

Milo Forman wasn't to Dennis's taste, mainly because he didn't like the media to stir, which always seemed to result in someone down the track creating more work for police. He wasn't to Brent Kelly's taste either but more because his manner always gave Brent the feeling he was being put on the carpet for yet another failure or misdemeanour.

Forman sounded in good heart as he came on to a blast of music, one kidney or not he wasn't going to go away quietly. He leapt straight in to the Marrow case saying he would need to be a bit circumspect although it hadn't gone to trial yet—but he had just been told that the case was initially investigated by a Muslim refugee from "one of those Middle East hell-holes where they treat women worse than animals and haven't heard of democracy" and that it was no wonder Brisbane had had to get in on the act. "I ask you, folks, what is justice coming to in this country where it's left up to people who don't speaka-de-English and don't know what justice means. And this is just one case. How many other cases round Queensland are now in the hands of people you wouldn't trust to dispose decently of a dead dog. So ring in and let me know what's going on in your area. The number is—" Dennis jotted down the number, lifted the phone, and tapped the number in. Brent Kelly looked at him in surprise.

The idea of Walsh ringing in … and surely it wasn't what police should do, not with a current case. Crime stoppers was a different matter. Maybe even a segment on the news. But Forman …

When someone answered, Dennis Walsh said grimly, “Put me on to the program manager. This is Sergeant Dennis Walsh from Buckton Police.” What the person at the other end said, Brent didn’t know, but next minute, to his astonishment, he heard Forman say, “Folks, we’ve got a police officer responding to our request. Good morning, Sergeant.” Dennis indicated to Brent to take the radio out of their small office and Brent hurried to pull the plug and set it up again in the interview room with the door closed.

For a moment Dennis was flustered. He had wanted to make his complaint to the program manager, not on air, but he accepted the opportunity. “Sergeant Walsh here. You were just referring to Constable Hussein on air. He is a Christian, attends the Uniting Church regularly, so I want a public apology from you, for trying to make him look bad. I also want a public apology from you concerning Simon Proctor who you called a ‘poofy little kid’ on air. Simon Proctor is a decent young man, heterosexual, who came out to help his elderly great-uncle on his farm and had the misfortune to be picked on by four bullies outside a pub. So you can set the record straight and apologise for trying to make capital out of them.” There was a time when Dennis would not have used words like heterosexual but Fiona had been a learning experience in many ways.

Forman wasn’t to know that Dennis Walsh didn’t feel very confident suddenly thrust on to talkback radio. What he did hear was a deep resonant voice which carried a sense of experience and authority. In other words, he had an unexpected bonus. Good radio.

“Well, if I’ve got it wrong, my apologies,” Forman said cheerfully, “but my offer still stands. Justice in this state isn’t something we can take for granted. You would agree, Sergeant?”

“I would. The case of Mr Marrow and his death and his kidneys is a case in point.”

“How so? I thought it was a demonstration of how lives can be saved by someone’s generosity.”

“You’ve got to set that against all the mistakes that’ve been made—and which may send a young man to jail for twenty years. The hospital must take some of the blame for Mr Marrow’s death. And they compounded it by taking two kidneys when they only had permission to take one. They failed to have an autopsy done and then they cremated the body. So everyone has to take it on trust that their cause of death is correct. That’s not good enough. Not when a young man is facing a charge of murder. You can blame the police. You can blame the hospital. It’s got absolutely nothing to do with a young constable who does his work conscientiously and carefully. So let’s have no more of this nonsense about trying to make new recruits to Queensland Police the scapegoats for what people who should know better are doing wrong.”

Dennis made a couple of umms and ahhs through this but in general he got it over very clearly and powerfully.

Milo Forman said, “You heard it here first, folks, skullduggery and carelessness in high places. So ring in about police but you can ring in too about organ donations and how they’re given out. Is everything squeaky-clean in that household? I’ve got my kidney now and I’m not giving it back,” he gave a boisterous laugh, “but it doesn’t mean that our hospitals aren’t playing favourites or taking more body parts than they’ve been given permission for. So keep those calls coming.”

Dennis Walsh found himself switched back to someone in an office who said in a business-like way, “Was that apology good enough for you?”

“I’ll see how the people concerned feel about it. It’s okay by me.”

Stephanie had got in the habit of listening to Milo Forman since the Proctor case came up while she dealt with the switchboard and some typing in Winville. But as soon as she had heard Dennis Walsh come on the radio she put her head round the door of the CIB room and said, “Dennis Walsh is on the radio.”

There was a scramble of people over to turn on their radio. Then a kind of disbelief. Then Dennis disappeared from the air waves as abruptly as he had come on. Daniel Wang turned to Greg Sullivan and said, “I hope he’s got life insurance—if Andrews caught that.”

Ali Deane felt the prick of tears and turned away to give her nose a bit of a diversionary blow. Dennis had always been there for them, for herself and Sam, and she wondered if he knew how much it had always mattered to her, to them both. When she felt she was under control again she said, “I s’pose Dennis shouldn’t of said that, about the autopsy, on air. But it’s true. How can they

prove Simon Proctor killed him if they don't know if it was a blood clot or wrong medication or anything else."

They all looked at each other. Then Daniel said slowly, "Who told them the body would not need to go to the morgue for a post mortem?" People who died while under medical care did not need a post mortem unless there were special circumstances—such as a murder investigation.

The room was suddenly quiet. Then he answered his own question. "I think it was Andrews."

At last Greg said, "But why would it matter so much to him? He said he wanted to win a big case—but it still doesn't seem enough reason. If Chick Marrow had a blood clot … okay, it's not going to look good for the kid … but I don't see any reason to hide it."

"I think … maybe … they wanted to get rid of the body quickly because Blind Freddy could see they'd taken two kidneys … and maybe other organs without permission. Les Marrow wouldn't kick up a stink, he only wanted to sue old Abe Proctor, but they weren't to know that. But once the body is gone and maybe they've done a bit of fancy paperwork to hide the origin of other parts … "

"But a hospital … " Greg said in a disbelieving way as though he had never come upon anything suss in a hospital.

"They had Forman in there as well, maybe he saw or heard something—or they thought he did—" Ali was still trying to get her head around the ramifications.

Daniel Wang said, "We can go on trying to find out who got that second kidney, maybe she got some other bits, but we'll probably get stonewalled again."

"Then," Ali Deane said calmly, "we ring Carney."

"We do?" Greg still looked puzzled.

"He goes along with everything Andrews does, he agrees with everything … on the surface … but if Andrews is corrupt he might like to distance himself. We can try anyway." She looked from Greg to Daniel and back again. "Okay?"

"It had better be me," Daniel said eventually. "I can pull rank."

Ali Deane said he was welcome to it; she was all fired up to be doing things but she didn't mind if Daniel took on that difficult job. It took him nearly an hour to finally catch up with Bob Carney at a different crime scene. Carney said sourly, "What d'you want to know now?"

"For starters," Daniel saw no reason not to jump straight in, "we need to know about Colin Andrews' relationship with the hospital and with the people on that waiting list for organs."

"Nothing to do with me," Carney showed no interest.

"Then you'd better make it something to do with you because if we have to subpoena every hospital record dealing with Marrow and Forman and that woman—and if we have to go looking for her—and if we have to start looking very closely at Colin's whole career—believe me, we'll do it. We've had enough of your lies and your evasions here. If you can't put a decent case together then you should have the honesty to say so and drop those charges down. If we have to go to the DPP to say those charges won't stand up in court—we will."

"Don't you threaten me, mate. I'll tell Colin you rang. But that's it."

"You do that. And you tell him I'm preparing a letter for the DPP and the Attorney-General as we speak."

"I'll go over your head. That Super of yours is on our side—"

"I think you'll find, when it's crunch time, that John Brophy knows where his loyalties lie—and they're not with two cowboys from Brisbane." Daniel found he rather enjoyed saying this; it might not be completely true but he felt he understood John Brophy well enough to know he wouldn't go against his own team if push came to shove …

Carney killed the call. Daniel said to the waiting room, and several other people had come in to find out what was going on including, to his fleeting embarrassment, John Brophy, "Win some, lose some. Carney is going to turn into an oyster and cling like a limpet to his boss's leg."

John Brophy found this an odd description. "Carney? The bloke we had coming and going with Detective Andrews?" He sounded puzzled.

"The same. Take a seat, sir, and we'll fill you in." Daniel came over to the side of the room where several chairs were pushed in around a small table. Brophy continued to look bemused but he did as he was asked. Daniel sat down opposite him and began to tell him where the case was at.

Occasionally Brophy intervened with a question but he mostly seemed content to sit and listen. At the end he said cautiously, "So you really think that there might be a—well, a conflict of interest in their investigation?"

Daniel felt this was a mild way to describe it but he said, "Yes, I do. I know Les Marrow, as next of kin, has the right to give them permission to cremate the body but he was never asked about the post mortem and it would not have been his call anyway. If everything was fine at that end they only needed to arrange for the post mortem and the whole thing was out of their hands. They could arrange for the cremation afterwards but that was between them and Les. When people are in a hurry to get rid of evidence—in this case a body—it's like a red rag, so far as I'm concerned."

Several people nodded. John Brophy sat there looking a little helpless but he finally said, "So you want *me* to ring Carney, is that it?"

Daniel looked up at the others then said, "We'd appreciate it, sir. He'd take you seriously."

No one had ever taken John Brophy very seriously but he agreed and took the phone after Daniel had got the number for him. "Mr Carney?" he said a moment later. "John Brophy here, in Winville. I gather there's a small query over the identity of the woman on that waiting list. Perhaps you could clear it up for us."

No one could hear what Carney was saying back to him and the whole room waited in silence, hoping his rank might do the trick. Brophy said to Wang, "Pencil and paper." He continued to listen as he jotted down some notes, occasionally saying "uh huh" and "is that so". "Well, it's good to get that matter cleared up. And you'll be back up for the committal hearing next week? Okay, we'll see you then."

John Brophy had not been given very many moments when everyone hung on his least word but now he savoured the moment briefly before saying, "Bob Carney says Andrews has the hots for a women called Lisa Singleton. And Lisa Singleton's daughter was the girl on the list. She'd suffered from childhood diabetes, Carney thinks, and her kidneys had packed up. Andrews was taking her into the hospital regularly for dialysis but he was getting fed up with all the time it was taking. He wanted her to get a kidney and be done with it. He saw Milo Forman there—though Forman probably didn't know who he was. And he heard about Forman getting a kidney from Chick Marrow. Carney doesn't know just what went on at the hospital that day but Andrews told him they were going to go all out to get the little sod who'd killed Chick Marrow. Carney thought it could help him get promotion. A murder case. It wouldn't have been a high profile case—"

"Except that Milo Forman got on the bandwagon," Greg Sullivan said as though he had just had a penny drop with an exciting little clink.

"Exactly. Everyone round Queensland has now heard about the case. There's still some questions to tidy up." John Brophy got up. "But you've done a good job. I never thought I'd say that about a case that we've spent hours and hours on and the court will probably throw out. But I don't like to see bullies getting away with … with anything." No one there knew he found it a curiously liberating experience to make that statement.

"It was Ali who did the good job. She kept at those small questions. I think they thought we'd all just let them run the case however they wanted and it would be a shoo-in. They didn't know that she had caught the hospital out—"

John Brophy had never taken much notice of Ali Deane but now he felt he was expected to say something; not to do so would make him look … he couldn't decide just how it would make him look. "Congratulations, Detective Deane. If Daniel and Greg think you did a good job that's good enough for me. You'll want to be thinking about making sergeant soon."

After Brophy had gone out, leaving some quietly surprised people behind him, Daniel said, "It's true. You deserve to go up the ladder, Ali." To have Daniel saying it straight out was nearly as surprising as hearing John Brophy say it. She gave it a cheerful, "For sure." But as she went back to her desk and people drifted out of the room she felt it didn't matter if she got to call herself Detective Sergeant Deane or not. It was the knowledge that she was good enough. Dennis had said "make sergeant before you think about having a baby" but maybe this recognition was what she had been waiting for. Maybe it was time to think seriously how she and Sam could organise their lives around a baby. Maybe the moment she had subconsciously been waiting for had come …

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NOTE: Dreadful things can and do happen in our hospitals at times but this story is no aspersion on any hospital or any hospital staff.

Country Casebook: Book Thirty-Five

Case No. 1: Butterballs

It was not the sort of spring that the poets like to sing about. Very little green and a lot of blowing dust. The small town of Buckton on the Darling Downs was desperately hoping for rain not only to save crops and pastures but also because they had staked a lot on their little 'Dairy Festival' or as some people had begun to refer to it, their 'Dairy Weekend'. It had started out as an art competition, the best design for a butter wrapper, but people had naturally said, "Let's have a few things for people to do as well."

In the end they had decided to have a number of things over a period of time. The exhibition of entries would be on at the RSL hall for a fortnight before the winner was announced. The day of the announcement would have a fair during the day with a dairy theme and a guest speaker. In the evening there would be a dance at the Hall, the announcement, and a fancy supper. The big display boards of entries would be pushed to the side walls to give people room to enjoy a Country and Western evening. The schools and churches had set aside their individual plans for spring fairs and sports and had agreed to do everything at the end of October. And on the Sunday the Butter Factory had agreed to be open to the public between two and four. This was the most difficult part of it all, for safety and insurance reasons. But the factory manager and staff had accepted that many people had only the vaguest idea of how butter was made and that it might be worth roping off a kind of path through the factory and doing some display boards so that people could be carefully walked through the building—and could buy butter at the end of it but also enjoy a display of old churns, butterpats, stamps, old advertisements, and a general history of the factory. Someone had suggested that the children might like to try out the sets of butterpats at the end. Local DPI man Kieran Dobbs had come up with two dozen sets of pats and several other items.

Fiona Greehan and Karen Dalton had organised the actual art competition and found two judges but the local Shire Council had agreed to find a high profile figure to open the fair. This had been kept under wraps but local police sergeant Dennis Walsh had said to his wife Fiona he assumed it would be the usual old political warhorse about ready to be put out to pasture. Fiona Greehan as well as planning the art competition was also on the Council and she said, "You'll just have to wait and see, my darling. But I promise you it isn't a politician."

In the meantime life went on. This involved a visit from a man called Jason Reithmuller. He was a quite attractive man with curly blonde hair and startling blue eyes. Sergeant Walsh recognised him as the new owner of the good property once owned by Wayne Booth. There had been a lot of legal wrangling after Booth died but the property had eventually gone to his mother who, as a very elderly lady, had agreed or possibly been pressured simply to put the farm on the market. It was an excellent farm with a permit to pump water from Buckton Creek. The problem now was that the

creek was a mere string of waterholes and very soon, if it didn't rain, there would be nothing left to pump.

"Help you?" Dennis Walsh said in his uneffusive way.

"Well, I'm here, as you might say, on behalf of my wife's aunt. She lives with us."

"And?"

"She believes we're trying to murder her."

Dennis Walsh looked more closely at Reithmuller. Was the man some sort of practical joker? And if he was then he'd come to the wrong place to get a laugh.

"And—are you?"

"Oh, sure, but not in the way she thinks."

"Come again?" Dennis Walsh thought he must've missed something or misunderstood …

"We don't mind to hex her into the grave, the old bitch, but we aren't trying to poison her or smother her or run over her or swop the pills in her bottles—"

"So if you're not doing anything to her why come to me?"

"My wife said we should get in first. So you know the real story. We think she wants to commit suicide but to make it look like we did something to her."

Again Dennis wondered if he was missing something. Was this bloke for real? "Okay, start at the beginning. Why does your wife's aunt live with you in the first place?" He took Reithmuller to be in his mid-forties and he'd heard that they had four children; two at the High School here and two working in Winville.

"She's Andrea's mum's older sister. She said she didn't want to go into a Home and could she live with us. We had the room there."

"She lives in the cottage there?" Dennis knew there was a small cottage as well as the main house; Wayne Booth had employed two men.

"No, the kids live in the cottage and come over for their meals. We want them to learn how to look after themselves before they leave home."

"But you go over and check on them?"

"Oh for sure, check that they're doing their homework and keeping the place tidy. And Faye lives with us. Maybe the other way around would've worked better. She drives Andrea up the wall. At least I'm out most of the day—"

"She helps around the house? Gardens? That sort o' thing?"

"No. She just sits there watching TV. She's bored out of her tiny mind. I'm not surprised she gets some weird ideas in her head. She keeps saying she wishes she was dead. So we get so fed up we say, well, it won't be long now. But we really want her to move out. She just can't seem to take the hint."

"Then maybe you need to go and look around the retirement homes in Winville and see what's available. Elderly women seem to like living in Chester Court. See if they have a vacancy. It isn't really like a Home, more like shared accommodation."

"She would see it as us trying to get rid of her and she'd say no one cares about her—the big guilt trip—and so we'd let things go and she'd start on about wanting to die again. I almost wish she'd die and be done with it."

"So what's with this hex business?"

"Oh, my wife and I say it just about every night to each other. Go away Faye, Go away Faye. It's our mantra. We link hands before we go to bed." Not many farmers would talk casually about mantras and Dennis had gradually formed the image of a clever educated man who had probably been brought up to farm but might be happier in some more intellectual pursuit. Not that farming these days was all brawn. There were local farmers like the Molloys who saw their computer as a vital part of their operation and were probably more computer-savvy than many people in offices.

Reithmuller as a personality was harder to pin down. There was something slightly deprecating in his manner but he also gave the fainter impression of being a rather cold fish. And what was Mrs Reithmuller like, Dennis wondered, and did she have the same sort of feelings about her aunt?

"So what d'you want the police to do?"

"Well, some advice mainly." Reithmuller had hesitated before saying this. To say "nothing at the moment" might run the risk of sounding like wasting police time.

"Then, if she doesn't drive, bring her in to a CWA meeting or church or something so she can make some friends and have some other interests in her life."

"I'll try. She's a stubborn old cow."

*

It seemed to be one of those days, Dennis thought later, when people with odd and poorly formulated problems thought they might as well drop by the station and dump their vague worries on the police. Two women, perhaps in their early forties, came into the station just as Sergeant Walsh was finishing a chat with DSS Daniel Wang in Winville about the case against Simon Proctor. Wang had been copping some criticism along the lines of why hadn't he found Peter Abzug. If he could find Bella Seymour, even go to bed with her, then how could he say he had no idea where Bella's former 'partner' Abzug was. He was often tempted to say 'I don't do miracles. If I did I would miraculously levitate up and away and leave the police, Winville, complaining members of the public, and everything else behind me'. And in this case he couldn't see that Abzug really mattered. But Bella's father Ralph Seymour had apparently just heard that Abzug was about to publish a book in the United States that would make him, Ralph, look *rather* bad and, given its subject matter, attitudes to indigenous people, it just might take off in Australia. On the eve of a State election that suddenly mattered.

"It depends," Dennis Walsh had ruminated on the question, "whether Abzug wants to be found or not. Put out a call on those chat rooms or something for him to contact Winville. Give out your e-mail address, that way he can stay hidden if he wants to, but he just might want to tell you his side of the story." Wang said he'd do it that way and he was also going to see if he could get police in the US to ask Peter Abzug for a statement; "that is, if he hasn't taken off again."

"Go for it. And if he wants to promote his book—surely he'll have to come out of seclusion and talk to the media." Now Dennis Walsh put those problems behind him and asked these two women what he could do for them. Bucktonites still liked to joke that what Dinny Walsh meant when he said that was really 'what can I do *to* you?' Dennis had heard the joke and didn't find it funny.

"It's our stepmother. We believe she did something to our father. He died quite suddenly but he hadn't been ill."

"And you are?"

They introduced themselves as Wendy and Bette "we were Morgans, now I'm a Fisher and Bette is a Davidson."

"And you live—or your dad lived?"

"He lived in Norwilla. He ran the school there for many years. But they closed it soon after he retired."

"And he stayed on there?"

"He said he didn't think he could get what the house was worth. But he planned to travel. And then he started to develop a motor neurone thing. It was very sad to watch. He put in a ramp. He got a wheelchair. He bought a van so the chair could go into it. He was really quite well organised to go on living there."

"What about his wife? How did she cope?"

"He put in everything he could around the house to make life easier for her. He said he would be happy if she arranged for someone local to come in if she needed to be out at all. He knew there might come a time when he would need more care and he was putting aside the money to cover that. He accepted that she would probably outlive him and that she would probably want to go and do things and he said he would leave almost everything to her in his will so she would be well provided for. He was very generous to her. But that wasn't good enough for her. She didn't want to be tied down and to do things for him—even though he had done everything for her. And she's an ugly old cow to begin with. I'm sure he only married her because he felt sorry for her."

"Wait a minute. Did you say Norwilla?"

It all sounded like sour grapes. Maybe they didn't like the idea of their stepmother being the main beneficiary …

"Yes. Why?"

"Because you're on Winville's patch. Have you been to the station there?"

The two women hesitated, then Wendy Fisher said in a rather tight-lipped way, "Yes, we did. They just fobbed us off, they just said we were reading more into it than it warranted and that our father died from a heart problem. He didn't have a heart problem. He was gradually becoming paralysed, his legs, and it was starting in his hands and arms. But it wasn't life-threatening."

"He may have found it very hard to live with—if he'd been an active man. Did he play golf or bowls or anything?"

"He did." Mrs Fisher sounded short. "But he was still enjoying his life. He still had friends who came to visit and a number of families who knew him from school used to drop by. It was still a full and interesting life. He liked to watch videos and he was learning to use a computer."

"Even so, I can't do anything for you." Small questions like whose patch didn't usually weigh heavily with Dennis Walsh but he wasn't sure that he wanted to get involved in this. He remembered a case in Winville where an elderly lady had been killed by an overdose of heart medication; this might be something similar. But it was more the two women …

It was hard to pin down. Something about their manner. Bullying was possibly too strong a word but he felt they were in the habit of getting what they wanted and they hadn't taken kindly to being disbelieved by Winville …

"Then you leave us no choice but to go public. We will make sure our stepmother stands in the dock one day if it's the last thing we ever do. You're as lazy as all the rest of 'em."

"Suit yourselves."

They didn't take kindly to this either but after reiterating their determination to 'see justice done' they went out. Dennis turned to give his junior a wry thumbs-down then he picked up the phone and called Winville. He got DS Sullivan who said he hadn't seen the women himself but that Aidan Hassell had spoken with them and that Donald Morgan had been a patient of Dr Davis who had written a death certificate for death by heart failure, complicated by his creeping paralysis—or words to that effect. "And was there a will?" Dennis said mildly. Someone, either Donald or the man's wife, might have hastened things but an exhumation would be messy and public and might not necessarily prove anything either way.

"There was. Don't ask me what was in it because I haven't seen it and there doesn't seem any good reason to see it."

"Not even to keep the Morgan dragons off your doorstep?"

"We see it all the time. Guy retires. Suddenly he's a nobody. No one's calling him sir any more or looking up to him … and it must be ten times worse stuck in a place like Norwilla … and then he got that motor neurone thing. They can think what they like but I'll guarantee it was a natural death and they just don't want to accept it."

"So—d'you know who did the will?"

"Dale Kennedy … I think. But you'll be wasting your time there, Dennis. There's nothing suspicious going on."

Dennis said Greg was probably right. But after he'd hung up he sat thinking. The family doctor hadn't been suspicious. However Leslie Davis had a history of not being suspicious—even when some suspicion might've saved police a lot of wasted time. Had the family lawyer been suspicious? It was six days since Donald Morgan had died so the will would now, probably, have gone for probate. Yet the two women had only spoken of it in terms of their father's 'intentions' not what was actually in the will.

He got Dale Kennedy without difficulty and asked him if he could confirm whether he had done a will for Donald Morgan. "I did indeed," Kennedy said cheerfully. "What's your interest in it?"

"His daughters just came in and claimed their stepmother was responsible for their father dying so suddenly. I don't know that I believed them but I thought it best to do a brief check."

Dale Kennedy wondered why the two women had gone to Buckton rather than Winville but he said only, "Quite a simple will. The house and vehicle went to his wife. Everything else to be shared between his two daughters."

"So the everything else would include—what? Super? Savings? Personal effects? He was s'posed to have a fund to cover his medical costs, wasn't he?"

"All that. And unfortunately house didn't include 'contents' so the wife may find some of her furniture heading out the door."

"But she's got enough to live on?"

"Not my business. If she chooses to contest the will she might be able to claw something back."

"Is that realistic?"

"She'll want to hurry. As soon as we have probate those daughters'll be around with a removal truck."

"Then see if you can slow things down a bit. It's not on my patch. But I think I'd better just take a quick squizz, make sure everything's above board."

*

"I think I'd better take a run out to Norwilla," Dennis said as he finished up for the day.

"What's at Norwilla?" Constable Kelly said without a great deal of interest.

"Nothing. That's the trouble. It's a little dot surrounded by grain paddocks. The school has closed. The garage has closed. There's still a corner store and a half dozen houses. But that's about it. I'm just surprised a man who was reasonably well off stayed on there after he retired. You'd think he'd want to move, go somewhere he could play golf or bowls … "

"And what can you do in Norwilla?"

"Not a lot. It's on Winville's patch. But I just want to have a quick chat with the wife, see if everything seems okay. I might combine it with a trip to Winville. We haven't been for a while. Go and see Greg and Narelle maybe."

"So it's not police business?"

"No, I won't send you there. But if you want to feel sorry for yourself just be glad you don't live in Norwilla." Dennis thought there were worse places to live, some cities, some parts of some cities, but then he had different wants. Brent was a city boy.

And once Dennis thought a trip in the countryside would be a good idea he immediately got on to arranging it. Would Fiona like to come with the kids? Fiona was increasingly busy with the arrangements for the Dairy Festival. Entries for the butter wrapper competition continued to flood in. Anne Grumm, wife of the Butter Factory's manager, had offered to help them with the secretarial side of things and she booked in each entry, giving it a penciled number on the back to match with the details she wrote up. She also checked that the entrant had sent in the entry fee and a stamped self-addressed envelope with the name and address of said entrant written clearly.

Fiona was tempted to say, perhaps another time, but she could see this invitation had *undertones*. "Okay, which day do you want to go?"

"I guess Sunday would be best, though whether Mrs Morgan ever goes out … I don't think there's any kind of church in Norwilla now … but she might go into Winville. D'you want to go and see Jasper Higgins or anybody in Winville?"

"Well, I could. I could take Ellie with me if you'd like to have Rob. And do you want to go and see the Sullivans?"

"Might as well. I could go round there while you two go to church if you want. Narelle goes to early Mass. Greg just shuffles round the house—unless something comes up. And we can come home via Norwilla."

Fiona was tempted to say wryly 'I can't wait' but she was vaguely curious. Had Donald Morgan simply died of one of the troubles retired men acquire … or was his wife a secret poisoner? It was rather hard to associate any kind of villainy with the tiny bare hamlet.

*

It was nearly two p.m. on the next Sunday afternoon when the Walsh family came up the long straight road to the little township. It was hard to see much point in Norwilla's existence now. In the

days when people went by horse and buggy, perhaps, and even well into the twentieth century when people liked to have the comfort of a garage and petrol bowser at moderately close distances. But Norwilla, even when it had had more buildings and more life, had never been an ideal place to live. Buckton still had hills and gullies and some timber. Winville was large enough to mitigate any sense of loneliness and vastness the black soil plains might spark. But Norwilla had no redeeming qualities except perhaps its people. The winter winds swept untrammeled across the open country. It baked in the summer sun.

Dennis pulled in by the store and said, "Anything we need?"

Fiona knew from experience that he tried to shop in such small struggling places. "Bread, some honey if they have it, a bit of fruit, and perhaps the children could share a flavoured milk if you would bring two straws."

A woman in her sixties seemed pleased to have a customer. In a way he was surprised she would bother to open on a Sunday but equally to his surprise he found half a dozen people inside chatting. Perhaps it was the way local people spent their Sunday afternoons. She directed him and he turned and drove back a hundred metres to where a long dirt lane went past an old fuel depôt with its back paddock of 44-gallon drums, its superceded and rusting farm machinery, old combines and disc-harrows, a posthole digger, even an old harvester which looked like a contraption of tin and wood held together by wire, alongside several rusting sheds. The place would probably be a goldmine to someone like Kieran Dobbs but also had something sad about it. The lane fetched up behind this graveyard to early grain production methods at the front gate of a lovely garden round a sprawling old weatherboard house with verandahs and a windmill standing still in the calm warm afternoon.

"This is a surprise," Fiona said. "I didn't expect to find anything worth admiring out here."

"When you can't find anything there's always the sky," Dennis said rather drily. He wouldn't want to live in Norwilla but he could see a certain blank beauty in its sense of space and the feathery clouds above. Fiona smiled and said that was a philosophy she would remember next time she was tempted to be critical.

Dennis went over and opened the front gate. Adele Morgan might well be away, organising some of the necessary things in the wake of a husband's death, but he wondered how she would feel about leaving a garden she had obviously put a lot of time and care into. No doubt she had made Norwilla bearable, perhaps more than bearable by turning an unpromising dry yard into an oasis of cool green beauty. Off to one side he could see several date palms. Along the western boundary was a thicket of native trees, wattles and ti-trees and flowering gums. A small sundial had paving stones around it with tiny ferns and clumps of lobelia and other things he couldn't name; closer in to the house were various bulbs, now finished, with their foliage turning a tired yellow, and under the edge of the verandah were those country standbys of sword ferns and ribbon grass. Grapevines, coming into leaf, twined round the verandah railings, and he could glimpse a summer house behind the main house. Donald Morgan might have felt that he deserved better than a small primary school here but at least he had something nice to come home to …

But if his wife hated and resented living here, living with him …

He went up the path, wondering instead how big the school had been, how many children were in the hamlet and the surrounding farms. Probably fifty years ago it could come up with anywhere between forty and sixty children. But farms had been 'consolidated', families had gradually dwindled, young people had fled Norwilla rather than see it as a place to settle down and raise families of their own.

The screen door on to the verandah opened with a faint squeak and a woman perhaps in her late forties or early fifties stepped out. Her short curly hair was still a rather washed-out blonde, held back with a brown headband, but her face held an expression of weary anxiety. She came and stood at the top of the steps and waited for him to reach the wire mat at the bottom before saying, "Can I help you?"

"Maybe. I'm Sergeant Walsh from Buckton—"

"Yes, I've half been expecting a visit from the police. I know my stepdaughters have been going round telling everyone who will listen that I murdered him."

"Uh huh. They came to me because Winville weren't interested."

"And you found them more believable?"

"No. But if such stories are merely malicious I like to see them quickly scotched, not left to gather strength." He was at a bit of a disadvantage at the bottom of the stairs but she continued to simply stand above him. "So is there any truth in their idea that you poisoned him?"

"You could bring your wife and children in, if you'd like. They might like to see the garden."

"Is there any truth in what they're saying?"

"Maybe. I often thought of doing something. But you really should let your family get out and stretch their legs."

He turned and beckoned Fiona. When she got out he said loudly, "Mrs Morgan invites you to come and see her garden."

Fiona waved in response and helped the children out of their car seats. A minute later they all came into the garden. "It's very kind of you to invite us in. It looks a lovely garden," Fiona said politely.

"They might like to run around. Children do like to run around." Mrs Morgan did not manage to infuse the words with much enthusiasm but Fiona thought that was understandable.

And it *was* a lovely garden for children to explore. Dennis though said to the lady of the house, "Perhaps you would like to tell me what you mean by maybe."

She stood aside. "You can come in if you like. There's still chairs and tables. There won't be any soon, just the few built-ins."

"Because of the will?"

"Yes. I have the shell and my garden. I expect I should count myself lucky."

"D'you know why he didn't leave you the contents of the house?"

"He knew I wanted to leave him."

"So why didn't you?"

"I planned to. He asked me to wait until he retired. He thought it wouldn't look good for a school principal if his wife abandoned him. And then he became unwell. It was a kind of blackmail, him always trying to make me feel sorry for him—and his daughters came around regularly and … harangued me. A decent wife wouldn't abandon her husband the minute he got sick. A decent wife would stay and care for him. And when one ran out of puff the other would start in on me. They treated me as if I was a naughty child. If I had loved him I would not have seen it as a burden, or only occasionally. But can you imagine what it was like—being expected to wipe his bottom for a man I had come to hate?"

"Surely it was too much for you and he would have needed to go into some form of care?"

"Oh no, Sergeant. That's why I've got a house full of gadgets. They made sure of that. They made sure I had no excuses. Ramps, chairs, even a bed lift, a van to take his chair. He still had a bit of movement in his legs and arms. He might have gone on for years."

"So you murdered him to prevent that happening?"

"Perhaps."

"Well, did you?"

"Perhaps."

"You intended to kill him?"

"Oh yes. I thought it would be a kindness to both of us."

"But you don't know if you did or not?"

"No. They said it was his heart, his doctor said, and I can't see how anything I did for him could've affected his heart. Maybe he just had a weak heart and no one had ever particularly noticed."

"His doctor was?"

"He used to go to Dr Pemberton but he changed to Dr Davis because Bette said he was younger and more up-to-date."

"That's Leslie Davis?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

"Yep. Worse luck."

"Sometimes I wanted Donald to die so much it was almost like a third person in the room with us. A sort of demon egging me on."

"And if you had left him—what would have happened?"

"They would've found a way to get me back here."

"Your stepdaughters?" Dennis couldn't help his surprise. "That's a bit extreme, isn't it?"

"Oh no, you don't know them. Wendy's husband left her. She ran such a long campaign of harassment that he finally gave in and came back to her."

"And they wanted you to look after him—because the alternative was one of them looking after him?"

"Yes. And it cost nothing if I did the work."

"Well, I'll look into it but you had better come into Buckton station one day and do a formal statement. And if you were doing something along the lines of pointing the bone—then you'd better say so. I don't think your stepdaughters are going to give up and go away."

"*I* might just give up and walk away." She said it meditatively. "I spent years creating this garden, only the biggest trees were here when I came, and I would be sorry to leave it but perhaps someone else would love it the way I have loved it."

She stood up and walked to the door. He got up too. The house was old and dim and had a lot of heavy furniture in walnut and silky oak and cedar. Perhaps it wasn't a good house for two people who hated each other to go on living in …

He drove round to where the primary school had been. Now, all the buildings had been removed to be re-used elsewhere and it was merely a dry yard with the ubiquitous pepper trees, one large one with its wooden bench built round all four sides still there, and a couple of well-grown silky oaks. A rather depressed and scruffy-looking pony picked at the limited covering of grass.

Elise said, "Do you think people ride the pony?"

"I'd say so, sweetie. I don't like the look of those girth galls." The pony showed signs of dried sweat in the saddle area and a couple of nasty sores. He went over to the fence and looked more closely. The pony was probably a little over twelve hands, brown, with a tiny white fleck on his forehead, and a surprisingly fine head. "I wonder … seeing we're here … " He turned round and drove back and parked by the store. "I'll just see who owns him," he said vaguely. Elise was getting along well with her riding but Twinkletoes wasn't really the pony for anything but an absolute beginner.

The lady in the shop said, "Oh, that's Benny's pony. He'd much rather have a bike but his dad said it's a pony or nothing because someone gave them the horse."

"And where does Benny live?"

She came to the door and pointed to a faded green house just beyond the crossroads. "Benny Gill. His dad does a fair bit of contract work round the district these days."

He came back to the car and said he was just going to duck over to the Gills' house. "Because of the pony?" Fiona asked quietly.

"He's not being properly looked after."

As she watched him walk away she felt like saying 'that's my Dennis'; people were right when they said he made work for himself, coming to Norwilla was proof of that, but she thought it was one of the things she liked about him. It was more than twenty minutes before he came back, and the children were starting to get a bit restless, but he got in quite cheerfully and said, "I did a deal. He'll bring the pony over next week and I'll take his son into Mercers and help him get a bike. If the kid wants to knock a bike around then he's the only loser."

"You mean—" she turned to him in surprise, "you've *bought* the pony? I thought you were just going over to give them a piece of your mind."

"That too," he said with a sudden grin. "But if I'm right then there might be a decent pony in there waiting to be … brought out. If not we'll find a suitable home for him."

*

Constable Kelly had deliberately avoided anywhere that he might run into Sister Iris Hitchener since the day he had unexpectedly met her out at the Donnelly farm. But his boss sent him round to the hospital to check on a small problem. Someone had apparently been getting into

the store room off the kitchen and messing with bags and boxes. The room was locked at night but was open all day while Mrs Binnie and her staff needed to go to and fro to get ingredients for the day's meals.

He wasn't keen to go. For sure he would see Iris and it would embarrass him. It might also embarrass Iris but he had heard her say they would get used to not seeing each other; she probably no longer cared one way or the other. He had had plenty of time to regret many, if not most, of the things he had said to her at their last few meetings but he couldn't bring himself to say sorry … not least because he had suffered several humiliating bouts of suddenly bursting into tears. Each time it left him wanting to sink through the floor …

It all went safely and sanely. Mrs Binnie was a comfortable middle-aged woman. She had been married to Malcolm Binnie's second son Hugh and had been a widow for nearly ten years. She was a good cook and managed to turn out nourishing meals on a tight budget. She showed him around the big store room with its shelves and bins and cupboards and extra freezer. She pointed to sacks of flour and sugar and said, "I can't say for absolute certain, but *I* think that smells like someone's weed on the bags—so I don't like to use those bags. And you can see how where they've opened these jars, breaking the vacuum seal, and then closed them up again. I didn't realise that the jars of tomato paste were starting to go off until I came to get one. We don't use a lot … and then I had to get one of the girls to go over all the jars to check. And some of the tins have got holes in them. It looks like someone brought in a can opener … It's going to cost us quite a bit to check everything and use up the damaged stuff as quickly as possibly. But some of it is only good for throwing out."

For a moment he stood rather non-plussed, then his training kicked in. "I wonder if we can get any prints off these tins. It's likely to be the same one or two people doing it all." If they hadn't worn gloves then there was a good chance he could get a print off one of the cans or jars. "I'll just go and get my gear. But have you seen anyone hanging around that shouldn't be here?"

"No, I really haven't. But when we're busy dishing up a meal … well, things get quite noisy."

He managed to bring up several quite clear prints but to see if they belonged to the perp it would mean taking Mrs Binnie's prints, along with her two kitchen assistants. And there was always the possibility that the prints belonged to packers at the production end. He was there for nearly an hour, taking prints, listing the damaged goods, taking photographs, checking the lock and the windows to make sure someone hadn't managed to pick it. If it wasn't any member of staff or a patient with a grievance then it suggested one of the local hooligans; perhaps Rowan Burchall again daring some weak-minded kid to do something stupid and pointless …

He finally said, "I'll see if I can get a match. We just might get lucky. I'll be in touch." He felt his own luck had held. There had been neither sight nor sound of Iris. And in another couple of minutes he would be gone. But as he went out on to the landing to hurry along to the main car park she and Sister O'Brien came out of the office. They both saw him. Kath O'Brien said, "Good, poor Mrs Binnie's been in a state ever since she found the mess in the store room." Iris just gave him her lovely smile but added nothing to Kath's comments.

At the station he laid out the prints he had lifted. He wasn't very experienced in doing it. But Dennis came over and had a look. "That looks pretty clear. Rowan Burchall might be a good starting point."

But he couldn't get a match. "Okay, go round to the high school on Monday. Might be younger kids but those prints aren't really small, and you've got part of the palm as well to suggest the size."

Brent felt no more enthusiastic about tackling the High School than he had about the hospital though for different reasons. He knew the principal never lost a chance to badmouth Dennis Walsh and by extension all police. He knew there were rumours round town about Derek Coleman liking to watch porn. He hadn't been able to distance himself from it in Brisbane but it always left him feeling ruffled and uncomfortable. How could any woman allow herself to be used in such a way. Some things should be private. If he had said it aloud Dennis Walsh would have agreed absolutely. But he didn't feel he should comment on a mere rumour. And a high school principal … surely it must be something that some kid with a bad attitude to school had started off?

Matty Ainsworth in the school office said he would need to get Coleman's permission to take fingerprints, or so she thought. "What is it about?"

"Someone, possibly a young person, has got into the kitchen stores at the hospital and made a mess. They'll have to throw a lot of it out. I've got a couple of prints … "

"And you think it's one of our naughty boys?"

"It might be." He couldn't be sure but he thought the vandal was probably male, simply by the splash pattern on the sacks; someone who simply stood there and urinated from a distance …

"Well, I've got a suggestion. It's not evidence. But it might help you refine your numbers downwards. I was hanging my coat behind the door here when I heard several boys going past, I forget just what day it was, a week or two ago, and one of them was saying something about 'every jar' and the others were laughing. It seemed an odd thing for boys to be talking about. I thought they might be referring to beer, sometimes you hear someone talk about a jar, but perhaps it was the ordinary kind of jar … "

"And—could you put a name to the voice?"

"Oh, I would think so." She drew over a memopad and wrote down three names. None of them meant anything to Constable Kelly but he said he would ask the principal if he could pull those three out of class. He could wait till the lunch hour but he thought his boss would prefer to see them taken out of class; it had a way of putting them on notice.

He knocked on the principal's door but got no answer. He thought he had no choice but to stand there until Derek Coleman returned, perhaps just from the men's, but a teacher came along and said, "If he's not there you can wait inside. I'm sure he won't be long."

Brent was reluctant to open the door and go in but to stand outside like a naughty boy sent up to get the cane wasn't much of an alternative. "Okay, thanks." He went in cautiously and sat down on the chair in front of the big desk. It was a much more attractive, and also, strangely, a much more private room than most school offices. As though Derek Coleman had turned it into a home away from home rather than just a place to see parents and staff and students. It had some expected items, like a big wall calendar with activities and examination dates and functions and end of term dates marked in. Coleman's in tray was respectably full. There were a number of books about education on a shelf. A big desk diary stood open next to the telephone.

He sat there nearly five minutes, just gazing vaguely around, and wishing he hadn't set eyes on Iris again. He could try to put her out of his mind but she only had to smile at him like that and he was lost. He was in the middle of trying to decide what he might say to Dr Heber on his next visit when Derek Coleman came in with a rush. He saw Brent and said, "What the hell are you doing in here? Who gave you permission to come in when I'm out?" He sounded angry.

"A teacher came along and said I might as well go in and wait—"

"Which teacher? No teacher here has the right to make free with my office!"

"She didn't tell me her name. I've only been here a couple of minutes. I'm sorry to bother you. But I need to pull several students out of class to have their fingerprints taken."

It didn't seem to mollify Mr Coleman but he said curtly, "Which students?"

Brent read out his list of names. Coleman shook his head. "You can have Elliot, he's a useless little sod. But you're not fingerprinting those other boys. They're some of my best students."

Brent considered this limited offer. The one boy offered up just might dob the others in. He finally said, "Okay, I'll talk to Elliot."

Derek Coleman got on to Matty and said, "See that Elliot Bayles gets sent to my office."

Constable Kelly knew he would need a member of staff present but he wondered what boy, unless very confident, would say anything in front of the principal. Elliot, when he turned up, was a freckled, pale-haired youth of about fourteen. He had a dying duck look on his face as he came in and saw Constable Kelly.

"I need to take your fingerprints, son," Kelly said in what he hoped was a reasonable imitation of his boss. He got out his inked pad and paper and a small packet of tissues.

"Why?" Elliot's voice was a little squeak.

"Some boys went into the store room at the hospital and damaged some of the supplies there. It will cost the hospital hundreds of dollars to replace them."

Elliot went even paler, if that was possible, and said almost inaudibly, “Am I in trouble?”

“Did you go to the hospital?”

He nodded.

“Who with?” Brent said as non-committally as he could.

There was a long silence while the boy looked down at his scuffed shoes and tried to decide which side of the fence was most prickly. Then he said, “With Nathan and Tim.”

“Nathan Benn and Tim Brumby?”

Elliot nodded. Kelly turned back to the principal and said hesitantly, “I really need to see those other boys as well, sir.”

“I said no, and I mean no. Charge this little hooligan if you need to and get off school premises. I’m busy.”

Brent Kelly stood up. “You can go now, son, but we expect you to come round to the station after school. We’ll catch up with those other two at their homes this evening.” He wasn’t sure what to say to Derek Coleman so he simply gathered up his things and went out.

Dennis Walsh listened to this and said “Fair enough. I’ll leave you to follow up this evening. Make sure you have a parent present when you take fingerprints. But I wonder why Coleman was so angry at finding you in his office?” And then he answered his own query. “Surely he doesn’t keep any of his suss videos in his office?” He thought on this for a minute before adding, “I wonder if he goes along to the post office to pick up his own mail, say around eleven o’clock, rather than wait till school’s out in the afternoon, or leave them for Nanci to pick up. He might lock it into his briefcase … ” And, being Dennis, he immediately lifted the phone and got Judy Bilton at the post office. “Mrs Bilton, does Derek Coleman come in to pick up his mail at the post office of a morning?”

“Sometimes, perhaps two or three times a fortnight.”

“Well, next time he has a parcel that might be a video and he comes by and picks it up—can you ring the station as soon as he’s gone?” A minute later he said “Thanks” and hung up.

“What are you thinking?” Brent said cautiously.

“Even if his porn collection is all perfectly legit, no blackmarket stuff, no illegal importations, for him to take it on to the school premises … the students are underage so it might be argued that he is putting their moral welfare in jeopardy. Anyway, sort out this thing with his latest lot of little pets and see about charging them if you can.” He had no clear plan of action but it would be useful to know if Derek’s visits coincided with parcels arriving.

Elliot came nervously up the station path a little after four and found himself facing the Ogre of Buckton. His courage failed him and he turned to go out again; Brent Kelly was one thing, Dennis Walsh quite another. But Dennis had seen him. “Not so fast, son. We want to talk to you. Go in there and sit down. Constable Kelly will be back in a minute or two.”

Elliot Bayles tried to find a tiny shred of comfort in the thought that he was only going to have to deal with Brent Kelly but he had already decided he was going to make a clean breast of it all. It was an adrenaline rush at the time, to sneak in, while no one was noticing, when Tim went up, ostensibly, to see his granddad in the Annexe, but afterwards he had the horrible image of sick people eating stuff that Nathan had pissed on.

“You don’t need to fingerprint me,” he said in a rush as Brent came in and sat down. “I’ll tell you what happened.” It was a simple pathetic little story. Nathan and Tim had been giving him a hard time because he wasn’t much good at sport and they had told him he needed to come along with them on their next spree (he called it ‘the Big E’ but didn’t explain why they called it that) if he didn’t want to find himself suffering next time he let them down in a scrum … and he had gone along with them. It sounded so simple and easy the way he said Nathan had organised it and once he was there … there was no sidling out … “I’m sorry, it was a nasty thing to do. My gran was in hospital once and now I think of someone doing that to the food she was getting. It makes me want to spew.”

“Okay, I’ll see what the others have to say for themselves. We might let it go at a caution if you all reimburse the hospital.”

Elliot said miserably that he didn’t have any money.

"Well, maybe you can do some odd jobs or something."

Surprisingly, he seemed to find comfort in the idea. The other two boys, as Brent went to their homes in the evening, both blustered and said they'd never been near the hospital. "Just the store room," Brent said. "So I'll take your fingerprints and cross-check." Another few years and they might take this in their stride, but they were not yet hardened in their vandalism and they found his threat nerve-wracking. So quick and simple to go in like that; much harder to know whether they had touched anything and left a print behind.

By the time he went into the café for an evening meal he had handed out three cautions and told all three boys to front up at the hospital on Saturday just after lunch to publicly apologise to Mrs Binnie and her staff and to receive the list of damaged goods. The hospital bought most things in bulk so prices would be lower than purchasing them in a supermarket but it still ran to around four hundred dollars worth of damage. Brent hoped Dennis might agree to be the one to go out to the hospital to make sure the boys turned up and did as they were told. But Dennis, when he asked him, only said, "Scared of running into Iris, are you?"

"A bit. I haven't got anything to say to her. It's embarrassing."

"I thought the problem was having too much to say, including some stuff better left unsaid."

Brent flushed up at that. "I'm only saying it the way it is."

"No, lad, you're only saying it the way your useless dad brainwashed you into believing—"

"That's not true!"

"You think I didn't look at those police reports before I dumped them on your doorstep? If your dad had been on my patch he would've found himself doing serious time. I might overlook a bit of yelling and throwing things—but he could've killed your poor bloody mum—"

"It's only what she deserved for not doing what he asked. It wasn't much to ask—just to come to Mass with him—"

"Well, God knows what you're doing in the police with an attitude like that. And the sooner you get out the better. Because on my patch husbands don't get to beat up their wives, not if I have any say in the matter. And your mum didn't just get beaten up, did she? She got publicly humiliated and destroyed because she was unlucky enough to marry some sick bastard."

"You shouldn't say that! You don't know anything about it!"

"Then I think it *is* about time I did get to know something about it. Your dad got into this country as supposedly a man without a criminal record. Upstanding bloke with three decent sons. A pushover. And I'll guarantee he was never asked what had really happened to his wife. I think it is about time Immigration had a cold hard look at the evidence. People are quick to point their fingers at the Muslim community for not treating their women properly—but your dad could show 'em all a thing or two."

Brent hadn't been able to get a word in once Dennis got going. Now he said sullenly, "You'd be too late. We're all Australian citizens."

"Then we'll have to see about un-Australianing your dad."

Brent didn't respond to this. He didn't believe any of his boss's threats could be put into action. But as he was getting into bed he had a flash of sudden doubt. He had gone along and sworn the oath but his dad hadn't been there; he had said something about 'getting around to it' but maybe he hadn't. Maybe he would get sent back. But then his enduring belief in his father kicked in. Nothing Dennis had said would make the slightest difference. Even so, the whole conversation left him feeling angry and depressed. If he couldn't believe in the righteousness and knowledge of his father—then there was no one else left to believe in.

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The three boys turned up at the hospital, along with several parents, and Mrs Binnie accepted their apology and promise of restitution without showing much forgiveness. She was still burdened with the dreadful secret feeling that some of that damaged food might have already gone into meals before she noticed. The thought of people suing the hospital, of her losing her job, and all for some irresponsible stupid teenagers … She listened without smiling and finally said, "I'll believe you're sorry when you've gone out and earned the money to buy us replacement supplies."

Brent Kelly stood at the back of the group. He could see the justice in this but every time he went out to such small 'events' he felt he needed to suppress his own thoughts. Because if he let them loose then he would find himself asking himself if not wanting to go to Mass was such a heinous crime that it deserved the kind of physical abuse he vaguely remembered being handed out—and which his father had frequently, and with much relish, referred to ever since. What these boys had done was nasty but there was a certain dignity in the way it was getting resolved.

Finally Mrs Binnie said, "Next time, stop and think how you would feel if you were in hospital having your appendix out or something—and someone came along and peed in your food. Wouldn't you feel sick and miserable when you found out about it?"

All the boys said they would. They might not all be telling the truth. They might not be truly putting themselves in such a position. But it might help them to stop before they started planning their next spree and think it over. Several of the nursing staff and the Hospital Auxiliary ladies and Godfrey Waddell who had come to collect an elderly patient who had died an hour ago stood behind the little group and listened. They all felt it was Dennis Walsh's decision to handle it like this; all except Iris who watched Brent and felt that he also wanted it done this way.

When he turned to leave he saw her, flushed red, and hurried away. Sister Martin had been standing beside Iris and now she said, "What is Brent embarrassed about?"

Iris wasn't sure she wanted to say anything, to Jeannie Martin, to anyone, but she finally said quietly, "His father brought him up to believe women are wicked evil temptresses. I can't undo the work of a lifetime. I'm not sure anyone can. Not unless it's what Brent really wants."

Jeannie nodded. "It's a pity." She was old enough and more to be a mother to Brent. She went on comfortably, "There's something about him. You feel you want to give him a big hug, to say something to make him smile, but I suppose that's the last thing he wants. Or thinks he wants."

Afterwards Iris thought Jeannie's understanding of Brent was very close to the mark.

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Brent Kelly still went regularly to the presbytery to have meals with Father Colgan and Father Meagher. They were always hospitable and kind, even if Father Colgan occasionally put Brent on the spot by asking questions he didn't want to answer. This time, though, it was Michael Meagher who said, "You're looking a bit down in the mouth, Brent. Is Dinny Walsh giving you a hard time—or you've got a difficult case on the go?"

For a moment Brent considered saying something bland like 'we're pretty busy' and then he felt it would be a relief to say something of the agonies he had been going through. "It's the boss, he's threatening to try and get my dad deported. I don't think he can. But it'll make things hard … " He wasn't sure just what he meant by this. If he had to tell his father that it was in some way his fault that Dennis was taking such a drastic step … all his old fears and anxieties seemed to come flooding back; he was no longer a young man in his twenties but a small frightened boy, frightened not only of his father but of his two older brothers …

"Sounds drastic," old Father Colgan said drily. "What's got into Dinny that he would try to do that? He hasn't met your dad, has he?"

"No. No, of course not. My dad would never come here—"

"Why ever not?" The old priest said it without thinking deeply. "Even my dear old mum came out here to see me, and in my previous parish. It didn't matter that I was fifty and more. She wanted to be sure I was comfortable." He laughed at that. "Comfortable. Well, that's what mothers are for—and fathers."

"My dad wouldn't."

"It's a long drive, I'll grant you, but I remember Constable Briggs's dad and mum coming up from Brisbane to see him. He was well before your time."

"My dad wouldn't." Brent sounded surly now.

"Well, what if we invited him to come and stay? It wouldn't hurt Carmen to make up an extra bed for a few nights and you can take him around and show him your beat. I'm sure he'd enjoy seeing your life out here."

"No. He wouldn't." As Colgan tried to urge Brent to consider it, Michael Meagher felt that he was wasting his time, that Brent would never agree to the invitation. Just why …

"I'm going to Brisbane in a couple of weeks," Meagher said. "If it would be any help I could just drop by and tell him how you're getting along." It might strike Brent as less confrontational.

"No, he wouldn't like that. He hates me. I'm not good enough."

"He was hoping to get a couple of angels, was he?" Father Colgan said drily. "And instead he got some normal boys."

"You don't understand. But I don't want to talk about it."

"Okay, we won't." They turned instead, to Brent's relief, to talking about the Dairy Festival and how they might be able to decorate the church in some way to expand the theme. After all, if jobs in Buckton disappeared, it would also mean a decline in the congregation …

But after Brent had gone and the lunch was cleared away and as Father Meagher prepared to go out again, John Colgan said calmly, "I think a visit to the Kelly ménage while you're in Brisbane might be an extremely good idea. That kid is a mess and we don't seem to be helping. A bit of an insight into his home life might not go amiss."

"Would his father let me in," Michael Meagher mused.

"If you go in the role of parish priest, yes, none of this buddy-buddy good neighbour stuff."

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Dennis Walsh had given a few spare moments to pondering on the Morgan household, if not the Reithmuller household. People did sometimes want elderly relatives, spouses, neighbours, anyone who was annoying them, dead and gone. Sometimes they went beyond wishing and saying. Sometimes they did … but what Jason Reithmuller and his wife might actually be doing was problematic. He wasn't even sure if taking it seriously might not be to play into their hands. Did they want their elderly aunt to be seen as hysterical? Paranoid? Willing to spread wild stories? But the Morgan household was a different matter. If Leslie Davis had only been seeing Donald Morgan in the last few months of his life was he qualified to say, without a post mortem, that it definitely was his heart?

It wasn't uncommon. Men retired. They got sick. They died. After a career in which they felt themselves relatively important and appreciated, they were suddenly nobody, just the person who got under their wife's feet. And Donald Morgan had the added problem of a serious and incurable medical condition. He also had the psychological and physical loss of his school. He could no longer come by and relive his memories. Was it all enough to prey on his mind? Enough to encourage him to over-medicate perhaps?

He didn't want to go poking round in Winville, talking to those two unpleasant daughters, or Dr Davis. In other circumstances, the two women might be pleasant enough, and if they were genuinely concerned that something hadn't been done for their father then he felt he should admire their loyalty. But it didn't make them any more likeable. And he couldn't rid himself of the feeling that it wasn't their father's death which was their prime concern but some way to make life more difficult for their stepmother …

Still, a further interview with them both, and a brief visit to Leslie Davis, might be enough to resolve the situation. He lifted the phone and got DS Greg Sullivan in Winville. "Greg, the dragon sisters, Wendy Fisher and Bette Davidson, they say they came to you, to Hassell, about their father's death. He was Donald Morgan over at Norwilla. Was he satisfied it was all hot air?"

Greg took a moment to pull the brief visit back to mind. "Well, he was sixty-eight, I think Aidan said, and though it was a bit sudden, it wasn't totally unlikely. He had been chronically ill for several years and steadily getting worse. I'd say, if the poor old sod got taken off by his heart packing it in, then it might've been a blessing."

"Leslie Davis did the death certificate, I understand."

"Is that a problem?"

"I wouldn't trust Leslie Davis to tell me I had a pimple—"

"Oh, come on, Den, he might be a bit keen to give out a prescription for everything, he'd probably give you antibiotics for that pimple, but he's not likely to miss it if the wife got stuck into her husband with a rolling pin."

"I'd say it'd be more subtle than that. But I'd just like to talk to the daughters again, in their homes, and have a chat with Davis. If they can't give me any evidence of wrongdoing then I'll tell 'em to put up or shut up. D'you want to come round with me?"

"When?"

"I'll be in court there Monday morning. I can stay on and try to catch up with them all at lunch time."

"Okay, I'll try and keep it free. Oh, by the way, it looks like they're going to drop the charges against Simon Proctor. He's already been through court for that assault and as they can't say definitely that that punch is what killed Chick Marrow they're going to drop the case. A good lawyer would go straight for the jugular on that one."

"And what about the hospital end of things?"

"Haven't heard any more."

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A car pulling a rented two-horse-float turned into the small side road by the cop shop one late afternoon. Fiona saw it and came out, closely attended by two excited children. A man got out and came over to their gate. "Are you the people who're taking our neddy?"

"If you're Mr Gill then yes, thank you. We'll put him in the next yard for a day or two. Does he have any … anything he's scared of … or any bad habits?"

"He's not too bad." He didn't sound very interested. Perhaps the family just wasn't at all 'horsy'. He let down the ramp and backed the pony out. The family hadn't done anything for him and he still looked very rough with his hooves long and cracked. "You can have that old bridle and saddle if you want. They're about on their last legs."

Fiona thanked Mr Gill though she felt certain Dennis would say the saddle was part of the problem. It was a heavy old stock saddle, stuffed with horsehair and with the dry leather of the flaps curling upwards. She came and unlocked the gate into Jack Cox's yard. It didn't have a great deal of grass but enough to keep the pony busy for several days—and certainly more than that old school yard had contained. "Is he hard to catch?"

"Not too bad. He likes a slice of bread."

She wasn't really worried. Dennis would be sure to be able to catch him. The boy who had ridden him now got out of the passenger seat of the pickup and stood watching Fiona lead him into the yard. She closed the gate and slipped the bridle off. The pony stood there a minute looking back to his known owners but Benny made no move to give him a last pat. A minute later he moved away along the side fence and started to crop the overgrown lawn.

"What do you call him?" she asked.

"Freddie."

She smiled at that. The pony might like to remain as Freddie even if they gave him another name for his outings; if he got to the point of having outings. "And how old do you think he is?"

"About eight maybe."

She directed the Gills back to the station, not that they could have missed it, and said she hoped Benny would find a bike he liked. His father shrugged. "He'd better." It wasn't a moment of delightful father-son accord but they were no longer her problem. If Dennis wanted to ask them how they felt about Donald Morgan he was welcome …

It was nearly an hour later before he turned up to say the kid had got his bike, not top of the range, but he seemed happy enough. The children were reluctant to give up their interested surveillance of the pony once he'd got a tub of water and Dennis had looked at his sores and run a hand down each leg and had a look at his teeth. "Might be a bit older than eight but it shouldn't matter—"

"How can you tell?" Fiona was curious.

"Well, you can't, not down to an exact year, not unless they're babies or quite old, but roughly."

"His name's Freddie, Daddy." Elise was already picturing herself on his back.

"Freddie eh? Okay, we'll get Vince to come round tomorrow and give him a good go-over. I'd say he's got worms in his tummy as well as those sores. And he'll need his feet trimmed. Then he can go down to the paddock and learn to get along with Twinkletoes."

But when he rang Vince Bromby it was to find the phone being answered by a brisk youngish woman who said she was currently Vince's locum and that if she liked Buckton she would think about buying the practice. He gave her directions and she said she would drop around tomorrow about four, barring emergencies. He said to the family, "Sounds English. I hope she's a good vet."

"Well, Vince is a good vet, isn't he? He just doesn't sort of … put himself out … "

"I've never been able to pin it down, something to do with his attitude, the way he gets on his high horse. Let's hope she's a perfectly normal person who gets on with people."

In fact, Leila Burkett was in her late forties and said she had come out here with her twenty-year-old daughter Naomi after her husband died. Naomi was mad about horses, in fact Naomi was mad about almost all animals. Leila went over the pony carefully, drenched him with help from Naomi, went round his feet and trimmed them all back a little. "He'll need a more thorough trim but I'm a bit pushed for time today." She checked his eyes and nostrils and teeth and said, "For the price of a bike I think you've got a jolly nice little fellow there. I'd say he's got a bit of Welsh Mountain Pony in him, lots of character, so now you can hope he hasn't got any nasty habits when you get on."

"That's really our problem. I don't ride. And Elise is still too much of a beginner. And Dennis is too big for him. We thought we might ask one of the Hickman boys to come round and put him through his paces as soon as those sores are healed up."

"Would you like Naomi to try him out for you?" Leila turned to her daughter who was about Fiona's height and fairly slightly built. They made an arrangement to join up at the paddock in a week's time. In the meantime Dennis could look around for a smaller saddle …

Leila Burkett sounded as if she wouldn't take any nonsense from pet owners or farmers but Fiona thought the two of them would be an asset to the district if they could afford to buy Vince's veterinary practice.

Case No. 2: Out on the Plains …

Dennis and Greg went first to see Wendy Fisher. There wasn't much to choose between the two sisters but Wendy had given the slight sense of being the spokeswoman. She lived in a rather dull brick veneer with a couple of hydrangea bushes each side of the front gate and a crazy paving path up to a door with yellowish glass insets. "Doesn't look like she ever appreciated her stepmother's garden," Dennis said drily.

"I wouldn't think you could do much gardening at Norwilla," Greg said without much interest.

"There's a windmill and several tanks out the back of the Morgan place. I'd say they made water their priority—or the wife did—and it's still looking pretty good, just the lawn starting to look a bit brown."

Mrs Fisher seemed quite chuffed to see them both and let them into a large lounge with deep carpet and some ornamental fish swimming round in a big tank. The room also contained a wide screen TV and several large speakers. Possibly Mrs Fisher saw herself as an indoor sort of person. She said immediately as they sank into some tan leather chairs, "What have you found out?"

"We'll need to check with your dad's doctor," Dennis Walsh said non-committally. "Heart can mean almost anything. And the fact that he didn't ask for a post mortem is going to make it very difficult. Did your father ever complain of chest pains, breathlessness, anything that might've made the doctor suspicious—or you dad said anything to him?"

"My father never never *never* had the slightest thing wrong with his heart. He was poisoned. We want you to find out how she did it."

"Then we've got a problem if Dr Davis wrote 'coronary' or something on the death certificate. It'll start to look like guesswork on his part."

"Don't go fussing about the doctor. *He's* not the problem."

"He's very much the problem," Dennis said drily, "if he gave a false death certificate. The things are s'posed to be halfway accurate."

"They always say heart when they don't know," Wendy Fisher began.

"If they don't know they're s'posed to arrange for an autopsy, not whack down the first thing that comes into their heads."

Wendy Fisher looked annoyed. She thought she was getting action on her perfidious stepmother—only to find that they were more interested in Donald Morgan's GP. "Perhaps you're right. But what can we do about it?" She tried to sound helpful.

"We can exhume your father. But that's fairly drastic—without some more evidence. But we'll see what Davis has to say for himself."

"Oh, you can exhume Dad if you want—so long as it doesn't cost us—we aren't terribly well off—or not till we get probate and Dad's money comes through."

"We can arrange an exhumation—but the fact that you and your sister don't like your stepmother isn't a good enough reason."

"But she was just going to abandon him! Bette and I were so shocked when we found out."

"You mean—leave him in his house and drive away?"

"Almost. She wanted to dump him in a nursing home—"

"What's so terrible about that?"

"Our Dad? How would you feel if it was your Dad?" Both Greg and Dennis gave this brief consideration then Greg said, "If my Dad was as incapacitated as your Dad seems to have been I would accept it. The last thing I'd want would be my poor Mum putting her back out trying to lift him or something."

Mrs Fisher didn't look pleased. "He spent a small fortune in putting all those gadgets in to help her—so what was the point if she simply up and went?"

"She told you she wanted to leave?"

"As good as. I saw travel brochures in her bedroom—and Dad said he heard her on the phone to somebody or other talking about meeting up. I ask you? What sort of woman carries on like that when her husband is helpless?"

"So when your husband becomes incapacitated—you'll give him round the clock nursing care seven days a week?"

"Of course." It didn't sound convincing.

"So you begrudged your stepmother even a week away at the beach to have a little break from Norwilla and all that heavy nursing?"

"If she wanted to take him with her—that's different. There are places set up to deal with people in that state—"

"Your stepmother said clearly that she hated your father and that the thought of having to wipe his bum for heaven knows how many years … well, would you want that?"

"That is exactly what I'm saying, what Bette and I are saying, that she hated him enough to kill him. We don't know how she did it but we know she did it."

They visited Bette Davidson and heard very similar sentiments. She too said unhesitatingly that she would agree to an exhumation if they thought that was the only way to get at the truth. "If you had doubts about your father's death," Greg said, "why didn't you say so at the time? Much easier, cheaper, and more reliable."

"We had our suspicions. But it's no good coming to you people with just suspicions. We spoke with Dr Davis a week later and he said it was all a little bit odd because he didn't present with classic heart symptoms … just vaguely reminiscent."

"So your fool of a doctor signed a death certificate because something was *just vaguely reminiscent*? Stone the bloody crows!" Dennis said in annoyance. "Where did that useless doctor get his degree? Out of a Monopoly box or something?"

"He gave our father a lot of care and attention," Mrs Davidson said rather sniffily.

"So long as you paid your bills on the dot. Or your Dad did."

Dennis blowing up wasn't going to help matters. Greg Sullivan said, "We'll nip round now and catch Leslie Davis and see what his suspicions were."

But Leslie Davis immediately put the onus for finding things odd back on the two women. He was still based at Winville District Hospital though he had a small number of private patients. He took them into a small office and said that Donald Morgan when the wife brought him into the hospital early in the morning was very weak and had been vomiting. But he was able to say that his heart was palpitating in a very strange way and he thought he had pins and needles …

"Pins and needles are a common symptom but it is less common for a heart victim to vomit."

"Did he vomit after he came into the hospital?"

"No. His wife said he had vomited several times at home."

"So you've only got her word for it?"

"It's an odd thing to offer if it wasn't true. And people don't always take pins and needles very seriously. They sometimes put it down to cramp in bed."

"But this was a man who was losing his feelings in his hands and feet. Would that make a difference?"

Leslie Davis didn't like Sergeant Walsh; it was more than didn't like, he sometimes felt he loathed him. But this question had also puzzled him. "He would retain some feeling long after he had lost movement … "

"But you were satisfied that it was heart?"

"No. I put on the certificate heart exacerbated by the underlying condition. Even a post mortem probably would not have untangled the two things."

"But his daughters are saying he was poisoned by his second wife."

"I know they are. They've got a perfect right to say whatever they like. It won't make me change my opinion."

"They want the body exhumed." Greg Sullivan felt at a disadvantage. It was one thing to have some basic knowledge, another to know what questions to ask.

Leslie Davis stared at him. "Why would they want that?"

"To find the poison, of course."

"That's nonsense."

"You'd stake your professional reputation on that?" Dennis said drily.

"I would."

As the two men went out into the spring afternoon Dennis said, "That's almost the first time I've found relatives champing at the bit to get a body dug up. Usually it's the last thing they want—even if there are still a few niggling questions."

"Yeah, but I don't think those two women care two hoots about Donald and his *dignity*—all they want is to see their stepmother suffer. I wonder why."

The wicked stepmother was a given in many fairy tales but Dennis had actually found himself liking her better than her stepdaughters; not major liking but he thought in different circumstances and in a different family she might've been a pleasant woman. And he secretly felt a tinge of admiration for someone who, instead of grizzling when she ended up in a place like Norwilla, simply got to work and found herself an interest and made the most of things. And unlike some interests and hobbies she had created something which Donald, unless he was impervious to beauty, must also have enjoyed. Dennis liked coming home to his own garden but it couldn't compare with the lovely space that wife had created in such unpromising surroundings.

"I think you've hit the nail on the head, Greg. Why do both those women want to see their stepmother in the dock?"

*

Constable Kelly didn't particularly look forward to his drives to Winville to see his psychiatrist, Dr Heber, not least because he resented being asked to bring out long buried memories. Why should he have to go to someone when he didn't believe the memories he carried round with him were the problem? But he couldn't bring himself to say to his boss that he wasn't going to go

any more. Dennis couldn't force him. No one could force him. But he had been brought up to do what he was told and he found it hard to rebel …

He had his appointment with Marcus Heber then drove south out of Winville. He thought he would come home via Norwilla and just see what it was like. The turn-off was clearly signposted about ten kilometres on. He turned left. It was flat out here, almost the only colour the landscape seemed to offer was the flat red of a cloudless sunset, and he ran between rather stunted crops and the dry grass of the verges. Something about the landscape made him feel rather lost and lonely. There was an occasional farmhouse in sight but it was hard to believe they actually contained people. The two streetlights for Norwilla were just coming on as he drove in and pulled in beside the general store.

He bought himself a pie and a can of Coke and went out to sit in his car and eat. A couple of children on bikes went up the road and turned left at the junction. Lights came on in the tiny collection of houses. Someone somewhere yelled "Come in now, you kids!" and he heard an answering call "I can't find Smoky!" There was a curious normality about the place which he felt it shouldn't have. It seemed too remote from everyday concerns to have people yelling about what was presumably a lost kitten. Another car pulled in behind him and a woman got out. The lady from the shop came out and served her from the bowser and said, "Are you okay? The police were here a while ago."

"I know. But I'm trying not to let it get me down. I thought I would go in to Winville to see a movie. I just hope Wendy and Bette don't see me."

Brent always went to Winville in civvies but he wondered if the shop lady had an inkling about his identity. Because the woman in the car must surely be the new widow—and going to the movies wasn't usually something that new widows did. He jotted down her number plate. Maybe it wasn't a movie she was really going to go to. Maybe it was another man. Maybe that was why the two daughters were so determined to paint her as a poisoner: because they knew she wanted to end this marriage and go to someone else.

The car headed in the direction he had just come. He let it dwindle into the distance, two red tail lights in the gathering dusk, and then he did a u-turn and went after it. No one had mentioned another man in the equation but he suddenly felt absolutely certain there was. He had blocked a lot of things out of his mind but Dr Heber, with his gentle probing, had caused a lot of the half-forgotten stuff to rise to the surface again—including his father's constant reiteration that wherever you found a disobedient or troublesome or irreligious wife (not quite in those words) you always found another man. And this wife, so it seemed, had got herself rid of a much older and increasingly disabled husband. It was almost a classic case …

Adele Morgan had not taken much notice of the red Mazda parked a few yards along from the petrol bowsers in front of the store. It had been pointing in the opposite direction. But now she felt certain it was the same car behind her. There was nothing suspicious in its presence on the road. It might merely be someone who had got lost or had come out from Winville to talk to Mrs Landy at the store. But the last couple of weeks had made her increasingly frightened and worried. It wasn't hard to believe that Wendy and Bette, or perhaps someone from the police or to do with her stepdaughters' lawyer, was keeping an eye on her. They would probably shout it to the world that she had so little respect for her husband that she was off to see a Tom Hanks movie almost before he was cold in his grave …

She drove slowly. She was in good time. Her plan had been to have a meal somewhere before going round to the theatre. The big old Palace theatre had once shown a full program; a short, some news, and then the main feature. But times had changed. It had been turned into two smaller theatres now, one would show an adventure or a thriller, the other perhaps a romantic comedy or a cartoon if it was school holidays. It still had the sense of a treat and a night out with its rich red carpet and big chandelier in the foyer. But although she dropped right down below fifty the other car stayed about the same distance behind her.

She tried to tell herself that she was reading something ridiculous into its presence. The person might simply not know these roads. But the faint twinge of fear grew with the miles. She turned on the car radio. The reassuring sound of news and music might calm her nerves. She

reached the outskirts of Winville and began to consider where best to park. Winville's one Chinese restaurant was close to the theatre. If she could get a park along there …

She was lucky. There were several places. She pulled in and sat for several minutes to quiet her thumping heart. The red Mazda drove slowly past. She could see a young male driver but she didn't recognise him. Whether she might know him in broad daylight … but she couldn't link him to her tormentors. Wendy had no children. Bette had two teenage boys. But Adele didn't think either of them were old enough to be driving yet. She finally took her handbag from the floor and got out and walked straight into the Golden Moon and ordered sweet and sour fish.

It was a little on the sickly side but she ate quickly; now that she couldn't see the car she felt a strange need to know if it was still somewhere outside—waiting—or if it had driven on, the whole thing just a silly coincidence. She paid and went out. She thought, but couldn't be certain it was the same car, that it was parked about five spaces further along. Nor could she see if anyone was still seated in it, not without making it obvious. She walked in the other direction, crossed at the lights, went along to the entrance to the theatre, stood for several minutes as though she was checking her purse, then she walked along till she was almost opposite the red sedan. She pretended to check her watch, looked fleetingly across the street, then walked back to the theatre and went in.

The man was still sitting in the car.

*

It was late when Brent Kelly got back from Winville. He had sat a half hour in the car, he had gone into the theatre's foyer and looked around but there had been no sign of Mrs Morgan there with anyone, but then she would probably be discreet so close to her husband's death; she had probably arranged to meet in the dark of the theatre rather than out in the bright lights of the foyer. He went and got himself some more food to while away the time. He waited for her to come out.

The street grew quiet and dull. A few shops stayed open late, but most put up their shutters, turned out all but a few lights in their windows, and people came out and went home. He could turn on his inside light and read but he didn't want to flatten his battery. He could find somewhere else to sit that had enough light …

He put his head back and closed his eyes and napped briefly. When he woke in half an hour there was still no sign of anyone exiting from the theatre. He got out of the car and stretched before walking up and down to get his circulation going. Then there was the first half-hearted trickle of departing patrons. He went over to stand in the shadows of an awning a little way along and watch for Adele Morgan.

She was with a man in his forties as she came out, a well-dressed good-looking man. They stood a moment, then the man put a hand briefly on her shoulder, said audibly enough for Brent to hear "Take care of yourself" before turning and walking away. Adele Morgan, now that the street was empty of all but theatergoers, and not very many of them, simply walked straight across the street to her car.

Kelly stood still and watched her depart. So he was right! There was an unknown man in the case. It hadn't precisely been lovey-dovey but then they probably had the sense to play it quietly. He wasn't sure what to do next but if Dennis Walsh thought there wasn't a case to answer he now knew better. He would need to do some quiet digging in his spare time. Just how and what and where was harder to plan.

But Sergeant Walsh always liked to know something about people's backgrounds: how they connected up, where they had met, what their previous careers had been. It seemed a good place to start. The station was quiet as he came in, Dennis long gone home, and no sign of any messages. He sat down at the desk and booted up the computer. He might as well start by finding out a little about Donald Morgan and his career in Norwilla. There wasn't much. But Donald Morgan, newly initiated into the excitement of cyberspace and with enough movement left in his hands, had created his own blog site. He was an extremely pedantic writer but he did give the information that he had married a fellow teacher, Adele Siri Grossmuth, in Brisbane. He also mentioned his retirement. But much of the site was given over to an almost embarrassingly frank blow-by-blow description of the progress of his disease. Even his problems with his bowels …

Brent Kelly read it all carefully. Then, in case either the wife or the daughters decided to take it down, perhaps embarrassed by his frankness, he printed the entire thing out and got an old folder from the storeroom and put the pages in. Then he marked the file 'MORGAN DEATH' and put it in the filing cabinet. Dennis had made a note of the daughters' visit and of his visit to Mrs Morgan but he hadn't bothered to open a file. Now, Brent saw that as carelessness—or maybe Dennis was too influenced by Fiona who probably would be on the side of the wife, like most feminists, and would likely see killing her much older husband as justified. It didn't occur to him to think back to his initial belief in Fiona as a special kind of woman; hardly the sort to condone murder. Then he went to bed.

*

Dennis Walsh had given instructions to Mrs Bilton at the post office but afterwards he had almost hoped she would forget or ignore them; perhaps even see them as inappropriate. He knew he had to tackle Derek Coleman but he wasn't sure how to go about it … and although he wasn't likely to admit it to anyone, except possibly Fiona, he always felt himself at a psychological disadvantage with the principal and his air of world-weary sophistication. He was never sure if it was just to do with Coleman or whether he brought to the surface some secret sense of inferiority from the past.

But Mrs Bilton knew nothing of these secret agonisings. She rang and said briskly a couple of days later, "Mr Coleman has just been in to pick up a parcel. I assume it's a video."

"Thanks for letting me know." Now he could rush round to the school, just letting Coleman have enough time to get back to his office and put it away, or he could … let the matter go. Put like that, it was no contest and he said to Constable Kelly, "You'd best come round with me. We'll try and resolve the issue once and for all. If it isn't porn … " He didn't feel like saying 'then we've all maligned the guy' or something similar. He was human enough to like maligning Derek Coleman.

Brent wasn't wild about going back to the High School but meekly did as he was told. Dennis put the note on the door and took the car although the school was only a block away. They might as well make their visit look as official as possible. They went in and Walsh said to Matty Ainsworth in the front office: "Can you come with us, Ms Ainsworth? We need to see Mr Coleman." She looked surprised but got up and put her message on for callers. "And does the school have a TV with a video player connected?" Dennis said as she came along the hallway with them and up one flight of stairs to the principal's office.

"Yes, we've got a couple. There's one free at the moment downstairs and another over in the library—"

"The one downstairs is in a room where students can't look in?"

She was a little surprised but agreed it was.

Derek Coleman had returned five minutes ago and put his package in his briefcase and put the briefcase at the bottom of one of his cupboards. Matty knocked and said, "It's the police, Mr Coleman." There was a brief silence, perhaps Coleman was making sure the cupboard was firmly shut, then he said, "Come in."

Matty, having 'delivered' them, turned to go away. Walsh said, "No, we'll need you as a witness, Ms Ainsworth."

She didn't like the sound of that but came in with him. Dennis Walsh said, "Mr Coleman, you went along to the post office and picked up a video a few minutes ago, didn't you?"

Coleman considered saying no but possibly the police had somehow seen or heard … "What if I did?"

"We'd like to see that video. Ms Ainsworth will put it in your video machine downstairs and all four of us will watch it—"

They all saw the fleeting anger and dismay before he schooled his face into a kind of neutrality; not truly neutral, a sour element turned his mouth down slightly. "You've got nothing better to do with your time, maybe, but Ms Ainsworth, I'm sure, has more than enough to do."

"We won't keep you both long. Five minutes. If your video is something suitable to bring on to school premises then that's the end of the matter. If it's something about sex legitimately bought over the counter in Queensland then you can watch it at home but you don't bring it on to school grounds. If it isn't legit …" Dennis Walsh let the words trail away into grim silence. That he

couldn't decide how to end his sentence would have surprised everyone there. Matty Ainsworth felt a frisson of something close to fear. What if it was something awful … she vaguely saw ructions and unpleasant publicity and Derek possibly having to resign and people threatening to do things to Dennis Walsh and parents ringing her up for information and reassurance …

"You can't do that, sergeant," Coleman said quietly. "You don't have the authority."

"You would prefer I get a warrant to search your office?"

"If that is what it takes. But no reputable magistrate will give you a warrant on such flimsy grounds."

"Want to risk it? I can send my constable to Winville now and I'll sit in your office until he gets back."

"Because of some vague rumour—you're joking."

"That is the point, Mr Coleman. We constantly get to hear the rumours and they aren't helping you or the school. If you've got a copy of 'Snow White' in your briefcase then we can help to put the rumours to rest. After all, every one of your students, pet or not, has the right to attend a school with a squeaky clean reputation."

Derek Coleman sat in silence for more than a minute; whatever his internal agonies he managed to keep his face almost blank. Finally he said, "Very well, but I will be putting in a complaint about harassment."

"Okay, where's your parcel?"

"I'll get it."

"No, you'll continue to sit in that chair."

Derek Coleman had thought to do a swift changeover; he kept a few uninteresting videos about education seminars and things put on by the school in the cupboard. Now he knew he was lost as Dennis Walsh got up and began to open and shut cupboards. A moment later he brought the briefcase out and sat it on the principal's desk. The case was locked. "Keys," Dennis said calmly and accepted the bunch Coleman handed over. Then he snapped the case open and lifted out the still unopened package.

Sergeant Walsh beckoned his constable over. "Keep the packaging, just in case it's evidence."

He took out his handkerchief and drew the video from its 'tough' bag and said, "Right, we'll all go downstairs." Afterwards he found the protection of the handkerchief symbolic of preventing contamination in more ways than one.

Derek Coleman made one last effort. "I really don't think we should involve Ms Ainsworth in this. Men … and she's an unmarried woman … " Matty had mixed feelings about never marrying but she didn't like Derek to bring it up so publicly.

"If it isn't material suitable for Ms Ainsworth to view—then it *certainly* shouldn't be on school premises. What if it got mislaid, if you suddenly had to be taken to hospital and she or someone else thought it was school material?"

Coleman didn't try to answer this hypothetical question. Matty turned everything on and Dennis, after looking at the cover of the video which was of a brightly-coloured scene containing a blonde woman who had the vaguely pneumatic look of someone who had just been blown up with a bicycle pump, leaning on the grill of a Cadillac and with the title 'Little Lucy' scrawled across it, slipped it into the machine and suggested they all take chairs. He sat himself back comfortably and picked up the remote control which, to his relief, was the same as the one he had at home.

The video case contained no sign of a rating, no sign of a producer or distributor, only the length (30 minutes) and a blurb below the picture 'Fun for all the Family!' That, Dennis thought later, was the biggest con of the lot. Because the film got straight into the action. Three supposed police, one black, two white, picked up a streetwalker on what looked like a pretty grim street dragging her into a police vehicle and carting her round to a station, all the while talking about the fun they were going to have. He fast forwarded it a little. The fun consisted of beating the woman almost into unconsciousness, including kicking her naked body in the crotch and one of the men laughing about 'giving it to her good' and more blunt things. The camera swung in close to show the growing bruises on her body. One of the men bent over her and tried to push a fist inside her. 'Never found a bit of street pussy that didn't flap like a—' Dennis fast forwarded again and the men

were undressing with the camera panning over their almost salacious enjoyment of removing guns and belts and night sticks and clothes; lingering shots over their massive erections, the woman now lying on her back on a table still containing files and scattered gory pictures of crime scenes. Dennis hurried the film on.

But it was Brent who broke ranks as one of the men pulled her legs up with a jerk and another man slapped her round the face and the woman opened her eyes and they could see the tears trickling. He got up and hurried to the door. Matty Ainsworth, snapped out of her shocked acquiescence, got up and followed. Brent hurried along the hallway, terrified that his churning stomach would pack up on him. Matty caught up with him and said, "Come in the office, I'll make us both a cup of tea." That she managed to make her voice sound calm and almost normal was the most surprising thing, she later thought, about this dreadful morning. But people would be knocking off for lunch soon and she couldn't bear the thought that anyone might have an inkling of what she had just seen.

She put her kettle on and got out two mugs and got the other swivel chair for Constable Kelly. "I know police have to watch some dreadful stuff sometimes," she said at last. "I didn't know … I didn't believe that people could make movies like that. And *Derek* … "

Brent accepted the mug from her and cradled it in his hands as comfort. He had occasionally been pushed into viewing 'dreadful stuff' which had been confiscated on his previous posting but he had always tried to avoid watching, pleading busyness or someone needing his help on something. Now he found himself on the brink of another of these breakdowns which had horrified and hurt him over the last few weeks. In one way it was easier to break down in Matty's presence. She understood what they had sat through. And although she'd never had children she had known generation after generation of young people with their troubles, large and small. She put a hand briefly on his shoulder. "I know. It's hard to believe … and a young man shouldn't have to watch because … because … I s'pose it's evidence … " and then it overwhelmed her too. Derek! She had worked alongside him for years. He had occasionally put a hand on her shoulder or arm as he came into the office and looked at something she was showing him on the computer or in the morning's mail. And now she felt she would never want to even stand close to him again.

Perhaps the feeling would wear off in time. Dennis Walsh would handle it. He wouldn't want the school as a whole to get hurt. Perhaps in a few months the memory would fade …

Matty tried to chat comfortably with Brent. She wasn't Catholic. Since Pastor Kramer had left and John Fortescue had taken over the small Church of Christ she had returned to it. She understood, or thought she did, how important it was to belong to a congregation when someone moved to a new town and a new job. She talked about the school and Buckton and all the unease she had felt about Eric Kramer and her own quiet life. He probably wasn't very interested but she felt it was better than sitting in silence thinking back to what they had just seen. And Brent in a confused way was grateful to her. She was a brisk no-nonsense person in her professional capacity but a quiet kind thoughtful person in private.

At last he sat back with a long sigh and thanked her for the tea. "I guess I'd better get back to work—but how would any woman let herself be used in that way? Surely she couldn't … "

"Perhaps it is all make-believe but it certainly looked real. I think … but I am very ignorant about these things … that she might be a drug addict and she might get desperate for a … what do they call it? … a fix?"

He nodded. He had seen signs of needle tracks on her inner arms—briefly—but which came first? The addiction or the films?

They heard distant voices, a door closed, they heard slow steps going upstairs, then the heavier tread of Dennis Walsh in the corridor. Then he stopped by the office and said, "He's signed an undertaking not to bring any more of that rubbish on to school premises—and we'll take this video back to the station and find out where it was sourced from."

Ms Ainsworth found some comfort in his calm words. "It—well, I am only guessing—but it might come from the USA, it's a bit like what I think Los Angeles looks like."

"Could be." He went on out into the noon sun and Brent followed him without enthusiasm.

*

Back at the station, Brent Kelly said in a voice which still wasn't under control, "I'm going to resign. I can't take any more."

Dennis put the offensive video down on their desk and turned to his constable. It wasn't hard to see that the last half hour had deeply distressed him. His eyes were red and he twitched and fiddled with his hands. Dennis wondered if it was more than the revelations about Derek Coleman, whether this had brought back more buried memories about male violence and passive female acceptance. But as he stood there looking at the young man the thought, the hunch, seemed to come from nowhere. It wasn't a *mother* Brent sought, as Fiona believed. His mother was too long gone to be any kind of comfort. It was a *father*. A father who should've given his frightened lost little son lots of hugs and encouragement instead of bearing down on him with the full weight of patriarchal violence, bolstered by the apparently awesome power of the Church …

Yelling at Brent was at times understandable; some of the things he had come out with were beyond the pale, but beyond that Dennis suddenly understood was someone desperate for the ordinary simple moments of human contact. The kind of contact good fathers would offer naturally; a hug, a ruffling of a son's hair, an offer of a game of cricket in the back yard, an interest in his life and its problems, a word of encouragement …

He wasn't a particularly tactile person but he had gradually learnt, via his own little son, that boys as much as girls, could long for a hug and a moment of praise. He had given youngsters like Jason McNally a pat on the shoulder. He had given his young constables a word of praise now and then. But now he simply held out both arms to Brent and said, "I know it's a long time too late but you should've got lots of hugs when you were a kid and a dad to tell you you were a great kid."

"I'm not." Brent felt the tears well up again. "I never did anything right. I deserved everything I got—"

"That's rubbish and you know it, mate. If you'd been my boy I would've thought myself damn lucky to have a son like you."

It probably had more to do with Dennis as a powerful personality than anything he actually said. Brent hesitated, then simply stepped into his arms, and felt, perhaps for the first time in his life, that he was safe and protected. The world was still out there with all its agonies and dilemmas and the terrible mistakes constantly waiting to be made. But, briefly, he could forget it existed.

At last Dennis said, "We'd best get on. But I'd say you might like to go and get yourself some lunch before we worry about this bloody video of Coleman's. Go and make yourself a sandwich and a drink and take your time." Brent took himself off to his flat to make sandwiches and make coffee and sit on his bed for ten minutes. The problems hadn't gone away in the interim but, curiously, he felt they had somehow become a bit more manageable … perhaps it was an illusion …

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Dennis ate his lunch at his desk. There was nothing to suggest where the video had come from and he wondered if someone was importing a master tape and running off copies here. It might be locally made but the men, when they occasionally spoke, had American accents. Coleman had told him he belonged to a club; they circulated their material privately. He received material, he watched it, he sent it on. He didn't ask about the origins of any of the material. He had names and addresses of the men he received from and sent to though the names might not be … he didn't say false. They, like him, used box numbers. But he had the 'misfortune' that the person who sorted his mail into his box also knew him and often noticed him coming to collect mail from his box. The other men might not be burdened with a nosy postmistress …

Dennis was about to ring Winville to get some guidance on the whole case when the phone rang. It was Mrs Applegarth and she said she had heard that the old lady living on 'Mr Booth's old farm' wanted to join the CWA but in the several times she had rung the farm to see if she could arrange for one of their members to call by and pick her up and bring her into a meeting, as they had heard that she didn't drive, she had always been told that the old lady was having a nap or wasn't well or couldn't come to the phone and could they take a message. She had left messages but no one had got back to her.

"Have you got a member out on one of those farms who could actually call in?"

"Well, there's Ethel Harvey, she's out that way and she usually comes."

"I'm not happy about Faye … well, I don't s'pose she's a Reithmuller seeing she's the wife's aunt … and I think a few people calling by would be the best thing possible. If Mrs Harvey would just call by and see if she can bring her in to town—and if they fob her off with some excuse—let me know."

It might all be perfectly above board. The old aunt might be going a bit odd in the top storey. She might genuinely have a chronic health problem. Alzheimer's perhaps. She might genuinely be paranoid about people, including her relatives, and a real problem to the family who cared for her. They might be embarrassed by some of the things she came out with. They might even deserve praise for caring for an elderly relative with a fear of going into care …

But he'd been in the job long enough to get a 'nose' for something which didn't sound quite right. The Reithmullers were playing a deep game of their own. But was it potentially criminal? Mrs Applegarth said briskly, "I'll get on to Ethel."

Then he rang Winville and asked Stephanie to put him through to John Brophy. He didn't want the school to suffer any fall-out but he wanted to make sure that the video and the video circle Coleman belonged to both got investigated. "How do I go about it?" he said bluntly.

John Brophy waffled round the subject, saying 'are you *sure?*' several times before his more definite, "Have you got the video?"

"Yep. And names and addresses for three men."

"It's a specialist area," Brophy finally said.

"I know. That's why I'm ringing you. D'you need to see the video before we act?"

This threw their superintendent into another bout of waffle. But he finally said, "Maybe that would be best. I can get Daniel to sit in. And I'll check—"

"It might be an idea to run off a copy too, for your records. I don't trust some of the bods not to 'lose' evidence like this. And I'll fax you through the other names on the list. I just wonder if they might also be schoolteachers. That might be how they meet up sometimes, at seminars and inter-school gatherings, that sort o' thing."

John Brophy didn't rush to endorse this way of thinking. Though if the other men were careful and didn't bring the material on to their school premises then they would only be in trouble if the videos themselves were suss … and Dennis found it hard to believe that any Censorship Board would have passed this material for sale in Australia. 'But what do I know,' he thought as he hung up and fed his page of names and addresses through their fax machine, after marking it 'Attn. Supt. Brophy', 'those bods in Canberra or wherever probably think this is nothing, all in a day's work, it's probably me that's the old fossil' … except that he couldn't bring himself to believe that anyone should be watching that sort of gratuitous violence against an unarmed woman as 'entertainment' …

Then he rang home and said to Fiona, "'fraid I need to go to Winville after work. D'you need anything."

"I've just had a ring from Tamika Boyle. She's sorry but she's not well and can I arrange for someone else to bring Megan. I wish she'd rung me earlier. I said I'd take Megan—"

"Well, what say I take Megan? I'm fairly flexible. I can stay on and get some dinner there after I've seen Brophy and bring her home. Is she staying with the Brownes tonight?"

"Yes. Would you? That *would* be a help. I'll ring the school to leave a message for her—or would you like her to come round to the station?"

"Tell her to be at the station by four-thirty at the latest."

Megan McPhee went to ballet lessons in Winville once a week. Constable Hussein, when he was based in Buckton and seeing Ali Deane in Winville, had taken Megan regularly. Since he'd moved to Winville, one of the high school teachers who came out from Winville, had taken Megan there on her way home and a Bucktonite who worked in Winville had brought Megan back here after her lesson. It wasn't ideal but the best they could do for the moment. Megan lived with her grandparents on their farm but stayed her ballet night in town, usually with the Browne family but occasionally with the Walsh family. Megan was not completely comfortable in Dennis's presence but she managed with slowly growing aplomb.

It was Dennis though who found himself feeling faintly awkward with Megan. It wasn't possible to watch Coleman's unpleasant stuff and then wonder how Megan and all the other girls there were treated by their principal; more than that he felt a tremendous simmering anger that anyone would even think of producing and distributing that kind of stuff in a world that contained lovely young teenagers like Megan …

He asked her several general questions about ballet and how she was getting along at school but avoided anything more specific about teachers or other students; he asked her how her grandparents were. He asked her if she was planning to enter anything in the Dairy Festival …

John Brophy, for once, hadn't been idle. He had got on to police in both the towns Derek Coleman had given them for members of his 'circle'; "both principals of small country high schools," Brophy said gloomily, "so let's hope you're making a mountain out of a molehill." Brophy did suspect that Dennis Walsh sometimes blew things out of proportion but the Proctor case had reminded him that small things, like a fight outside a pub, could turn into something much larger down the track …

And John Brophy and Daniel Wang, after watching the video right through, and inspecting the label closely, agreed with Dennis that someone had almost certainly imported a master copy from the United States and run off copies. "Coleman has more videos at home. But I don't know whether they're all like this and suss—or whether they're milder stuff that he doesn't mind visitors seeing. Do we need a warrant to check?"

"It looks like it," Dennis said wearily. "He might let us in to check but I doubt it. And it'll be quite a job checking everything—if he's got dozens."

"Okay, I'll fix it tomorrow," John Brophy said to the surprise of both the other men, "and come out. Can we get Coleman to resign quietly—and these other bods?"

"If it stacks up—I think he'll be glad to go." Dennis wasn't certain about this but he thought Coleman was in his fifties. He could probably call it early retirement.

As they left Brophy's office Daniel said to Dennis, "I've got some more stuff on the Whitelaw case. I'll bring you up to date now if you want."

Dennis didn't jump at the offer. "I think—tomorrow'd do. I'm just going to go round to get a bite and then I'll pick Megan up from her class. But there was one thing—I might've got the wrong end of the stick—but didn't Rabey say Diefenhalter had gone from Japana?"

"So far as I remember. Why?"

"Well, he's obviously back there. Ali mentioned him. So did Rabey mean he was just off sick or on leave?"

"I certainly read it that Diefenhalter had left their employ."

"Then I think you should be treating that as suspicious."

"I've got Hove and Whitelaw in my sights. I don't think I know anything about Diefenhalter. I'm sure I've never set eyes on him."

"Okay, bring me up to speed tomorrow. And add Edde Dee into the mix. He's on his own in the office across the line there. Maybe they got him to call Oliver over on some excuse … "

"Maybe."

When Dennis drove round to pick Megan up for the long drive home he found her teacher, Simone Pratt, had come out to see off her students. She came over to the police car and said, "Have you come for Megan—or do we have a different kind of problem?"

"Just Megan. You could see me as maybe her courtesy uncle or something."

The elegant Ms Pratt smiled at that. Would Megan want the Ogre of Buckton as a courtesy uncle? But she did not doubt that Dennis and Fiona wanted the best for Megan and Fiona had booked Elise in for the beginners' class next year …

On the way home Megan said rather diffidently, "What's a courtesy uncle?"

"People used to have 'em. Usually it was a friend of your mum or dad—so they got called uncle or auntie even though they weren't related to you. I always thought it was a nice idea."

"So did you have any courtesy aunts and uncles?" Megan felt quite daring to ask such a personal question.

"I did. A couple of my Dad's mates from the war … and a friend my Mum'd had from her schooldays always used to send me a Christmas present."

Megan considered this and then said rather wistfully, "I'd like to have a courtesy aunt and uncle … would you mind very much?"

"I'd be honoured," Dennis said to Megan's surprise. "Fiona too."

"And then I could have Ellie and Robbie as my courtesy cousins, couldn't I?" The idea seemed to please her. Dennis found himself thinking that that was what Brett needed. A few courtesy aunts and uncles …

*

DSS Wang kept his word and rang about ten the following morning. Dennis had dealt with several permits and sent Brent out on a call to the Co-op; someone had defaced their front window. "And when you finish there go along to the post office and give this note to Mrs Bilton." He didn't want Judy Bilton innocently talking out of turn and drawing attention to the High School. With luck it could be dealt with fairly discreetly. Not that discretion was the first virtue to come to mind when anyone was discussing Dennis Walsh …

And if John Brophy did get things organised and send someone out to Buckton in the next few days would they find that Derek Coleman's shelves had magically reinvented themselves and now contained copies of 'The Sound of Music' or 'Casino Royale'? Quite likely. But it only required the one video to bring the principal down …

"Got a minute, Dennis," Daniel said briskly. Dennis said the station had gone quiet.

"Okay, well, we think we've found the real Whitgreave. A couple came out on a visit from England to stay with relatives in Bulawayo … or near … and while they were there it looks like their baby turned up rather prematurely. They put a notice in the local paper but because they were planning to go back to England soon they registered the baby's birth through … I'm not sure if it would've been the High Commission or maybe some Colonial department … this is probably while the place was still a colony … but the baby apparently died and they cut their visit short and took the body home to bury it in the family plot. We've got the date of both the birth and the death there, but the death too was registered, it seems, in England. The birth date matches with the passport that Seb Whitelaw showed us."

"You got this through—"

Before Dennis could say 'Oliver's father' or 'Mr Homan-Mortlake' Daniel intervened to say, "Yep, the usual channel. So it looks like someone, maybe masquerading as a family member or maybe genuinely related, applied for that birth certificate and got themselves a new identity. I've asked the AFP for help. I don't have the resources to follow this all up. But Whitelaw says he never lived outside of Africa before he came here. So unless he's lying through his teeth—"

"Fair chance he is."

"Well, I think there's someone else in there too. Maybe I'm reading more into it than belongs there—but we did another interview with Whitelaw and we put that business about the suss birth certificate on to him and he just said it was a long time family tradition to call their first boys Sebastian Paul … and there were any number of Sebastian Pauls floating around … but I also asked him where he lost an eye and just how. He gave me some bland story about being on a camping trip with a mate and I asked for the mate's name. It wasn't what he said but just that feeling—he hasn't forgiven that mate."

Dennis said, "Could it be more than not forgiven? Maybe that mate's rueing the day he got careless? Maybe that mate's not around to rue the day?"

"Well, he said his name was Brian Smith, that he was English, that he assumed he'd gone back to Britain and that he hasn't got a clue where he is now. I didn't believe a word of it."

"Could the mate have been the one who got a passport in the name of Whitgreave?"

"That's what I'm wondering. And something happened to him and Whitelaw said to himself, a second passport might come in handy, and more so if they looked reasonably similar. He doesn't wear his glasses in the passport photo for Whitgreave, I wonder if he does in his Whitelaw passport?"

"So we don't know where that passport is?"

"We know one was issued to a man in South Africa—but he's signed a stat. dec. here to swear he's Whitgreave and he doesn't know why we keep claiming he's Whitelaw. And getting official information out of Zimbabwe is worse than pulling teeth out of a … whatever … "

"Okay, so that's that side of things. What about Prime Tech? Anything there?"

"It's based in London. I've asked to get a list of both the directors and the employees, past and present. It's listed in the Companies' office in London so I should have that soon. It's a bit of luck, I was afraid it would be a private business—"

"I thought you said it had a web-site?"

"It did. Currently down, sorry about the inconvenience and all that, but it didn't list the directors. And it had Whitelaw quoted as saying it was a life of adventure and excitement for the fit young man with initiative, that sort of guff. I wonder why they got Whitelaw to endorse it, but it suggests that he was close to the top dogs—and there's another thing. Prime Tech does quite a lot of other things, providing mercenaries is only a small part of it. They provide security for international shipments, bodyguards for VIPs, computer services—"

"But they can't fix their own? Bit hard to believe."

"I think that's diplomatic. They're probably deciding, if Whitelaw's been on to them, to leave a few things off their re-vamped web-site. I just wish I'd managed to download the whole site when I found it." Dennis, too, sometimes had those kinds of futile wishes.

"There's another thing I was wondering about," Dennis said, "though it might be a furphy. When Whitelaw put in for a new passport in—wherever it was—and gave an address, it might've been a hotel or maybe a relative—but maybe he was using the Prime Tech office there."

"Maybe." Daniel didn't rush the idea, not least because there was absolutely no guarantee that the Zimbabwean embassy or high commission in South Africa would give out any information. "You think they'll tell us that Whitgreave is dead or retired and this has to be Whitelaw here?"

"God knows. So what about Diefenhalter, anything there?"

"It's suss. He was issued with a brand new passport only three weeks ago. Looks like he took time out from Japana to take a little trip down south."

"And the high commission won't give you details?"

"We got lucky, Dennis, or I think we did. His passport is British. They told us they had issued a new one because he'd visited Israel on the old one. They'll sometimes leave out Israeli visas if you ask them—so you won't have problems if you're doing business in one of the Arab countries. But Diefenhalter said he hadn't known at the time that the Neurand Trust would want him to look into selling beef into the Middle East."

"Since when? They made a big thing about selling to Japan. But I've never heard a word about the Middle East."

"What you tell the High Commission in Canberra and what you do up here may be two different things. But I suppose Japana, like any business, would widen its sales if it could."

"Yeah, but don't they have to make the poor bloody animal face Mecca while they cut its throat or something? And they don't use the bolt gun first?"

"I think you're thinking of sheep, Dennis."

There was a brief silence, then Dennis said, "I heard only the other day that they've been taking a few sheep. Something to do with the poor season … but maybe Diefenhalter's … he's not Jewish, is he?"

"No. He says he's the same thing as that Kramer guy you had in Buckton."

"Dutch Reformed?"

"That sounds like it. And South Africa is a big market for Israeli arms."

This throwaway line wasn't a road Dennis particularly wanted to go down. "Okay, so Diefenhalter said what—about Oliver, I mean?"

"Nothing. He said he'd never set eyes on him."

"Then—see if you can get into Diefenhalter's office and have a good look around."

"Looking for what?"

"That's a bullshit yarn, for starters, and why would he need a new passport in such a hurry … I think friend Eddie knows more about Oliver Hone than he's letting on. Get Sam out to the pub in

Dinawadding with a photo of Eddie quick as you can. Des Peck's probably still feeling guilty. He might be more willing to help right now. See if Oliver was ever in there with Eddie … and you need to check that other office for any signs that someone was kept there, maybe overnight."

Daniel thought of saying 'that's pie in the sky' but James Hove might well have wanted the death to occur at one remove. Oliver Hone might have been killed there, then transported to the main complex and dumped in a hole ostensibly dug for a bit of rubbish. But if Eddie Diefenhalter was involved then there was a good chance he had a similar background to both Hove and Whitelaw—either army or a mercenary outfit—or both.

Daniel hung up and sat looking into space for a minute or two. He didn't have a good photo of Eddie Diefenhalter, only a faxed passport photo, but it would have to do. Then he turned to Ali Deane and said, "Can you make the time for a quick trip to Dinna? I think we just might be able to catch *someone* still on the wrong side of the fence. They think they can all relax now that Seb has confessed—and Seb thinks we know he didn't do it and he can just go on with life—and getting someone for Oliver's death is just too difficult. And we can make a lot of hot air about checking up on identities but they know it'll all run away into the sand because we just haven't got the resources or the people … " Seb Whitelaw had made no big issue about saying he would not try to leave Japana. He sounded calm and confident. He knew, or he thought he knew, that his confession that he had murdered Oliver Hone would not stand up to close investigation and he would be released anyway. His expression when Wang had told him he was free to return to Japana was of commiseration. He might have said 'poor old Winville, stymied again' if he'd bothered to say anything. Daniel was mildly confident that he could eventually come up with enough evidence to make a charge of murder or at least manslaughter stick but he had no intention of even trying until he had resolved the question of identity. Was the man Sebastian Paul Whitgreave as he claimed? It now seemed almost certain he could not be. Or was he John Sebastian Whitelaw *alias* John Marcus Whitelaw? Daniel Wang believed he was.

Ali Deane made good time on the road to Dinawadding. She didn't expect Des Peck to greet her with a smile and friendly hullo but she had what she soon realised was a bit of luck. Only Judy Peck was in the pub when she went in and Mrs Peck was much more noticing of people's looks and clothes, not to mention their expressions and their accents, than her husband.

Mrs Peck looked carefully at the photo, which Daniel had got blown up, and said, "Of course, that's Eddie. He comes in every now and then. I haven't seen him for a few weeks. But I heard he's back at Japana so I'm sure he'll be in sooner or later."

"Did he say why he was leaving Japana?"

"Well, no, not in so many words. He gave us the impression that Japana is looking for new markets but I don't know exactly what that means—and as the cattle all go to the one small abattoir I'm not sure … something to do with expanding capacity … I think they'd have to get some of the cattle killed somewhere else. Maybe he was looking into making those kinds of arrangements."

"He told us that he went to Canberra, to the British High Commission, to get a new passport."

Mrs Peck looked surprised. "Eddie? I thought he was South African?"

"Did he actually say anything about South Africa?"

"No-o-o, I don't really remember anything—oh yes! I did overhear him talking with someone else one evening. I was collecting up empties. He said something about the folk in Jo'burg … something like that and how they were trying to persuade him to come back and run another … what did he call it? Not a scheme … perhaps it'll come to me. Another route … " She pondered on this. "Isn't Jo'burg what they call a town there?"

"Uh huh. I think it would be Johannesberg."

With her vague idea confirmed Mrs Peck seemed to grow more confident. "He said something about someone being … compromised, I think. But I moved away then and didn't hear what it was all about."

Ali Deane was reluctant to read a lot into this scrap, even if Mrs Peck had remembered it all correctly, but it just might suggest that Eddie Diefenhalter had worked in security, possibly for Prime Tech, before coming to Japana where he, supposedly, decided which cattle were ready to be sent to the abattoir. It might not preclude him having a good knowledge of cattle but she wondered

if there was some way she could put him a little off balance if he genuinely didn't know much about his current work.

"D'you remember who was with him?"

"I might know them if I saw them again. I'm not sure I ever heard their names. A few of the guys, when they ordered their drinks, would say 'I'm so-and-so' but others never bothered. Now and then Des would introduce himself and sort of wait for them to say something. But it didn't always work. Some of them are pretty surly blighters, in my opinion, but I try to be friendly."

"And—did you ever see him in here with Oliver Hone? That would be quite a while ago now." It meant showing her hand but Mrs Peck knew they were still trying to find out what had happened to Oliver and didn't find the question odd. "Oh, I would think so. Eddie is one of the more friendly ones. He'd go and sit down with this one and that one. I'm sure I saw him with Olly at least once. I even saw him with a couple of local folk, just passing the time, I guess."

"Would you feel confident enough of that connection to actually make a statement, Mrs Peck?"

The publican's wife thought this over. "You're not saying Eddie—surely not? At least he gives you the time of the day. And he seemed to be quite friendly with Olly, having a bit of a laugh, but maybe I'm thinking of someone else he was with … but I am *pretty* sure it was Olly."

"Don't say anything to anybody but have a bit more of a think about it and give me a ring if anything else comes back to you."

Was Eddie Diefenhalter's friendliness towards Oliver Hone a point in his favour—or deeply suspicious? Ali mulled over the possibilities as she drove on over the disused railway line and into the parking area in front of the small office with a caravan beside it. There were perhaps fifty Brahman steers in several long row yards. Unlike in the main complex where the yards were usually conventionally rectangular they had gone here for a slightly different set up. The long rows were back to back with lanes on both sides. She wondered if Eddie Diefenhalter had urged them to use a different design for greater efficiency. They had put in loading ramps and races here too but as she looked around she thought the gains in efficiency were probably minimal. She could also see a flock of perhaps two hundred wethers in the open paddocks beyond. Were they here to be fattened or merely held for a few days? She was curious.

Mr Diefenhalter sounded quite genial as she came over to the office. "And how can I help you, madam?"

"The sheep. Is it true you're hoping to expand into the Middle East?"

"Maybe. Early days yet."

"And Oliver Hone came over here sometimes to work with you?"

"No, not that I remember. There aren't enough stock here yet to warrant getting any of the main … stockmen to come across. I've been managing with a bit of casual help from two local men."

"But you knew him?"

"No, I can't honestly say I did. Why?"

"Everybody at Japana is under suspicion until we get someone for his murder. Are you quite sure you never met up with him? Never had a drink? Never saw him round at the main complex?"

"I'd doubt it. Unless I met him and didn't know who he was. I don't bother much with names. You meet a guy one week, next week he's gone."

"True. So you wouldn't mind letting me have a look around this office and in your caravan then?"

"Sorry, lady, no can do." He still sounded genial. "This is all private property—"

"So you *do* have something to hide?"

"Of course not. But I've got work waiting and I can't let you be wandering round on your own. It's not safe, for starters, and you'd need to get permission from head office, I'd say."

"Okay." He didn't seem worried but then he didn't really know what she was looking for; she acknowledged that she didn't really know herself. "So you worked with cattle before you came here, Mr Diefenhalter?"

There was a very slight pause. “I did. I don’t claim any expertise but I know enough to know when a beast is ready to go to slaughter.”

“So why did you choose this job over one where you could use your expertise, whatever sort of expertise you’ve got?”

“I knew a couple of the blokes that were planning to come here.”

“From?”

“From Zimbabwe. Mugabe’s wrecking the country so I thought it was time to get out, so this seemed like as good a chance as any.”

“But you had done what kind of work before you came here?”

“This and that. I was a mail guard on a train, a miner, I was in the army briefly, I helped my brother set up a tourism venture over the border in Botswana, I drove a lorry for a while. You name it, I can probably turn my hand to it.”

“But no cattle?”

“I stayed with a cousin sometimes, he had a farm. He didn’t say no to me giving him a hand.”

“And you’re sure you never met Olly Hone? Not even to talk about life back there?”

“Sometimes, lady, talking about life back there is the last thing I want to do.”

She waited. But he just shook his head and said nothing came to mind. She went out and called Daniel to say “Nothing doing. Only with permission. He said he never met Olly. Mrs Peck says she’s pretty sure she saw them in the pub together.”

Case No. 3: Old Habits

Mrs Harvey sounded quite apologetic when she called in at the station a few days later. She came into town once a week to go to things, to shop, to pay bills, to see her daughter and granddaughter. “I did call in on the Reithmullers, Sergeant Walsh, to say I’d be happy to take their old aunt to a CWA meeting—or if she was Anglican I could bring her to a Guild meeting with me. But they said she wasn’t well at the moment, that the winter had pulled her down a lot, that she was an asthmatic and the dust bothered her. They were quite nice about it but I didn’t get to see the old lady. I will call by again but it won’t be for a week or two, I’m afraid.”

“That’s okay. I’m just a bit worried that she never seems to get to see anybody there, doesn’t make any friends, and they seem to regard her as a nuisance.”

“I’m going to the seaside with Beth and Paula, Bill and I, so we won’t be back till the twenty-third.”

Dennis left it at that. Life might not be a bundle of laughs for the old lady but she was probably getting three square meals a day and a warm bed and a few other little comforts. And the daughter and son-in-law had effectively been put on notice. But he happened to mention the old lady to Fiona, it was hardly a confidential situation, and Mrs Applegarth and Mrs Harvey had probably mentioned it to a variety of people, starting with all the women at the last CWA meeting. Later he was profoundly glad he had told her …

But at the time she merely said, “I wonder if she’s a country person? It seems odd that she would want to be on a farm, unless she felt happiest in that environment. Somewhere like Chester Court would give her much more company and most of the women there are still quite involved in things. It isn’t like being in a nursing home, just people keeping a good eye out for you.”

“I’ve never set eyes on this Faye … but I wonder if she’s paying them to keep her? They might not want to lose a paying boarder even if she is pretty tedious.”

“And you don’t know what her name is?”

“Yeah, Mrs Harvey says it’s Faye Kendall. And she apparently belongs on Mrs Reithmuller’s side of the family. But we don’t know if this Faye was ever married.”

Fiona was busy over the next few days but she saw Naomi Duggan at the next Reading Group, now minus Muriel Bennett and with Maria Preston from the Council standing in again as librarian, and asked her if she knew where the Reithmullers had come from before they bought the

farm here. Naomi pondered a minute before saying, “near Toowoomba, I think.” She hesitated then said, “Why?”

“They’ve got this old aunt living with them, it seems, and several of the women have tried to invite her to CWA meetings and things, but the family always says she’s busy or sick or something. I don’t know that there’s anything wrong … it just doesn’t seem very exciting for her … or maybe the family doesn’t believe in bringing her to a doctor if she isn’t well. I don’t know but perhaps they don’t believe in conventional medicine.”

Naomi thought this over and then said, “It’s odd you should say that because I think the family is a bit … I’m not sure how to describe them … not obviously New Age … but … not very conventional. I wonder if the old aunt shares their beliefs?”

“I suppose she must. It wouldn’t be very nice to live there all the time, never seeing anyone but your family, if you thought they were all off in Cloud-Cuckoo-Land, would it? And they told Dennis that she had asked to come and live with them—so she must’ve known if they live on tofu and brown rice or something.”

This rather intrigued Naomi. She had found the children quite pleasant and polite and they always came with their homework done. She asked the youngest, just in passing, where the family had lived before coming here. The girl said without much interest, “Near Kingsthorpe.” Naomi chatted a minute or two without suggesting it had any great importance. But later she said to Jon, “Isn’t Kingsthorpe where Freda Donnelly’s mother comes from?”

“I don’t know. Is it? And why is that significant?”

“It probably isn’t. But would you like to go out for a ride one weekend?” Jon was quite a reasonable rider. Naomi had not had anything to do with horses. He said if it was something she would like to do. To their surprise they found Brent Kelly there walking slowly round a small paddock when they arrived. Freda found a horse for Jon to have a canter on but told Naomi all their beginners’ mounts were taken at the moment but if she would like to book in … She brought out an appointment book and suggested weekday evenings would be easier to fit them in as the days got longer. Naomi accepted that and said she would just try a couple of lessons to see if she liked it. Then she went over to the railing fence to watch Jon putting his horse through its paces.

As she stood there an elderly lady came over and joined her. She introduced herself as Freda’s mother, Dora Simpson, and said she was sorry they couldn’t accommodate her—“though it really is wonderful to see the venture taking off. I wondered if people would be willing to come all the way out here. But both Freda and Lyn have very good reputations.”

Naomi responded pleasantly and asked Mrs Simpson where she lived before coming here.

“I had a little place near Kingsthorpe. I wanted Freda to leave everything here and come to me. But it ended up me coming here. I’ve put my place on the market now.”

“I met someone from Kingsthorpe only the other day,” Naomi said disingenuously. “The Reithmuller children are at the High School here. Would you have known them there?”

“I did hear things *about* them,” Mrs Simpson sounded cheerful. “They had a farm there, not much of a farm. I was surprised to hear they’ve got an excellent farm here. But someone said their old aunt helped them buy it.”

“You knew the old aunt?”

“No-o-o, I don’t think I ever did. And she may be as odd as they were said to be.”

“In what way odd?” Naomi didn’t have to pretend to be enjoying this bit of gossip.

“Well, people said, and I don’t know if it’s true, that they believed that people came from space every so often, maybe every couple of thousand years, to get human beings sorted out and on track again … I’ve no idea what that might mean. And they were said to get messages from these aliens by some sort of deep hypnosis. We all found that quite amusing. But I don’t know how the stories started. I think the children went round telling other kids.”

“And stories sort of take off, don’t they, once kids get hold of them?”

“We used to play a game called Chinese Whispers when I was young. You’d start a story by whispering it to someone and they would whisper it to someone else and it would go around the room and when it came back to you—sometimes you would hardly recognise it. I think back to the lovely parties we had, all the parlour games and songs around the piano … and it didn’t cost a

penny, perhaps just some sheets of paper and some pencils … I suppose it shows my age." She laughed rather apologetically.

"This is just an idea … but perhaps early next year when we're not quite so busy in school … would you be interested in coming in and talking to some of my classes about parlour games? Things like charades and Chinese Whispers and Coffee Pot and all those things families did together. I'm sure some of the children would enjoy it. I can't promise for all of them, the little monkeys, but I'm sure there are still students who've heard their parents speak of the games they used to play."

Mrs Simpson didn't rush the offer but she said it might be rather fun. Naomi, pleased with her conversation, didn't push her for a commitment but instead turned to asking about the horses.

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Father Meagher had the best interests at heart of young Brent Kelly; he was less and less sure that taking time out to visit Brent's father, Seamus Kelly, was a good idea. Brent was already upset because a lot of people seemed to be meddling in his private life. John Colgan took the simple view that if your private life required meddling then you probably had a problem. But then John Colgan had never been caught up in the sort of agonies and dilemmas that other people … John Colgan moved through life with a serenity and self-reliance that other people might well envy …

He stopped and re-considered. He didn't know that for certain. Colgan was more likely to chat about parishes he'd been in before Buckton than about his own ups-and-downs, perhaps because he didn't regard his own ideas and problems as particularly mattering. Whenever he saw a conflict he simply took the road the church had mapped out and if that made him unpopular it didn't seem to bother him. But Father Meagher was honest enough to acknowledge that he liked to be liked.

Brent had put a lot of people offside, including at times Dennis and Fiona, but if it bothered him he hadn't so far said so. He *had* said, several weeks ago, that in church was the only time he felt at peace. Meagher wasn't sure this was something he would want to pass on to Brent's father. He even had the fleeting temptation to call by at an hour when Mr Kelly was likely to be out at work. He could then say, with perfect honesty, that he had found no one at home.

But a little twinge of curiosity wandered round in the back of his mind. To listen to Brent was to see his father as more saint than sinner yet some of Brent's accounts suggested a disturbed and violent man. It wasn't Brent who was 'bad' … but Brent was convinced it was … He wasn't sure he could unravel all that …

It was a dull brick box, its windows with the Venetian blinds down, and a blue sedan in the carport. There was a patch of dry lawn and a clemantis vine spilling over the side fence from next door. Meagher parked and went up to the front door. He had purposely come in a cassock and collar, rather than a more casual suit, in the belief that Mr Kelly might have certain old-fashioned expectations. There was a light on in the front hall and he listened to the muffled ding-dong of the bell. But it was several minutes before he heard footsteps.

A man opened the door and stood there rather belligerently; quite a big man, not with the bloatedness of the heavy drinker but more the all over pudginess of someone who habitually ate too much fried food. "Aye, and what is it, Father?"

"I'm Father Meagher, I know your son quite well as I'm based in Buckton, and I just thought I'd take time out to come by and let you know how he is."

"And which son would that be?"

"Brent." The question surprised Father Meagher but he accepted that he had probably caught Brent's dad on the hop.

Mr Kelly held the door open wider. "You'd best come in then and we'll have a cup of tea."

Michael Meagher accepted the invitation. The house surprisingly smelt of cigarette smoke. The rather ascetic habits of the son had not led the priest to expect the indulgences of the father. But he came in and accepted a chair in a small untidy living room. Mr Kelly went away to put the kettle on and Meagher looked around the room. It was certainly decorated in the style of many old-fashioned Catholic homes with a number of pictures of Mary, a crucifix in a corner with the Sacred Heart beneath it, and a votive light under it alongside some plastic roses shoved into a white china vase, several photographs of young boys at their First Communion or serving as altar boys, a couple

of plaster-of-paris statues on a small bookcase. He had seen countless similar living rooms though they were perhaps becoming less common … and they were more often the creations of pious women than of pious men …

Mr Kelly brought in a teapot and two mugs. He went away again and came back with a small carton of milk and a jar of sugar and two teaspoons. "It isn't as nice as me old ma—she would've done you proud—but you caught me on the hop."

"I didn't want to put you to any trouble—"

"So how is the lad doing?" Mr Kelly didn't sound particularly interested.

"So far as his police work goes—I understand he's doing very well—"

"I told him not to."

"Not to what?"

"Join. But he said it's different here. Is it, d'you think?"

"Oh, I would think so. It's always attracted Irish Catholics here, perhaps not so much these days, they're trying to encourage a wider range of young people."

"Women too, I hear."

"Still quite small numbers."

"And his boss, he said there's only the two of them there."

"Dennis Walsh, yes. I think he's more than satisfied with Brent's work."

"That wasn't what I had in mind. What's he like as a fella? He goes to church?"

"Dennis? No. He's a good bloke in other way. Works hard. Cares about the community."

"But he's trying to wean the lad away from the church?"

"No, I don't think so. Occasionally Brent has to work of a Sunday but I think Dennis makes allowances when he can."

"You seem to like this Dennis bloke."

Michael Meagher wasn't sure he understood why this was said in such a belligerent way. Was Mr Kelly afraid that Brent might turn away from his real father to a father figure? "I try to like everybody, it is put on us, you know, love your neighbour, and Buckton is a small place. You never know—"

"You're telling me Brent's got this thing for him?"

Father Meagher blinked. "I don't quite understand. I think they get on reasonably well. But I wouldn't like to say more than that."

"You don't have to pretend. I can see it. I always knew that kid would come to no good. His ma *clung* to him. I had to drag them apart. He's always looking for someone to *cling* to. But there's some things I can't stomach and that's one o' them."

Michael Meagher found Mr Kelly's accent even stronger than Brent's and a little hard to understand at times. He wondered if he had misunderstood … something …

"I suppose it is natural for a mother and son to cling … when children are small … but the relations between Walsh and your son are those of boss and subordinate. I don't think anyone could read anything more into them."

Kelly cracked big bony knuckles while he apparently thought on this. Michael Meagher thought he had probably been an impressively good-looking man thirty years ago. But a constant attitude of suspicion and belligerence had long ago undermined his looks.

"Would you like me to take any messages to your son," Michael Meagher hurried on.

Seamus Kelly didn't appear to be listening to this because he said suddenly, "Would you like me to tell you how I got them apart?"

"Got who?" Michael Meagher had half-expected Brent's father to say something vague about his 'best wishes' …

"His ma. She refused to go to confession, never stopped, but she wouldn't go. I belted the bejesus out of her one time, that was just before she found she was expecting again, kept her in her place for a while. But when I tell me family what's the rules I expect them to be obeyed. I lost out with me big kids, thumbed their noses, but I said it's them that'll wish when the flames lick around their bare ankles. But I made sure Brent never got away. I worked on him right from when he was a wee boyo. And he never gave me a peep back, pity more people don't know how to discipline. But I

made sure he saw what would happen if he cheeked me, right from when he was this high." He held out a hand at about the level of his knees. "I put her over me knees and belted her till the blood was gushing and I made sure he watched every minute of it. Never had a scrap of trouble out of him after that."

"You're—you're talking about your wife?" Father Meagher said faintly.

Kelly looked at him in surprise. "Who did you think I was talking about? Mrs Thatcher?" He seemed to think that was very funny because he gave a sudden bark of laughter.

"I think … I'd best be going."

"You haven't drunk your tea."

Meagher obediently drained his cup and stood up. "I'll tell Brent you're well."

"You tell him to behave himself, that'd be more like it. I had to watch him day and night, make sure he didn't put a toe out of line, sneaky little bleeder that he always was."

Father Meagher walked to the door and said, "It's been good to meet you, Mr Kelly, I wondered from the many things Brent said. He obviously thinks the sun shines out of you."

That, Michael Meagher thought sadly as he got back into his car, was true, or if not true the alternative could never be admitted. But he wished it wasn't. And why was it true? The odd thought came to him: because he always made sure there was no else close to Brent; just the father and those other brothers who had finally disappointed.

And there was something else there. A grim relish in recounting that story. For the first time Michael Meagher considered the possibility that Seamus Kelly was mentally disturbed. It wasn't simply a slavish adherence to the Church and the expectation that his children would do likewise; there was something sick there and the Church, because it so obviously floated along on the top of their lives, had probably meant that people made allowances. Yes, Mr Kelly was severe with his kids but isn't it nice to see them all at Mass, a family, all neat and nice, not kids out being a nuisance, a real old-fashioned caring father with a close relationship with his sons.

Except it wasn't a family. The mother had not been able to cope and had …

Michael Meagher didn't know how to finish that sentence.

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"You did what?" Brent merely sounded puzzled when Father Meagher passed on news of his brief visit. He had discussed it with John Colgan and accepted his advice: he couldn't not tell Brent, not least because there was a good chance the father would tell him.

"Just a brief visit. I was only in Brisbane a few days and I had quite a full schedule. I just said hello and told him I'd left you well."

"What else did he say?"

"He asked about your boss and whether you came regularly to Mass. I reassured him … "

"What else did he say?"

Michael Meagher was tempted to say something bland. But at last he sighed and said, "He told me about beating your mum until she was bleeding and that he made you watch. I'm sorry. I didn't ask him to tell me such private things. He insisted on telling me. He said it was to get the two of you apart. I don't understand that … "

"And it isn't true anyway. He just likes to say things like that because he doesn't like women. He likes to … to make people remember him."

"Does he? Brent, I'm not the right person to say this … but did your father ever suffer … perhaps head trauma, something like that?"

"How would I know?"

"I don't have any expertise in this area but I didn't feel … I wondered if he had ever had a nervous breakdown or something."

"Of course not! It was my useless mum that had the breakdown—"

"I wonder." Michael Meagher felt the problem was beyond him. "Anyway, I won't say any more. It really isn't my business."

It was one thing to say that, another to take it to heart. And Father Colgan had a quite different question. "How did you get along with your grandmother, your father's mother, when you were a little fella?"

Brent stared at him. Then he just shook his head. The old man said, “I’m sorry, I didn’t realise you didn’t know her. Did your father talk about her much?”

“I did know her. But I didn’t see her.”

“She lived some distance away?”

Brent shrugged. “Derry. But she … she was mostly sick. My grandfather sometimes came to see us, not much, just now and then.”

“And you went to see her?”

“No, I never went to see her. She was always having stupid accidents. My dad used to say she was the most accident-prone person he had ever known and he used to laugh.”

Michael Meagher and John Colgan looked at each other and were briefly silent. Then Colgan said, “Are your grandparents still alive, do you know?”

Brent thrust his bottom lip out as though he thought he might jack up; then he said merely, “I guess they’re still there. I haven’t heard anything about them in a long time. Why?”

“Do you have their address?”

“Maybe. But why would you want to know?”

“I’m thinking, just thinking, mind you, of a trip in that direction before I get too old and decrepit. I like to see families keep in touch. The Church is about family. I can’t urge you to love all your relatives, sometimes that takes more courage or more generosity or more loving kindness than most of us can muster up … but it is good to make the occasional effort to keep in touch. A letter. A card. A phone call.”

“I don’t think I want to keep in touch.”

“Perhaps not just now. But it gets easier to forgive as you grow older … ”

“Who do you want me to forgive?”

“You shouldn’t need to ask that question, Brent, I would’ve thought it was pretty obvious.” The old man sat back and raised his eyebrows. Carmen came in then and poured coffee and took away their plates. But Brent brought the conversation home with him and gnawed at it all evening. Because he thought he understood something he had never asked about. Why had his grandmother never come with his grandfather on visits? Why had his granddad laughed about keeping her safe inside? Why all the excuses …

And he thought he understood what Father Colgan saw—or believed he saw. A family where women were beaten up, generation after generation, and the blame for their own hurts and misery belonged squarely on them. They were the problem. Not their menfolk.

“My nanna … ” He tried to bring her to mind. Even when he was a child he’d thought of her as small. A little quiet sad person in the background. He tried to summon up a smile from her, a gift, a farewell … and there was nothing …

He sat for a long time and then he went back into the station and picked up the phone there and tapped in the number for his grandparents. It would be morning there. But would his grandmother be alone and would she answer the phone? He couldn’t picture her running to pick up the phone ahead of his grandfather but he suddenly felt impelled to make the call. They might be away, they might be …

It felt strange ringing across the world on a whim. Even stranger when a soft voice gave the number and said hello. “Is that you, Nanna,” he said in a not-quite-believing way. “It’s Brent here. In Australia.”

“Brent?” She sounded astonished. “Really?”

“Aye, I’m at the police station here in Buckton. I wanted to know if you’re all right there.”

She hesitated. “It is nice of you to ring all that way to ask me … ” She seemed to find an answer difficult.

“And is granddad there?”

“No, not this very minute. He’s gone to the shop. He was right out of smokes.”

“Then—I need to ask you something? Will you promise to tell me the truth?”

She sounded mystified but said, “I wouldn’t want to tell you things that aren’t true, my dearie.” Perhaps she said the endearment without thinking but it touched him.

“Then—will you tell me honestly if my Dad ever hurt my Ma? I won’t tell him I rang you.”

It was a long expensive pause before she seemed to sigh and say, “Well, I guess he did, love, but he was only trying to … trying to … it was the way men were, love, some men.”

“My Dad told the priests here that he put my mother over his knee and hit her till the blood was running and he made me watch. I didn’t want to believe it … but I’ll know it’s true if you tell me it is.”

“I really don’t know, Brent. I wasn’t there. I didn’t often go with your grandpa … ”

“Why was that?”

“Sometimes I was too busy … or had a little accident, some days I don’t feel very well.”

“Because my grandfather hurt you?”

“Oh no! No, nothing like that. Sometimes I bumped into things … or tripped.”

“Nan, I’m in the police now. I see women too afraid to tell the truth when their husbands have hurt them. They always say they bumped into something, they tripped, they knocked themselves.”

Again there was a long silence. Then she said, “You mustn’t go worrying, my dearie. You have your nice new life in that lovely sunny place. Don’t go worrying about things back here.”

“I know you’re not telling me the truth. No one has ever wanted to tell me the truth about what went on in my family,” he sounded aggrieved now, “all those years I thought my ma was dead—and now I know she was in an asylum. All the things I was frightened about … and I … I always thought it was somehow my fault … because I didn’t behave good enough and I cried a lot.”

“Oh no, love, it was never your fault. Seamus, he was a bit fierce with you boys, and old Father Meiklejohn, he was always telling him ‘spare the rod and spoil the child’, he didn’t take any nonsense from children, you mustn’t think it was your fault, love. None of it was your fault.”

“And—d’you know where my mother is now?”

“No … it’s best that I don’t. She was very unhappy. But you know that, don’t you?”

“She was unhappy because of me?”

“Because Seamus didn’t treat her right, I know he didn’t, and I was sad that I couldn’t do anything to change things—”

“How d’you know he didn’t?”

“Because I came to stay a little while when you all had the chicken pox when you were very small … and I said there were things he mustn’t do … and he caught me and he banged my head against the doorpost until I was bleeding. My memory isn’t very good now. But you mustn’t go asking questions. It’s all in the past now, my dearie. You can do better there … ”

“Did granpa hit you on the head, or hit my dad on the head—ever?”

“Well, I think he did. But that’s a long time ago now. It was the way things were. Don’t you go worrying about anything now. And I must go. I hear the front door. It was very sweet of you to ring your old nanna … ” The phone was hung up abruptly.

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Naomi Duggan didn’t race around to see either Dennis or Fiona. She wasn’t even certain that what she’d heard from Mrs Simpson added up to anything important. If the Reithmullers liked to believe that human beings were visited by aliens at intervals it was hardly criminal. Dennis would probably dismiss it all as ‘a load of crap’. But it gave her an excuse to drop by the station one evening after work. She thought Jon was much better looking than Dennis, and certainly quite a bit younger, but she understood something of his fascination for Fiona. There was a kind of electrical energy about him, a zing, a zest for life, a zizz of power. She often felt she would like to touch him just to see if sparks flew off him. She didn’t see it as being in any way unfaithful to Jon but she sometimes toyed with the curious question: what would it be like to go to bed with Dennis Walsh? And yet it didn’t embarrass her whenever they met. It was almost like a purely academic question to take out and toy with now and again …

Dennis gave her a smile. “How’s things?”

She said, “Oh fine. Derek Coleman is keeping a very low profile and there are rumours going round the school that he is going to resign at the end of the year.”

“Best thing he could do. But that isn’t why you came by?”

"No. It was just an odd little conversation that I had with Dora Simpson out at Freda's place. Dora used to live in Kingsthorpe, same as the Reithmullers—" She went on to repeat the conversation. "I don't know if there is anything in it, maybe just rumours that got exaggerated."

Dennis noted down what he saw as the three key points in the recital: that the old aunt possibly had money, that the family entertained the sort of beliefs that would not fit comfortably into those of the congregations in Buckton and might encourage them to meet with people of similar way-out beliefs, and that they knew something about hypnotism. But after Naomi had gone away again he sat thinking. Was it enough to make a visit start to look like a priority?

He finally came down on the side of yes. The Reithmullers had given him, and everyone else, the impression they gave the old aunt room and board out of the kindness of their hearts. But if there was money involved then the kindness might not be much in evidence and some form of coercion … he considered this from various angles and finally picked up the phone and said, "Sweetheart, I'm going to duck into Winville this evening. Is there anything you're needing?"

She thought about it and said, "Nothing urgent. But is it the sort of visit where you could take Elise? She always says she doesn't see enough of you."

"She might find it a bit dull, that's the only thing. I've got to go round and see a couple of people."

"If I send her with a couple of books and her new calculator?"

"So she can make sure I know my multiplication tables? Okay." Fiona just laughed at that and said what time did he want to leave. Dennis, having grown up in an era of rote learning, probably *did* know his multiplication tables better than most schoolchildren now. He could help Elise when she wasn't sure if the machine was right.

He always liked driving with Elise for company. She was never dull. But whether the Reithmullers would actually let him in to meet with their aunt, rather than fob him off with some excuse about ill health, and whether the aunt would actually agree to come to Winville with him—or was in a fit state to come …

Sometimes, though, going in to places in his official capacity made people agree almost before they had time to think about excuses. The Reithmullers might be a bit odd but they were not hardened criminals. Mrs Reithmuller said that of course he could meet with her Aunt Faye "but you won't tire her, will you?" To that he said "I can't stay long, I've got my daughter in the car," and when she came in with him and showed every sign of wanting to be present, he went on, "No need, you've probably got things waiting." Mrs Reithmuller couldn't think of anything to say to this and simply went out again.

Faye Kendall was a surprise. He had been given the image of an old grump, probably a hypochondriac, someone who complained non-stop, and instead she was so slight and fragile he thought he could almost blow her away. Her small face under thin white hair was soft and rather wistful. She wore glasses and he thought her eyes looked rather unfocussed and vague and she almost certainly was suffering from cataracts. She said "I can't think of anything I've done wrong, any form I haven't filled in—"

"It's not that kind of visit. Don't worry. Your nephew says you have a fear of nursing homes and care. I don't blame you, there's some pretty awful places, but I'm on my way into Winville and I could take you to see Chester Court if you'd like. It's a bit different to most places. The women make a lot of the decisions about how it's run. I could drop you back here in about two hours. So it wouldn't tire you out."

When he'd begun speaking she looked lost and rather confused. But as he went on, and she was not immune to the persuasive power of his personality, she began to feel that she would love a little outing. And it would be very safe, surely, with a police sergeant. "If it wouldn't be a trouble," she sounded vague, "I've never been to Winville."

"Well, it's not paradise on earth," he said with a slight grin, "but there's several nice old buildings and the shopping's a bit better than Buckton."

She continued to sit there, apparently trying to process her thoughts, and he wondered if she was suffering from the onset of dementia. He wouldn't want her to wander off and get lost in

Winville. But one short trip should be manageable. “If you’d like to get your handbag and a cardigan maybe. We should be back soon after eight.”

She got up obediently and went out. A few minutes later she came back with a light coat and scarf and a rather shabby brown handbag. He wondered if the story that she had money was all nonsense or she just never had the opportunity to go shopping. She seemed both surprised and puzzled by Elise but quite pleased to be helped into the car. Dennis didn’t try to talk to her, instead waiting till they were nearly into Winville before saying, “I think if we go round to Chester Court first, they probably eat quite early, then I just have to call in to the police station so I wondered if you would mind staying a few minutes with some friends of mine? I was going to leave Elise there with them too. They are doctors so you could take advantage if you’ve been having any little aches and pains.”

She didn’t make any response to that but he thought she didn’t mind to fit in with his plans; possibly she had always been in the habit of fitting in with her family’s plans. But as they reached the outskirts of the town she said rather hesitantly, “Was there a different reason why you wanted me to come with you? Why should you care about me?”

“Several of the CWA ladies have called by to invite you to come into Buckton with them and each time your family have told them you’re too sick to go out. I wanted to be sure that you weren’t being denied medical treatment or anything. I’ve heard your family believes in things like hypnotism … ”

“They hypnotise each other … sometimes … to get voices to speak through them.” She didn’t sound very sure about what they were trying to do. “It is true that some days I don’t feel very well, just sort of heavy-headed and headachey, I don’t know why, I never before had headaches … but I would’ve liked to meet the ladies when they came. I wonder why Melissa didn’t say anything.”

“Well, tell the doctors about your headaches. There might be something simple they can do for you.”

She didn’t rush to agree with this. But she seemed to quite enjoy going in to see Chester Court which was an old house which had been converted into a shared home, originally for war widows, but now it took single women regardless of their status. It provided more opportunities for women who still enjoyed cooking, doing flower arrangements, helping with the laundry, doing a little in the small garden, to feel they weren’t completely helpless. It didn’t provide full-time nursing care although it had protection so that forgetful old ladies wouldn’t wander off and a doctor came in once a week.

“I’m not really afraid of nursing homes,” she assured both Dennis and the home’s director, Mrs Watson, “but I did want to stay independent and my niece offered me a home as long as I needed it.”

Mrs Watson didn’t like to ask if she paid her relatives any board but Dennis had no such scruples. “You pay them board and lodging or they do it out of the kindness of their hearts?”

“I—I helped them buy the farm. I think they felt … that this was … ” The confused look was back on her face.

Mrs Watson gave Faye a brochure and said that if she had any more questions just to give her a ring. Elise accepted a piece of apple cake from Mrs Watson and said, “Is granny going to come here?” Dennis tried to picture his elegant mother-in-law in Winville, in Chester Court, and said, “No, sweetheart, it is Ms Kendall who might like to come to live here eventually. That way she could go to meetings and church and bingo and concerts and shopping and everything.”

As he said this a wistful look came into Ms Kendall’s eyes; almost as though she had forgotten there were such things. But she said nothing as they got back into the car and went round to see Alistair Thompson and his wife Kamala. Kamala was expecting a baby in another month and didn’t offer to rush around and get them anything. But Alistair said, “Well, well, well, the Ogre of Buckton, and how can we help you, Dennis?”

Dennis beckoned him outside as Faye took the chair Kamala rather apologetically offered. “If you’d just mind Elise for me, she’s got a book, she won’t be a nuisance—”

“Och, the house is half full of toys and the baby isn’t even here yet. We’ll need a semi-trailer soon … your wee girlie is welcome to look at them. But who is the old lady?”

"I'm not happy about things in that household. I don't know that it's any kind of physical abuse. But she seems to be virtually a prisoner in her niece's home. And without transport … and I've been told that the young people are always hypnotising each other … and possibly her. If you could very gently persuade her to tell you. She says she's started getting headaches since she's gone to their farm. It might be pollen or something but I just wonder if they're giving her something."

"Well, we'll do our best."

"She seems to have a fear of institutions, hospitals and nursing homes—but it might be a fear that's been put into her mind."

Dennis then went round to the station and caught Daniel who said gloomily, "Yep, we're exhuming the old bugger—and if we don't find anything we'll never hear the end of it. Anyone'd think those two daughters of his hated him. They can't wait to get him dug up and pawed over. I just wish they'd come to us straight away."

"I think—but it's only guessing—that they wanted it this way. It's much more public, much more damaging to the wife, much more that 'no smoke without fire' business. Autopsies get done for all sorts of reasons, and most of them don't get people yapping, but exhuming someone, people'll assume it's something serious."

"You could be right."

"Better make sure Leslie Davis is there when you open the coffin, that way he'll think twice before he whacks down 'heart' next time."

"It's set for Friday morning. And we're trying to get the Hoysted boys to give us permission to turn Eddie Diefenhalter's office and caravan over—but the chance of finding anything at this late date … I'm not going to hold my breath."

"No, but you might be lucky and find a blood stain or something."

"Well, we've got a discrepancy. Mrs Peck says she saw Eddie and Olly together in the pub. Eddie says he doesn't think he ever met Olly. Pity you can't spray a bit of Luminol on discrepancies."

"Very funny. So still nothing on how Olly died?"

"They think but they're not prepared to stake their reputations on it—that Olly maybe choked on his vomit."

"Wouldn't that show up?"

"No. Once you're sure he's dead you just up-end him and most of it flows out. Or you tip some water down his throat and wash it back down. All Eddie had to do was slip something into Olly's drink that'll make him start feeling queasy. Eddie says, come round to my place until you're feeling okay again, or Eddie says he's got something that never fails to settle an upset stomach … and we don't know how many drinks Olly had. If he'd come into Dinna with someone else and didn't have to be worrying about driving … "

"Could be. So they thought we might completely overlook Diefenhalter?"

"Your guess is as good as mine." There were times when Daniel Wang thought Dennis's guesses, when it came to country things, were likely to be better. He knew he would never have built up a case against James Hove for the death of Constable Wrightson simply because he didn't see a couple of escaped steers as suspicious. The death might have happened in the way Hove had tried to tell them it had …

Elise had enjoyed seeing all the things waiting for the new baby. But it was Ms Kendall who seemed the most cheerful. "Dr Thompson would like me to go into hospital to have a Cat-scan," she said to Dennis, "just to make sure I haven't got a small tumour or something. He said that way they can rule out anything serious first. I told him it was always worse after I'd been sitting in on one of their hypnosis sessions, I really don't know why. I just sit on the couch and watch."

Dennis didn't know a lot about hypnosis. But how easy for the 'wrong' person, almost taken unawares, to be put into a trance and given some … he wasn't sure what to call them … subliminal suggestions perhaps. "So when are you coming into Winville?"

"Oh, not for weeks yet."

"And—this money you lent your niece and nephew—did you keep enough to live on?"

"I'm not really sure … but they said I had a home with them until I die. That was very kind of them, wasn't it?"

"D'you have an accountant?"

"I did have, I think … in Toowoomba. But now I don't need one."

"I don't like to ask personal questions—but what sort of money are we talking about?"

"I was going to marry, it was quite late in life, John's first wife had died. And then his plane hit power lines." Tears came into her eyes. "I had been *so* looking forward to it. He was a very nice man. And then they told me he had already changed his will and put me in. So his son and daughter and I each got a third of his estate. It was so thoughtful of him."

"So you lent your third of his estate to your niece and nephew?"

"Yes, I think that's what I did. You know, sergeant, I had always been used to working and caring for myself and I wasn't extravagant and I knew I didn't need very much—and they said this farm was so much better than the one they had before."

"And—they pay you back regularly?"

She seemed to find this hard to answer. "They have my account details. They say they pay money in regularly. I think I get some pension but not the full amount. And I don't need to worry about a thing, they often tell me not worry about a thing."

Dennis didn't ask her any more questions as he could see she was looking increasingly tired. It *might* be all perfectly above board and the Reithmullers simply hadn't stopped to think that their old aunt might occasionally like to come into town, to meet people, to see more than the family. But they had come to him with a cock-and-bull story and he now wondered if they had hoped to psychologically prepare him for Faye's death in the reasonably near future. It wasn't that she had money they might hope to inherit. Or so it seemed. It was more likely that they wanted to be certain they never had to pay that large loan back. As he pulled up alongside the garden gate he said to her, "D'you remember the name of that accountant you used to have?"

She seemed non-plussed for a moment then said she thought it had been Denny & Wherret in Toowoomba. "But they mightn't remember me."

He thought she had probably been a pushover; a gentle rather self-effacing person who felt she hadn't done anything to deserve that unexpected windfall (and he felt she would rather have had the husband than the inheritance) and was easily persuaded that helping the family would be a good way to use it. If they had obviously gone out of their way to make sure she was happy and comfortable with them and had the chance to meet people and go out … he might've been prepared to let it go. After all, she was only in financial need if she wanted to go into somewhere like Chester Court or needed major medical care. It was more the feeling that she was being exploited, perhaps mentally abused …

As Mrs Reithmuller came out to the car, Dennis got out and came around and helped Faye out. He said to her niece, "Well, you've got a lovely aunt there so you take good care of her. And make sure she has regular outings to Winville and Buckton. And I'll call by in a fortnight to take her to the doctor's appointment she's arranged." He hoped it might be enough to keep Ms Kendall safe and … appreciated.

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Daniel Wang and Ali Deane weren't feeling very hopeful when they returned to see Mr Diefenhalter. The caravan had quite likely been scrubbed out if Eddie thought there was anything there. He had probably been over it with a fine tooth comb. And they still had nothing more than Mrs Peck's word and the fact that Diefenhalter had disappeared from Japana when they were coming out regularly to question all the employees. It didn't add up to a lot.

"We'll search and then we'll spray and then we'll search again."

Diefenhalter accepted the fax from Neumann Hoysted giving the police permission to search as something he could live with. But the caravan proved to be both spartan and tidy. "No harm to go through the motions. It might even get the wind up him," Daniel said without conviction; Ali, too, thought Mr Diefenhalter was unlikely to crack. And his brief drink with Olly Hone might have been perfectly innocent …

Daniel went carefully and neatly through the drawers and cupboards without finding anything suspicious. They removed the bedclothes and felt the mattress. Ali got down and crawled under the table and looked in and behind the small frig. At last, Daniel said, “It’s not looking good but worth a try.” He carefully sprayed the floor but no sign of blood showed up. “Well, we’d best go over and check the office.”

“Wait a minute, Daniel.” The cupboards were not set flat but had a gap in under them, probably just a bit of dust there, but she carefully sprayed along the space and waited. It was not visible to the eye but the chemical showed up a tiny dot. “Is it anything?” She sprayed up along the edge of the nearest cupboard door and over the hinges without getting anything more.

Daniel came and crouched down and stared at the tiny spot. “It’s an odd place if he cut himself while he was preparing dinner, unless something splashed while he was hunting round for a Band-Aid.”

“It doesn’t suggest a splash. It might suggest a cut foot but I wonder if someone just caught their skin on a hinge or something and it left a tiny drop when he was on the floor.”

“Maybe we’re clutching at straws. But we’ll need to ask him if he’s cut himself in the last few months.” He packed the kit again and left the caravan. Mr Diefenhalter was in the office talking on the phone and Ali and Daniel began their inspection of the small space. Except for the normal office paraphernalia and some animal health products the office too was bare. In the small space behind the office was a makeshift kitchen, a washing machine, and a small cubicle with a shower and toilet.

“Would you mind to step outside for a few minutes, sir,” Daniel said.

Diefenhalter complied after shooting them an annoyed look.

“We’re wasting our time,” Daniel finally said, “there’s nothing here.”

“No, but it had to be done,” Ali said more loudly than necessary. Daniel looked at her then followed her lead. “Never mind. There’s always some dead-end-roads and at least the big boss’ll have a better idea now where to look.” He went over and glanced at Diefenhalter’s computer. It showed a lot of figures. Ali came over and joined him. “Beef prices, by the look of it.” She brought her voice right down. And then she said, “Or maybe not.”

They went out and said to Mr Diefenhalter that he could have his office back. “But just before we go—did you cut yourself in the caravan recently?”

“Not that I can remember … or not for quite a while. I nicked my finger … but that must be five or six months ago. But that was nothing, just peeling something and not looking what I was doing.’

“Okay, thanks for that. We’ll let you have your space back.”

And to Ali, Daniel said wearily, “There’s something there but I’m blowed if I know how to dig it out.”

“Then let me go digging into his background.”

“Go for it, but don’t get your hopes up. And I guess we’d better just call in at the pub.”

Mrs Peck made two cups of coffee and asked if they’d like something to eat with it. “I’m starving,” Ali said cheerfully. “I’d like some toasted ham sandwiches if it wouldn’t be a bother.”

Mrs Peck went away and came back in five minutes with a generous plate. She obviously assumed Daniel would change his mind and want a couple. And as she put them down she said, “A little thing did come back to me … I don’t really know what it means. But I’m sure Eddie said something to Olly about wanting to read a few some time. Does that make any sense?”

“D’you think he meant Olly’s poems?” Ali said.

“Well, it might be.” Mrs Peck sounded cautious. “I just assumed Ollie had some books Eddie wanted to borrow.”

“Mmmm, and one other thing, d’you remember if Eddie got up and came over and collected their drinks?”

“Well, he might of,” she said after some thought. “I don’t mean Eddie would shout but he liked getting up and moving round and giving people a slap on the back if he knew them at all, that sort o’ thing. Olly just liked to sit quietly.”

So simple to drop something in a glass.

Case No. 4: Far-Flung-Friends

Brent Kelly frequently agonised over his lost relationship with Iris Hitchener. He knew it was all his fault. But that didn't make things easier. He could apologise but he didn't want to remind Iris of past failures. He need not have worried. When he finally lifted the phone and rang her at work to ask her if she'd like to come round to dinner one night she simply said "No."

"Because of last time?" So much for not harking back—

"Because it seems I am the one expected to say no—so it seems simpler to say no up front and be done with it. We aren't the right people for each other. We both need to look for … more compatible people." She had no intention of telling Brent that she hadn't particularly enjoyed sex with him and although that was something which usually improved with time and understanding he was hardly the person to offer that time and understanding and greater closeness, not when it sparked off half-buried stuff … She wasn't a psychologist but she felt certain that it had caused many of his problems since and was probably the reason he was going twice a week to a psychiatrist in Winville. Whether Brent had told Dr Heber about it … but even just the thought that he might made her feel uneasy. Her private life should be off-limits to everyone … and certainly Marcus Heber …

Dennis Walsh avoided asking Brent any personal questions. In an odd way though he felt Brent was tackling his work with a bit more energy and enthusiasm. And he thought Brent seemed more comfortable with him. He was content to leave it at that.

But Patsy Pounder, coming in one afternoon to leave a message for Brent that her son Warren would be happy for Brent to come round to see the model railway working so long as he came before six because Warren turned everything off then and had his tea, told Dennis that Iris had told her when she came round to give Warren his insulin shot that she had finished up with Brent. Dennis merely nodded and said it didn't surprise him.

"I know." Patsy was a kind woman even if she did criticise some of her neighbours quite caustically behind their backs, "It is a big gap in age—and more so when you're young. It doesn't seem to matter so much as you get along a bit. And if you'd like another piece of gossip … Iris went round and had dinner with Nelson L'Estrange last night."

No one had really asked how Nelson felt when Brent suddenly came on the scene. And Nelson himself had maintained a dignified silence. But he thought that if Iris could go round to Brent's flat for dinner why shouldn't he invite her around? It would give him a reason to try out a more ambitious recipe. Iris, to his secret surprise, had accepted his invitation. Previously, he had always picked her up and taken her to something in Winville and had dinner there. He wasn't sure if he had always done it that way just because it had made it a nice outing or because he was reluctant to have another woman come into his dead wife's 'home' and sit in her chair and eat off her plates and cutlery …

But it went very well. He told her he'd used Hannah's recipe books to choose out something fairly ambitious, and they sat down to asparagus soup and a chicken and mushroom casserole, and Iris complimented him on the meal. He had never spoken about Hannah when they went out but it seemed more natural to speak of her here.

Even so it was hard to say, even to someone as quiet and sympathetic as Iris, "I always knew I loved her but I didn't know she was my life until I had to stand helpless and watch her die, just calling the ambulance, but it was too late. She had bi-polar disorder quite seriously but they said it was an aneurysm and there was nothing I could have done, that I wasn't to blame myself. But I did. And I longed to die and go on along the journey with her … whatever kind of journey we take after this life … " It came out in a rather curt rush; as though he felt a need to say it but wanted it quickly over and done with.

"But you went on with life … "

"I wasn't going to. I was going to do something dreadful." He knew some of his neighbours knew, or suspected, what he planned that terrible day. But it was still hard to speak of it.

"And—what stopped you?"

Nelson looked at her with a rather lugubrious expression and said, "Dinny Walsh. He called me all sorts of names and told me not to be a fool. Somehow, after that, I couldn't think of doing anything … and it does get a little easier with time … "

Iris, far from seeing the dead wife as an impediment, was touched by the story. And she thought she would've liked Hannah L'Estrange. "And to have had that kind of love in your life … some people would envy you that."

"I think that is true. But there isn't a lot of comfort in it. We didn't have children because of Hannah's condition … and her medication, though it helped, did give her quite severe side effects."

She nodded. "And, if you don't mind me asking, how did Sergeant Walsh get involved?"

"You may have noticed, my dear, that he has a way of getting involved in everything round this town. I said he couldn't understand how I was feeling and he told me his first wife and baby daughter had been murdered … I don't think I really believed him at the time—or I didn't want to believe him—and then they showed something about it on that dreadful documentary—and he got very angry and resigned. I heard it was George Hickman who talked him into staying on. I don't know if that's true."

"I think, though I certainly don't *know*, that it was a combination of factors. I heard Superintendent Adey in Winville came out to talk to him. And perhaps Fiona … though I think she would not mind all that much if he went and did something else."

As they talked on this it came to Nelson that Dennis had been there in his 'hour of need' and he had gradually got to the point where he could be grateful to Dennis for preventing him doing something very final—but he had not been there for Dennis. It had never even occurred to him to drop a note around to Dennis or call by the station. And if it had, he was honest enough to admit to himself that he would have been reluctant to involve himself in something which seemed very public and very … tacky …

After dinner he asked Iris if she would like to watch a video he had got from a catalogue of educational items. She had heard the rumours going round about Derek Coleman but it was impossible to connect Nelson with anything similar. And the video turned out to be an interesting one on how different medical conditions, often undiagnosed, could effect children's ability to learn; some of them, poor sight, poor hearing, cerebral palsy, vitamin deficiencies, foetal alcohol syndrome, were fairly obvious. But one little boy had his school days made miserable because a very sporty and competitive teacher had picked on him simply because he had flat feet. There were children not comfortable with their sexual orientation but not understanding why they felt uncomfortable in the boys' changing room and toilets—or vice versa—and children with rare inherited conditions which made them age too quickly or suffer deep lassitude or fail to understand certain kinds of spatial problems.

At the end she said, "That was certainly an eye-opener." It was Nurse Pym who came regularly to the schools. But Iris now said, "I'm not terribly good with children *en masse* but if you would like me to come round instead of Jenny Pym I would certainly be willing to talk about diet and things … "

"Would you? Nurse Pym is very sensible and reliable, I'm sure, but you would know more."

"I've started helping Mavis and Julie with Brownies but I've got a lot to learn about girls and all their activities. The only thing I feel confident about is teaching First Aid."

He laughed at that and she thought it transformed him. She had also gradually come to the conclusion that he was a shy man and he did avoid his staff and his students probably more than he should. His perfect school existed as a concept in his mind and he had difficulties in transferring ideas and images into action; particularly if the transfer involved persuading a group of teachers or parents or pupils. Even so, she had heard him praised for creating a safe environment with sensible discipline and an openness to innovation and better ways of doing things.

He had never done anything more than give her a brief peck on the cheek. But now as she said goodnight she made it seem natural that the kiss would land on her lips instead. It didn't stop Nelson being rather tedious and pedantic at times but she thought she saw more clearly the man behind the public façade. And it would be nice to have someone say she was their life. Some of the

hurt Brent had caused with his rigid ideas about women seemed to dissipate as she went back in her mind over the things Nelson had said. He had probably lived a very quiet retiring life because of Hannah but she didn't think he'd ever regretted that.

But was his set idea of the life he wanted to lead the kind of life she wanted to lead? She found that a difficult question. At least, she thought wryly, as she drove in and parked beyond the Nurses' Home, religion wasn't an issue. Nelson went every Sunday to Holy Communion at the Anglican church but he had never asked her to come or said anything about his father expecting …

Nelson washed up their plates with cheerful vigour. There had been absolutely no sign of her yearning for Brent Kelly and he was sure she had found the video genuinely interesting and the meal tasty. He began to plan what he would cook next time. And it was only when he climbed into striped pyjamas and eased himself into bed that he allowed himself to dwell on her beauty and that farewell kiss …

*

Daniel Wang had not enjoyed anything to do with the exhumation of Donald Morgan. If it was inconclusive he would still have Donald's two daughters breathing down his neck. If it proved conclusively that he had been poisoned they would never give over crowing that they knew better than the police. If it showed absolutely no sign of poison and instead that he *had* had a coronary it would bolster Leslie Davis in his careless slapdash writing of death certificates—and Mrs Fisher and Mrs Davidson would probably continue to pester them, sure that they just hadn't looked hard enough for poison.

And there was no joy with Diefenhalter. Ali had been unable to turn up, so far, any connection to either the military or Prime Tech Solutions. "I need a magic wand," he said gloomily to Ali and Greg. "Oh sure, don't we all," Greg said good-humouredly, "but it isn't actually all that long. Don't despair yet. But there was one thing I thought after I went home yesterday. Did you check Friend Eddie's vehicle?"

"He has the use of a Japana vehicle—"

"So how did he get to Canberra?"

"Went there by bus and hired a car when he got there."

"Have we checked his driver's licence?"

"No. Why should we?"

Put like that, Greg floundered a bit. "I just wondered. It mightn't jibe with his other documents."

Ali nodded and made a note. Did he have an Australian licence or an international one? "Maybe we need to put Eddie and Seb into a room to wait together and see what they call each other. Pity we can't add Hove into the mix too." But she sometimes felt the real problem was Daniel. She quite liked him and he was approachable and usually willing to listen. But he was rarely cheerful or full of positive energy. She wasn't sure if it was their caseload or something to do with Bella Seymour—or maybe just Winville getting him down. As they came up to the State election someone was going round putting up some League of Rights type of material, sticking stuff on power poles and post boxes and fences and trees, to say things like 'Asians Go Home'. She had been reared with racism always there, like background radiation, but Daniel had lived a relatively comfortable privileged life in Hong Kong. Country Queensland had brought home to him some quite sharp shocks and she didn't think he handled it very well.

But he got an e-mail which seemed to interest him just before he logged off and went home in the late evening. The list of directors for Prime Tech Solutions. One of them was down as Admiral Henry Neumann (ret'd). He didn't know what to do with the information but he felt certain it was significant.

*

Dennis, rooting in the jam-packed filing cabinet, came upon one file (while he was looking for the Morton file) he knew he hadn't created. He pulled it out and looked at it. It was labeled 'MORGAN DEATH' in Brent's writing. He opened it up and found the printed-out material from the blog site and a note to say that Adele Morgan had attended the movies in Winville, date and

time given, and was seen with a man afterwards. “Well, well … ” He settled in to read Donald Morgan’s material and wondered why anyone would want to tell the world about his bowels …

And then he came back and read it again. There was something a little odd about it. He sat back and tried to think this through. Then he turned to his own computer and tried to pull up the site. But either he was doing something wrong or the site had been removed. He sat back a minute and closed his eyes. Why the site didn’t seem … was ‘genuine’ the word he wanted? … might come to him. But as he sat there Brent came in.

He saw the open file and wondered if it was good news or bad. Dennis might bawl him out for going on with the case in that way—or he might see it as initiative. Instead his boss said, “This is a very odd site. Have you seen anyone adding to it since you got this stuff?”

“No, it’s disappeared.” He wasn’t sure whether to say ‘Odd? Why odd?’ so he merely came over and sat down.

“What made you go looking for it?”

“I heard he was interested in computers. I thought he might be interested in going on-line, maybe getting into chat rooms … ”

“Could be. But if he created this site then I’m a monkey’s uncle.”

“Why?” It came out sounding a bit bald.

“Well, think on it. This is a man in his late sixties. He’s been respected as a principal. He lives a quiet private life. And here he is giving intimate details of his bowel movements—and telling the whole wide world how he has to involve his wife every time he goes to the toilet. Does that sound in character?”

“Some people—well, they don’t think of cyberspace as being actual people reading your stuff. It just sort of goes out into nowhere. Maybe he was sort of expressing his frustrations.”

“Maybe. But I don’t think he’d buy a computer one week and create a blog site the next. It takes a while for us old fogies to get the hang of it all—and even if his wife was also interested she probably wouldn’t be very knowledgeable if he got stuck. I think we’re looking at someone with more knowledge of the Internet.”

“But—would—” for a minute he struggled to recall the daughters’ names, “Wendy and Bette have any knowledge? And why would they want to—to embarrass their dad?”

“Same as they didn’t turn a hair about digging him up, maybe. And Bette’s got two teenage sons. She would only need a bit of advice from them on how to get started. I’m not saying that’s what happened. Just that I think the whole thing’s a bit suss. And who’s this bod you’re suggesting Mrs Morgan was seeing?”

“I didn’t recognise him. He was tall, at least six foot, and had wavy brown hair going grey and brown eyes and he was wearing a suit with a broad blue tie.”

“As a guess, I’d say it sounds like Dale Kennedy. He is, or he was Donald Morgan’s lawyer.”

“And—is he married?”

“No. According to people like Narelle Sullivan he’s having a torrid affair with his partner Adrienne Marchmont. I can’t see him being interested in Adele Morgan.”

“So she might want to know how she can get her husband’s will changed?”

“She might but she hasn’t said so.”

“The contents of the house are going to be auctioned on Saturday week.”

“That soon? Well, it’s not our business. And maybe those two dragons will leave her alone once they’ve wrung every penny they can out of their father’s estate.”

“You’re not going to the auction?”

“No. Last thing I need is more junk.” The Walsh home was hardly bursting with ‘junk’ but Dennis was not addicted to clutter. “Go, if it interests you … ” But Brent only shook his head. He couldn’t imagine himself wanting the sort of old-fashioned stuff which was likely to come up for sale. “And to keep you out of mischief,” Dennis went on, “you can do the pub tonight. Breathalyse the lot. I’ve been going easy on the sods.”

Brent never felt very confident about going out with the breathalyser but accepted that it had to be done. To his surprise, when he turned up at the Coolibah, it was to find the place almost

deserted. Only Maryann Dillon overflowed a stool at the bar and old John Benson and Myrtle Grundy sat almost unnoticed in one of the booths.

"Where is everyone?" Brent went over to the bar to ask George Johnson.

"They've all gone to John Goodrick's sixtieth. Good riddance, is what I say, though I s'pose I shouldn't. Tonight will hardly pay us to stay open. But if you're feeling peckish go along there to the kitchen. Maurie's got stacks of food going begging, well, not stacks, but a decent-sized casserole. We thought that people who avoid the pub when folk like the Goodricks and the Scullys are in might make a point of turning up tonight for a pleasant evening—but it hasn't worked out that way." Brent was quite hungry. He had been thinking of a hamburger at the café but now he went along to the kitchen to say to Maurice Smith, "Mr Johnson says you've got food going to waste."

"Sure, come on in." Maurie seemed quite cheerful about the lack of customers. "Have a seat and I'll get you a plate. And I'll take George some." A few minutes later Maurie helped himself out a plate and came over to sit down opposite Brent Kelly. Maurice wasn't a great talker but after a while he said, "That was nearly me name, y'know. Me mum called me Michael Kelly-Atkins."

"So why d'you call yourself Maurice Smith?"

"Took me away as a kid, give me another name, never told me about me mum, if it wasn't for Dennis … Fiona an' her mum, they were the ones … they found out … an' they found me … an' me mum was dead by then. That's what those bastards did to me … an' all because I was a blackfella, see, well, not real black … an' I don't know what made the bastards think they could get away with it … " Then, having said that in a rush, Maurie fell back into a long silence before breaking it to say, "But they did get away with it. I got nothing. An' they smarmed round in their big cars with big long titles an' letters after their names. Still makes me want to spit. But that's life an' you can't do much to change it."

"No, I guess not." Brent felt the whole thing was a fraught area but at last he said tentatively, "So where did you grow up?"

"Stuck me in a boys' home, the bastards, right from when I was a baby. Never knew where I come from, who me mob was, knew nothing about Nora, that's me mum—" Maurie was getting emotional and he turned instead to his beer and drank deeply. "An' the people that ran that place, by heck, they were a mob of buzzards, should've been up on this child abuse stuff they talk about now. But back then—you wasn't allowed to make a peep, didn't matter how much they belted you, or said you was going to live on bread an' water, or had to work all day Saturday, all day Sunday … just a bit of church to tell you to shut up an' behave yourself."

"I'm sorry, Mr Smith, I didn't know life had been like that for you."

"Call me Maurie, most folk do. I thought of sayin' to everyone to call me Mr Kelly-Atkins—but I kept forgettin', that's what me head's like these days, worse than a bloody sieve."

"Still you could take back your real name—even if people here went on calling you Maurie."

Maurie finished his plateful and considered it. Maybe he should get firm. If he gave in too easily then there would never be another Kelly-Atkins … "Maybe I should. Well, you can start, young fella, an' maybe I'll get used to it in a while—an' then I'll go the whole hog."

Dennis, unaware that his constable was changing Maurie's life rather than putting drunks on notice, told Fiona, after the children were in bed, about the exhumation and about the blog site Brent had found. But at the end of his recital she said, "Somehow, the two daughters don't really sound like bloggers. Is there someone else in the equation?"

"Not really. It's hard to picture the wife writing that stuff. These bods are ultra-respectable—on the surface, anyway."

"I imagine—if someone set the site up for them so they just put the actual material on it. That could be an alternative. But why would they want to hurt or embarrass their father?"

"That's the question I ask myself. So either it's aimed at the stepmother—but made to look like her husband telling very intimate stuff about himself, which she mightn't like but she would probably just ignore—or they do hate him but they've slipped the hatred on to her because she's more accessible, because it might seem more acceptable. God knows how their minds work … "

"That is possible. They possibly avoided him while he was well. Maybe he was over-strict or something. And then when he got this nerve thing and they knew he might end up paralysed they

wanted to be seen in public as caring—but the last thing they want is to actually have him in Winville, even living with one of them … I wonder if he set up his site and gradually did less and less with it—and someone has hi-jacked it."

"But it would still need to be someone who knows him surely?"

"He was a school principal. A lot of families and past students must remember him … "

"Mmmm, it's hard to know what to think. So when you were wandering round the garden what did you think?"

"It's a lovely garden, like a little oasis in the dry paddocks, and she's got it set up very sensibly, compost heaps, mulch, all that sort of thing. Someone like Kaylee Williams would probably love to go and see it."

"Well, she'd better hurry," he said more drily. "I've just heard all the house contents go up for auction, Saturday week, so she'll probably move. And you didn't notice anything suspicious?"

"Like little bottles thrown out, marked Poison, that sort of thing? No, sweetheart. All very tidy. Her chooks look well-looked-after. There were some little birds round the chooks' water bowl, I'm not sure what they were, finches perhaps, and she still uses an old hand-mower … " she took her mind back to that brief exploration, "and she probably took a lot of cut flowers indoors, maybe because her husband more rarely came out into the garden. We saw bundles and bundles of dead bulbs on the compost. Daffodils and lily-of-the-valley, that sort of thing, ferns, I didn't realise bulbs would grow so well out here—but then that garden has a kind of, almost a kind of magic about it."

*

Leslie Davis was present at the post mortem on Donald Morgan. He didn't enjoy the exercise. But then he couldn't point to any obvious sign of heart disease. "It's possible," Dr Wittenbach said neutrally. "I wouldn't like to say that's a heart in perfect condition. But it isn't an obvious cause of death. I know his daughters say he was poisoned but it's going to be one heck of a job to absolutely eliminate—"

"They don't want you to eliminate," Dr Davis said rather testily; he didn't enjoy being shown up, "they want you to immediately pinpoint something which will send their stepmother to prison for life."

"Did she treat them very badly?" Fred Wittenbach was merely curious.

"I doubt it. They were grown up and married when he remarried. But they probably didn't want to share his little nest egg."

"Well, we can send some bits and pieces of the poor old fellow off to be checked. But how is anyone going to say it wasn't a side effect of his disease, his medication—unless we find him chock-full of arsenic."

"Let's hope we do," Davis said drily.

*

The auction of the house's contents drew quite a crowd, some out of curiosity given the publicity drummed up by news of the exhumation, some in the hope that there might be some genuinely good furniture in the house. And a few local people, those who had never been invited inside by the Morgans, came along purely for the opportunity to see exactly what had been in the house. Adele Morgan, hating the whole business, absented herself from Norwilla. Wendy Fisher and Bette Davidson were both very much in evidence, praising the house's contents, drawing attention to the fine quality of some of the furniture, inserting libelous innuendos about their stepmother, mentioning their 'poor dear ' father now and again.

Although most of the house's contents had been brought out on to the front verandah or a couple of front rooms for inspection and sale, items gradually found their way down on to the lawn, other things were dumped carelessly on garden beds; someone borrowed a wheelbarrow from around the back to shift some small items and ended up taking it away with them; several people dug out some of the rarer plants when no one was looking …

By the time Mrs Landy from the shop handed over to her son-in-law and came over to see the last of the auction the place had ceased to look like a house in a lovely garden and was beginning to look like a house slated for the wrecker. For a couple of minutes she simply stood and stared. Wendy Fisher casually walked through a bed of annuals without bothering to try and avoid the

plants. Mrs Landy went over to her and said loudly and with unexpected anger, “Mrs Fisher! Why are you destroying our garden?”

Mrs Fisher only smiled and went on across to the sundial where she carelessly put down the heavy old iron she was carrying and which had been used as a doorstop. Mrs Landy hesitated then followed her. “I said,” she had to raise her voice as the auctioneer had started on the next item, “I *said*—why are you destroying our garden?”

Wendy Fisher turned to her and said, “What d’you mean—your garden? It belongs to that little snake in the grass—”

“The house and garden now belong to the Norwilla Progress Association and we will sue you and the auctioneers for the damage you have done to our property!” Mrs Landy, long accustomed to being nice to people she didn’t particularly like, got some faint satisfaction from the way Wendy Fisher looked first startled, then annoyed.

“That’s nonsense!”

“There has been a Public Notice in the paper for the last two weeks. You have had ample notice—so don’t come the innocent with me.”

Mrs Landy then turned and went over to the gate where two people were about to exit carrying plants and cuttings. “And you folk,” she said sharply, “will replant those and hand over those cuttings you have just taken without permission.”

“Rubbish! We were told we could help ourselves to anything we wanted!”

“Who told you that?” Mrs Landy was surprised to find that her boiling anger was a pleasurable sensation.

One of the women turned and pointed at Wendy Fisher. “Mrs Fisher,” Mrs Landy almost bit the words off, “does not own this garden and has absolutely no right to tell you any such thing. This garden belongs to the Norwilla Progress Association.”

“That’s nonsense and you know it! This house and garden belong to that woman that poisoned her husband. Why should we care about what happens to her? She’ll be going to prison anyway.”

“This garden—” Mrs Landy felt the words stood out in huge capitals, “belongs to the Norwilla Progress Association. There has been a notice in the paper for the last couple of weeks.”

“I don’t believe you.” But the other woman who had stood silent listening to this altercation took a paper out of her bag and opened it up to the Public Notices column and ran her finger down it. She suddenly looked embarrassed and awkward. “So it does.”

Wendy Fisher and a couple of other people came over to join the little group. “Show me,” she said rather peremptorily.

For a moment she seemed bereft of words then she said angrily, “A criminal doesn’t have any rights over property anyway. She can’t do anything with the house and garden because she will lose them as soon as the case goes to court.”

“So you are hoping to inherit the house and the garden as well as all the contents, is that it?” Barbara Landy said rather snidely.

“We will, naturally, because we are the only heirs—apart from that woman—and she doesn’t deserve a thing.”

“Then it seems you have two choices. Either the Progress Association will sue you for wilful damage and encouraging other people to commit wilful damage—or you will inherit a garden which has just gone down by thousands of dollars in value.” Mrs Landy had no idea just how much the damage might be assessed at but she was proud of her clear thinking. Her son worked at the Watch House in Winville and she had acquired a smattering of legal knowledge from him as he told her something of the people and the cases he got to know about …

The two women didn’t wait to hear the end of the argument. They turned back and did their best to restore the plants to their original homes. It might not be enough to get them to root themselves in again. Then they gathered up the couple of items they had bought and hurried away, the pleasure of the auction quite spoilt for them.

Mrs Landy stood by the gate all the rest of the afternoon and did her best to keep people away from the garden beds. She couldn’t do much to save the lawn but she thought she would give it a good watering after everyone had left. It might be enough …

The auctioneer and his assistant stopped beside her after they had packed up all their equipment. “What were you trying to do?”

“The property, the house and the garden, now belong to the Norwilla Progress Association. I was trying to save it from all the damage people were doing—at Mrs Fisher’s behest, mind you.” She still felt that her blood simmered and bubbled.

“Are you sure?”

She repeated her information. Mr Jones, of Nichols, Jones & Co, said rather apologetically, “I’m sorry I didn’t realise. I could’ve made a public announcement at the beginning, urging people to be careful—”

“But you didn’t mind how careless people were—when you thought it belonged to Mrs Morgan?”

“I can’t say I gave the matter any particular thought.”

“Well, if I am ever wanting to have an auction sale—I don’t think I’ll be coming to your firm,” she said decisively.

It was late when Adele Morgan drove up the lane and found Mrs Landy still sitting on the front verandah. She came in slowly, looking round at the damage, the broken roses, the footprints through garden beds, the chipped sundial, the crushed shrubs, but she didn’t mention them.

“It’s very kind of you to stay, Barb, I should’ve come back sooner but I didn’t think I could face Wendy and Bette if they were still here.”

“I know. I gave a few people a piece of my mind for the damage they were doing—and several of them said Wendy had encouraged them to help themselves to plants. But don’t worry about it now. What you need to do is clear your name. You need to go to the police and make a statement—and with luck—”

“But they have exhumed Donald. Goodness knows what they will find.”

“Then it’s all the more urgent to go to the police. Would you like me to come with you?”

“No, but thank you. I thought … it was my garden that kept me here … and it was, partly, but it was having good friends here that made the difference—”

“Then—why not stay?”

“You *know* I will end up in jail so it … it doesn’t matter what plans I make … ” She hesitated then went on, “You know I hated Donald, didn’t you, and I wanted to leave. But they found ways to keep me here. And yet he wanted to die. He hated being at the mercy of women all the time, me, his daughters, nurses … he didn’t like women and it was a form of torment to be so completely dependent on me … he used to say, nearly every day, that he wished he could die and end it all.”

“I know. He told everybody that.”

“Then—would you—if it comes to court—be willing to say that?”

“I don’t see why not. He didn’t make any secret of it.”

*

A couple of days later Sergeant Walsh had a visit from a woman he took a moment to place. She looked tired and rather dowdy. Her dishwater blonde hair was starting to go grey. Her whole manner was listless and uncaring. Her stockings had wrinkled round her ankles.

Then he said in surprise, “Mrs Morgan! You’ve come to make a statement?”

“Whatever you want.”

“Okay, come on through. I’ve got some questions and you can write out a statement. It may not be enough, depending on the post mortem, but they might leave you alone for a while.”

She sat down and consented to the interview being taped. But Dennis didn’t rush into it. Kaylee Williams and her daughter Susannah had come round on Sunday afternoon to look at their back garden and see how their plantings were developing and they had brought several punnets of leaf vegetables to add to the main vegetable garden.

Dennis had asked Kaylee if she had ever seen Adele Morgan’s garden; Kaylee said no, she hadn’t but she’d heard it was lovely. “And you’ve heard people saying she poisoned her husband?”

“Oh, everyone’s heard that,” Kaylee said carelessly. “But don’t ask me if it’s true because I wouldn’t have a clue.”

"The only odd thing we could find around the house and garden were a lot of bulbs thrown out, daffodils and lily-of-the-valley, Fiona thought, but no oleander, nothing obvious. No thornapple round the fences." His mind tended to think of such plants first, given the Savage case and the ways the boys there had, or reportedly had, ground up oleander leaves and twigs …

"But—" Kaylee stared at him, "daffodils and lily-of-the-valley are poisonous."

It was his turn to look slightly gob-smacked. "Are you sure?"

"Of course, people don't always realise, because they're such sweet and pretty things. People have the image of poisonous things looking and smelling nasty, like thornapple."

"So what parts are poisonous?"

"All of it, I think. Leaves, flowers, sap, berries, bulbs … I'd have to check but I wouldn't risk any of it. But most of the oleander poisonings have been through people using the wood. I heard of a case where someone made some wooden skewers from a branch and stuck them through a rolled roast. It killed the whole family. You obviously wouldn't use bulbs that way. But leaves have occasionally got into salads and children occasionally pick the berries … "

It had been a very interesting and informative conversation but now he wondered whether to ask Adele Morgan straight out or wait for the p.m.'s results.

"Why are your stepdaughters so certain you poisoned your husband? Did you say something?"

"I told them he often said he wished he was dead, not just incapacitated. He did say that. But I don't know how seriously he meant it. He was always critical of women and he hated being dependent on women."

"And why were Wendy and Bette—well, maybe why are—so antagonistic to you? Did you upset them?"

"That wouldn't be difficult. You know I was a teacher when I married Donald? And when I first came to Norwilla I got a job teaching in Winville so I had the extra traveling and I would get home after Donald and he would just sit there and wait for me to get home and cook the dinner and I used to say, couldn't he start to get things ready, and Bette and Wendy got in on the act, and they went on and on at me, that I was neglecting my husband and getting up to things in Winville—and in the end I was no match for them and I gave in and resigned … and that was why I started the garden. But you must understand that they hated him too. They were terrified that, if they couldn't keep him in Norwilla, he would retire to Winville."

"They were worried about his health issues?"

"Partly. But they just thought he was a dirty old man."

"In what way?" He had the horrible thought that Donald Morgan might have been on Derek Coleman's mailing list.

"You never met him, did you?"

"No."

"He would stand in front of the class and clean his ears with his fingers and stand there looking at the gunk he got out. He would pick his nose in public or blow his nose and then inspect his handkerchief. He lost a better school because a teacher complained to the Education Department that he was standing in front of a class scratching his balls—I suppose they thought Norwilla didn't deserve any better—and of course he was angry and said it was all the fault of having women teachers … I sometimes think that in that long period when he was a widower other things may have happened that I don't know about. He was very bitter about women teachers. But I didn't know that when I married him. He just seemed a pleasant lonely man who was doing his best for a small country school. And I had never married and my mum was always telling me I was too picky. And I guess I thought, oh, what the heck, maybe this will work out. I wasn't in love and I'm sure he wasn't, but he seemed a decent man … or maybe I just met him in one of those desperate moments where you see yourself getting old and dreary and a bit lonely."

Dennis nodded. He understood that both men and women could succumb for such a reason. He had been incredibly lucky—but he also thought that he and Fiona had known each other much better than Donald and Adele had. It made a difference.

"Had you met the stepdaughters before you married?"

"No, I met them on my wedding day—and they did try to be nice about everything on the day. But it only took them about a week to start criticising me. It wasn't major at first, just twitting me about looking for work in Winville, but I think it got worse because I wasn't good at standing up to them. It was almost like a game. 'Let's see if we can make Adele cry?' Something like that."

"And did they—make you cry, I mean?"

"Sometimes."

"And in the end you got fed up with everything and poisoned your husband with a concoction of daffodils and lily-of-the-valley and other stuff from your garden?"

As he spoke the colour drained out of her face. At last she said in little more than a whisper, "How did you know?"

"You'd better tell me exactly what you were doing."

"I—I just thought—I thought if he was unwell he could go to hospital and I would at least have a break from him. And if I packed up then and left they would need to keep him there—or arrange for him to go into Parrvilla or somewhere. And if he died—" She spread her hands vaguely.

"You didn't mind if he died?"

"Not terribly. And he wanted to die anyway."

"So what did you do?"

"I read somewhere that the water that bulbs have been in, their vase water, can become quite toxic after a while, so I kept cutting bulbs as they came on to flower and putting them into a bucket and I would use the water when I made his glass of Sal Vital."

"And how long had this been going on for?"

"About a month."

"And he was getting worse?"

"I—I'm not sure. He vomited several times. His doctor put him on some different tablets and told him to take something for his indigestion as well."

"But you did intend to hurt or kill him?"

There was a long silence and then she said tiredly, "I suppose I did."

"Then I am going to have to charge you with attempted murder."

She agreed with that and listened without much apparent interest as he formally charged her and filled in a charge sheet. But then he brought out the material Brent had downloaded and showed the pages to her with a description of where they'd been found. "So who wrote up this material?"

She looked through it for several minutes then said quietly, "Donald did. He got his grandson to help him set up the site. He enjoyed putting very personal things up about his bowels and his phlegm and how he was getting worse and how he had nothing left in his life but watching his bodily processes break down. It wasn't completely true but he wanted to create a … a kind of record."

"Why?"

"So no one would accuse him of committing suicide—when he decided he'd had enough. He had a life policy and the money would go to his two grandsons—and it wouldn't be valid if he committed suicide—he just wanted to gradually look like someone whose whole body was gradually giving up on him. He put those bits about me in there because he knew it embarrassed me and because he thought other men would pity him for being so dependent on a selfish uncaring wife."

"I don't see why they would. They'd probably think why doesn't the silly old fool go into hospital and get some decent care. So why was he so anti-hospital?"

"I don't know that he really was but he would be a nobody in hospital, just the nurses bustling in and bustling out, no personal attention, and I think he gradually got … I don't know how to describe it, under his daughters' spell … and he enjoyed making me run around like a slave all the time. He was almost like those awful old women you read about in books where they treat their companion like a slave. Nothing ever suits them. They're always complaining of neglect. But I can't really explain Donald to you because I spent most of my time thinking about what I was going to do when I was free. It was like a lovely dream."

"So why did you give the house and garden to the Progress Association?" He had heard a rather garbled story on the grapevine but he made a point of checking each week's Public Notices in the *Winville Courier* in case there was anything police might need to know about. The notice told part of the story. Gossip claimed that Mrs Morgan's garden had been 'wrecked' …

"I always planned to do that. It would be very hard to sell the house. There aren't any jobs. And I thought if I was going to end up giving the house away I would much rather give it to the people there."

"I wouldn't of thought the Progress Association was set up to accept a gift like that?"

"Oh, they are. They got really desperate a few years ago, what with things closing and people leaving, around about the time the school closed. And they thought they would buy that block of land near the corner there and create a sort of community centre, a basketball court, video games, music, things to bring families in from the farms. And to buy land they had to be an incorporated body. But then people just sort of ran out of oomph when it came to fundraising and everything. So I thought I would give the house and garden and they could sell or rent or use it however they wanted, have little fêtes and garden afternoons … I spoke about it to Adrienne Marchmont about a year ago and Donald agreed. It would make him look good. He'd already made a will to give all the furniture and stuff to his daughters and we arranged to deed the house and garden to the Progress Association once neither of us needed the property any more, so it isn't dependent on me or the will. Donald and I signed to pass it to the Association."

"Won't that leave you short of money?"

"No. I taught for twenty-five years. I lived very quietly. I invested quite a lot. I'll have my super. I'll manage. And do you know something?" Walsh shook his head but took a punt: "You'd rather be free of all this, even if it leaves you poor?"

"That's *exactly* it. And I've thought of going back to teaching for another five years or so. I always enjoyed my work. I was sorry to give it up."

"So where're you staying at the moment?"

"In my house. Mrs Landy lent me a camp bed and I've bought a camp stove and a small frig and I go over to her house for some things."

"Surely they didn't sell off the bath and the toilet?"

"They wanted to—but apparently a toilet and a hot water system and a shower qualify as fittings not contents. They took the stove and the bath."

He was tempted to say something sympathetic but suppressed it. "Okay, well, don't leave the district."

*

Who spread the rumour Dennis Walsh couldn't guess; possibly Mrs Morgan told Mrs Landy and it went from there. He had a gloating phone call from Wendy Fisher a few days later. "So she's admitted it at last? I knew she would."

"She'll come up in court next week. You can go along and gloat. Now, I'm a busy man." He hung up on her. Whether the Progress Association would take her and her sister to court for not respecting their property … it might be a tricky one because a court might see the mess as merely collateral damage. An auction invariably involved people. Though Wendy and Bette could have chosen to have the contents professionally removed and sold in Winville …

And the court system might prefer to wait on the p.m. before they listed the case for its first hearing. After all, however bitterly Donald Morgan's wife might have felt about him, it didn't automatically mean that anything she had done was responsible. Half the folk around Buckton probably went around wishing they could do away with a relative or a neighbour.

But Greg Sullivan rang him to say the case was going to go ahead anyway; not wait the weeks for tox reports from Brisbane. "Scaredy cat," Dennis said with a grin. "So you want to get the dragon sisters off your back as quick as you can?"

"It isn't just me," Greg said almost apologetically. "They've told everyone we're not doing our job and they know, they absolutely *know*, not a doubt about it, that their stepmother is an evil murdering witch."

"Are you going to call them as witnesses?"

"For what?"

"Yeah, I guess it is a case of 'for what?' but I'd like to see them put on oath and told to put up or shut up."

"What you'd like to see, mate, and what's going to happen are two different things. But I'll tell you another thing. We're getting stacks of e-mails from all these weird women's groups telling us that wives only kill their husbands after years of abuse and provocation. I don't know where they heard about it. Pals of Mrs Morgan, maybe. We're just ignoring them." As Mrs Morgan had taught in and around Brisbane for many years she might well know how to get on to various women's groups. But would she rather have a quiet trial and a quick verdict? Or become a *cause célèbre?*

"Sometimes it's true, I guess, but I don't think this is that kind of abuse."

"No. But it's going to be a circus if these weird dames start turning up at court—"

"Never mind. The dragon sisters'll soon set 'em right."

Greg Sullivan gave that a cheerful snort.

Case No. 5: Wilderness

DSS Wang was still muddling along with the Hone case and having unpleasant dreams about Japana where he went round and round in the yards getting increasingly filthy, hot, and weary—and always seeming to come out in the same place with Eddie Diefenhalter's mocking grin looking down on him from the top of the caravan steps.

But Greg Sullivan's vague suggestion about checking driving licences had, in fact, sparked off a related thought. Documents. He had got bogged down in passports and lists of arrivals. He had tried to get employment details from Japana with varying degrees of help. But now he sat at his desk making lists. Everyone generated paperwork. Registration papers for cars, insurance, workers' comp, Medicare cards, library cards, video shop cards, bank details, bills, electoral rolls … phone bills …

If Eddie Diefenhalter had taken Olly Hone back to his caravan with him and something had happened, even an accident, what would he do next? He could call an ambulance. He could go out and dig a hole. But he might not want to. If anyone found the body then he would be squarely in the firing line. And it would be much harder there, not like the dust churned to a fine powder in the main yards. And Eddie had people from Dinawadding coming in to that office. He didn't have the protection of locked gates and an intercom.

So Eddie would ring someone. Hove maybe. Or Whitelaw. Someone he knew for sure would get rid of the body. And Eddie's phone accounts just might turn up a clue. No doubt he made regular calls to the main office during their normal hours. But a call after eight o'clock at night just might suggest …

He had a phone in his office. He also had a mobile. Daniel jotted a note to get records of both.

Ali Deane took the job on next morning and found that Eddie, while he was apparently in Canberra, had got himself a new phone—because the back records had no connection to anything to do with Japana. It took them a while to track down his previous phone number and records.

It might not be suspicious. But Wang said simply "Everything to do with Japana is suspicious."

"You're starting to sound like Dennis," Greg said drily.

"Maybe. I'm beginning to wonder if there is one honest man in the whole caboodle. I'll guarantee that the only one who didn't get told Olly had been rubbed out was that Christian Harper and I'm even starting to have suspicions of him."

Ali worked her way through the lists of numbers rung, the times, the dates. Where she knew the identity of the numbers she jotted it in. Daniel and Greg both went out and left her to it and she continued her cross-referencing patiently and carefully. Eddie Diefenhalter was in regular contact with the main office, with Gresham's Transport, with the abattoir in Caboolture, with Gavin Whittaker in Winville. Those all made sense. It was the various unidentified mobiles which took her

more time and several more calls for information. But by lunch time she had every one he had called identified, or their phone. And she had tied the suspicious calls down to a couple of days.

"Come and see what you think," she said as Daniel came back to the office about two.

"So he rang 8.35 to Sebastian Whitelaw—and that's the only late call he ever made to him—and he rang Hove or Rabey in the main office at 7.10 next morning which is earlier than he usually called?"

"I can't find another call before 7.50."

"And the dates for Olly's death would fit the time frame they've given us. But we haven't got a date for Mrs Peck's sighting of the two men together. See if you can at least tie her down to a month, maybe some event, or someone else in the pub."

Mrs Peck waffled all over the place saying she wasn't good on dates. But at last she said she thought it was around Christmas, possibly a couple of weeks before. "We don't usually play carols but I have an idea there were some on that night, just on the radio. I'll ask my husband—"

"And if you've got some regulars … someone just might've noticed."

She said she would check but didn't hold out any hopes. But Ali said cheerfully to Daniel, "It may not matter. That would fit pretty well. And we can ask what radio station they usually have their radio tuned to. What d'you want done next?"

"I'd like to bring the two of them in, Diefenhalter and Whitelaw, and interview them separately, then together."

"And—d'you think James Hove had anything to do with it?"

"Oh, I'd guarantee it. But maybe he just said, you made this mess, you get out of it, and tell me when everything is under control again. And then Craig got on to him about that animal cruelty video and wanted to see where the animal had been butchered and talk to everyone who showed up in the video and all the rest of it, and Hove decided they had to take Wrightson out as well."

"So Whitelaw also has a phone—and it is in the name of Sebastian Paul Whitgreave—so how are you going to deal with that?"

"I'll get the AFP to apply for the birth and death certificate of the real Sebastian. They know it's getting harder and harder to get any info out of the Zimbabwe end but they may not have realised that we know about the English end of things—"

"And—do we know if Diefenhalter is who he says he is?"

Daniel pressed a couple of fingers against his lips for several minutes then said, "No, he was off our radar when we checked those passports. I'll ask the AFP to check for his birth certificate but also see if there was ever a death certificate. It says he was born in Portsmouth. But there's a chance that whoever got the Whitgreave passport might've got a whole swag of them. I don't think it would've been that hard. Just be thankful they went for unusual names."

*

While Fiona Greehan, Karen Dalton, and Anne Grumm were counting and collating all the entries for the classes in their butter wrapper competition, and Anne was saying in mingled triumph and dismay, "I make it five thousand and twenty-nine entries all up," Mrs Morgan and Adrienne Marchmont were stepping into court for their first hearing.

DSS Wang secretly hoped the case would be knocked back, that the lists would be too full, that it couldn't be dealt with before the full post mortem result became available. But John Brophy said without much interest, "If she's confessed, then she's confessed. Get that side of things out of your hair. It's up to the court to throw the case out if they don't think it stacks up."

In theory this was true but Daniel didn't like to see cases thrown out on that basis. It made it look like Police weren't doing their job. And if a case got thrown out then it was much harder to get it taken seriously further down the line if and when more evidence came to light. But, as Greg said, it would give them a breathing space from the Morgan daughters. They *were* intimidating women. And he couldn't help thinking that if he could think that—then how much worse it must've been for Adele Morgan …

What no one seemed to have allowed for were the dozen or so women who turned up and stood on the pavement outside the small court house in Winville, several with placards to say

‘Protect Adele Morgan’ and ‘Wives Can Be Driven to Desperation’ and such things, and all with a fairly belligerent attitude to police.

Adele came in the back way with her lawyer so she didn’t see the women but Sergeant Walsh ran straight into them. He had thought he wouldn’t be needed seeing that Adele had confessed. It should be a simple straightforward thing. The tape would be tendered in evidence. She would admit that that was her and that it was a true record of the interview. And then the magistrate would very likely adjourn the case to get some more evidence on Donald Morgan’s death or ask that it be held over until the inquest—because there would now almost certainly be an inquest. But Ms Marchmont had subpoened him. She obviously believed he had coerced Mrs Morgan into admitting what her stepdaughters wanted her to say.

One of the women stepped firmly in front of him and said “How dare you treat Adele like this! You should be ashamed of yourself!” A number of the women also backed this up with varying statements about police coercion and not understanding how an innocent woman had been abused and coerced until she was desperate to escape—

“Women don’t kill husbands unless they’re desperate!” one shrill voice over-rode the others. “She should never have to stand up in court to try and clear her name—”

His first impulse was simply to tell them to get out of his way. But these words made him wonder. Were these women really here to support Adele? Or had Wendy and Bette found them and coaxed them to come along and implant the idea that Adele *had* killed her husband? It was more subtle than he would’ve expected from them. They might be strong confident women but he didn’t credit them with either brains or this kind of sneaky cleverness.

Their clamour around him might be loud but it couldn’t over-ride his big voice. “Why are you so sure she killed her husband? You’d best leave those placards and come into court and listen to the case—”

“They wouldn’t let us in—”

He wasn’t surprised. Another woman said angrily, “We want everyone to know what it is like for women in abusive relationships! We can catch more people out here!”

He wondered if they had called the media. Not that the *Winville Courier* and one local radio station would give them much coverage. Maybe they hoped everyone in Winville would make a point in coming past the Court House while they stood outside chanting ‘Free Adele!’

“Suit yourselves. But don’t jump to conclusions.” He thrust his big burly figure past the couple of women blocking his way and went inside. The normal security guard at the street level door, Terry O’Neill, said, “Hi, Dennis, looked a bit hairy there for a while.”

“Yeah, but let ’em in if they agree to leave their placards with you and not to disrupt the hearing. They’d be better off hearing what she has to say.”

“They’ve already told the guy John Daly sent round ten minutes ago that we wouldn’t let ’em in and justice is a sham here. I don’t reckon they really want to come in.”

Dennis nodded. They might get better coverage apparently shut out of a supposedly ‘public’ hearing. But if Vohland or Kelso simply adjourned the case there wouldn’t be much mileage in their presence anyway. And if they weren’t local they might not want to keep coming back to Winville.

Marian Vohland took the case, though she didn’t look particularly enthusiastic about it; possibly she thought she too might cop a rocket from the women outside. But just as Mrs Morgan came in, so too did five of the women. They had obviously decided to split their forces and get double the value from their presence. They sat down at the back of the court and stared rather fiercely at Mrs Vohland as though she had suddenly joined forces with the enemy.

Dennis personally thought that Adele Morgan was very lucky to get Mrs Vohland who invariably gave the defendant plenty of opportunity to explain their actions and motives. But he felt some sympathy for her. She now had several strident feminists sitting alongside Mrs Fisher and Mrs Davidson. The only person who might be said to be truly understanding and supportive of Adele Morgan was Mrs Landy.

The interview tape got played. He always hated hearing himself on tape; not least because he could always see ways he might’ve improved on the questions.

Mrs Morgan agreed that that was what she'd said but went on rather drearily, "But I know I didn't kill Donald because the doctor said it was his heart combined with creeping paralysis."

Adrienne Marchmont had tendered the death certificate along with a written statement by Dr Leslie Davis to that effect.

This got a very mixed response from the gallery. Mrs Landy simply nodded very slightly. Wendy Fisher opened her mouth as though to yell 'That's not true!' or something similar. Bette Davidson also looked angry. The supposed supporters of Mrs Morgan looked interested rather than annoyed. But it was Mrs Vohland who burst out with an irritable "Then what on earth is this case doing on my docket!"

She directed this at Dennis Walsh. When he didn't immediately respond, not sure if this was a question he had to answer or merely a letting off of steam, she said sarcastically, "Well, Sergeant Walsh? Cat got your tongue?"

He stood up and said merely, "Someone comes to me and confesses to trying to kill her husband—not much I can do but take the matter forward."

She didn't sound mollified as she said, "That's hardly a good enough excuse for rushing the case into court. You might've gone looking for corroborative evidence—like the post mortem report they're working on. Or impounding the bucket that was supposed to have held this contaminated water. Or the glass by Donald Morgan's bedside."

"Sorry. All that stuff got auctioned off before we knew it was relevant. Maybe we should've got the whole property put off-limits as a crime scene but I understand the family were in a hurry to get everything sorted out and sold off."

She gave him a long hard look which gave nothing away. She knew, as well as he did, that Norwilla wasn't on his patch and that if it had been left to Winville nothing would've happened. Donald Morgan would still be firmly in his grave. Mrs Fisher and Mrs Davidson would still be going round town loudly telling everyone who would listen, along with those who couldn't care less, that their stepmother had murdered their father. And Mrs Morgan would have quietly packed up and left the district and the gossip and the rumours behind her.

She sat in silence for several long minutes, apparently considering this, then she merely said briskly, "I will adjourn this case for a month. When it comes back here I want to see clear evidence that Donald Morgan did *not* die from natural causes. People confess, day and night, to everything under the sun. I don't want any more such confessions clogging up court lists without back-up evidence." She turned to her clerk to look for a free date and a minute later had adjourned the case until the last Monday in October.

Adele Morgan walked out quietly with Mrs Landy. Dennis Walsh got up and went out without bothering to look to the back of the court. The unknown women might go away and not come back. Wendy and Bette would undoubtedly continue their campaign to harass everyone even remotely connected to the case … and he would put Mrs Morgan and her confession out of his mind. Or try to.

*

Brent Kelly had been a bit nervous ever since his boss came on that file he'd marked 'MORGAN DEATH', wondering if he might get criticised; it was useful information but the knowledge that that was probably a lawyer he'd seen her with made him feel merely sneaky. He had made a point of going round to Dale Kennedy's office after one of his appointments with Dr Heber and simply parking and waiting for the lawyer to come out. He now felt certain Dennis was right. It didn't explain why Kennedy had been at a movie on his own or why he had seemed very chatty with a woman who wasn't exactly a client, although her husband had been. But maybe he just liked to wind down with a film sometimes and he probably felt he was merely being courteous.

But he felt a lot more cheerful the late afternoon Naomi Burkett came round to see if she could get the paddock key from Dennis. She was doing the pony's feet in slow stages. He was now down in the small paddock with Twinkletoes and the Castleys' house cow, which rejoiced in the time-honoured name of Daisy, and she usually discussed the pony's progress with Dennis as it hadn't taken her long to realise that Fiona, although sympathetic, didn't know much about horses.

She could climb over but as she was always carrying a box of farrier's tools he thought it was better that she had the key to the padlock on the gate.

"I'm sorry, he's gone to Burleigh but he's left his keys here, or the main bunch." Brent took the bunch and began checking their tags. As he looked for the right one he told Naomi about going out to the Donnelly farm to learn to ride. He still missed Iris but he accepted it was over and, if nothing else, Iris had given him the pleasure of getting to see Warren Pounder and his model railway and getting to learn to ride. Naomi was much more slight and slender than her mother and she told him about her offer to take the Walsh pony for a couple of months and work him as soon as his feet were in good nick again and he'd put on some condition.

"I think this is it. But would you like me to come down with you? I was going to close up soon. But I could come now and come back and tidy up." She accepted the offer. Dennis might have more than one key for the paddock or something. They walked along Heussler Street, turned left on to Creek Road, then crossed the creek on the narrow footbridge, and up past the picnic tables to the gate of the paddock. Although the paddock itself was getting very dry there was still a little water in the creek and the trees and scrub made it seem cool and restful.

"How d'you like living here?" he asked as he undid the padlock and let her through.

"I miss the green. You must too. But people have mostly been pretty nice and I'm looking round to buy myself a horse so I can do a bit of show riding if I can find the time. I wonder—if I'm not being too pushy—could I come out and meet those ladies that run the riding school. I've heard people mention them." Her voice was slightly less 'county' than her mother, perhaps the influence of films and TV, perhaps she had lived or worked elsewhere, and he wondered if people ever tried to take the mickey in the way an occasional person put on what they regarded as a pseudo-Irish accent when they talked with him—or possibly talked about him behind his back.

"I go on Sunday afternoons, usually, unless there's an emergency. Would you like to come out this Sunday?" He couldn't imagine her being a realistic partner. But he thought he would enjoy having company. And maybe it would be good for Iris to know that he wasn't eating his heart out.

Dennis, when he got back feeling hot and tired, found a message from Daniel Wang. He wanted to use Buckton station to interview both Diefenhalter and Whitgreave/Whitelaw, separately then together. Would Dennis contact him and suggest a time—

Both Dennis and Fiona had been busy recently but Fiona wanted to make time to go to Brisbane to see her mother and Bryan Adey. He had been Dennis's boss in Winville before retiring to fight an exhausting and ultimately losing battle with lung cancer. He had moved in with Mrs Greehan and for a time he had been very positive, sure he could beat it even if it would leave him rather weak and breathless, but in the last month he had gone downhill steadily and was now hospitalised. Dennis wanted to go with Fiona if he could wangle the time away. Adey had been a very quiet man but Dennis felt he had genuinely tried to improve things in Winville. And they could perhaps find the time to take the children to the beach or something …

"It had better be soon—or are you waiting on more info?"

"Early next week. I'm hoping to have something to put Whitelaw on the spot. Whether we can also rouse up something to put Eddie off-balance … well, I'm still hoping."

"Okay, no problem. I've asked Brophy to give me Sam or someone for a couple of days while I go to Brisbane to see Bryan Adey but that won't be before next Thursday. I've got a couple of things on the go here but Tuesday morning looks okay."

"Then pencil in 10 a.m. and I'll let you know if I have a problem getting them there together."

"Pity you can't put Hove into the mix. What about Rabey?"

Daniel said he hadn't considered him but he undoubtedly knew more than he'd ever let on. "Then, bundle him in," Dennis said grimly. "Something might give."

*

Dr Wittenbach didn't feel very comfortable working with Leslie Davis. He knew beggars couldn't be choosers, not in Winville, but he felt that Davis was a poor doctor, slapdash and careless, and lacking in empathy for anyone, patients, victims, or family members. And as he read through the detailed lists of all the tests which had been done on Donald Morgan's vital organs he felt he might be looking at medical malpractice. The police had passed on Mrs Morgan's claim that

she had given him contaminated water. They had also gone round to Mrs Davidson's home and collected the items she had collected from her father's medicine cabinet by his bed in case there was anything she might be able to use with her family. She said she had not so far touched the bottles of tablets and medicines.

Fred Wittenbach was tempted to call Davis 'Motor Hand' when it came to writing prescriptions. There were preparations here to treat everything under the sun, he told his wife rather caustically, and then some. Dr Davis apparently had not told Donald Morgan to throw away superceded pills and there was a good chance Donald Morgan had combined things which could have reacted. He also let off some steam when he came in to discuss it with DSS Wang. "This medication for constipation is under a cloud. I refuse to prescribe it for anyone—and certainly not for a man whose system was already weak and whose health was already in a parlous state. What's wrong with a teaspoon of castor oil and a plate of All-Bran for breakfast? He's got strong sleeping pills—though I don't know how often he took them, but pretty regularly I'd say. And he's been taking quite large amounts of a strong medication for his cough. He was also on an anti-depressant and a drug to improve his circulation." As he spoke he pointed to the different brand names on the list and Daniel jotted himself some notes.

All the bottles had yielded up only Donald's fingerprints; he apparently coped by leaving the caps and lids only lightly closed. But if his wife had been over-dosing him with anything then it would be extremely hard to prove. She might well have removed stuff weeks before his death so that his fingerprints would thoroughly cover hers and then she could add things into his food.

"You're saying—in effect he was being overdosed with some very strong stuff."

"I won't say *over*dosed. The instructions are within the limits. But there is a good chance that he was sometimes taking more than he should. Given the dates some of the bottles were made up I think he was guzzling them down like Smarties—and not worrying what he took them with."

"So you can't say exactly what killed him?"

"Because he vomited shortly before he died there weren't much in the way of stomach contents to resurrect," Daniel found resurrect an unpleasant description but said nothing, "and things had already started to break down in his system. It will be very hard to be definite. And I don't see how you're going to prove what he took himself and what his wife or his daughters may have given him." Daniel nodded. He had had similar thoughts. It wasn't only Donald and Adele. Bette and Wendy had come out to visit their father the day before he died. They said they had brought new batteries for some of his equipment …

"So how the heck are we going to sheet anything home to anyone—if it definitely wasn't his heart?"

"Oh, you're not." Wittenbach said almost cheerfully. "All, I can say is that it wasn't his heart. And Leslie Davis is going to receive a 'please explain' and not a minute too soon, in my humble opinion. But if you want to know what I think—then I would say he killed himself. I would never give a patient with that degree of paralysis sleeping tablets that strong—or if I did I would make certain he never took more than half a tablet at a time. I can't be certain but it looks like he was taking two or three a night."

"Why would he do that? Did he have trouble sleeping?"

"He told Davis he did. Or so he says. He was probably building up a level of tolerance."

"But he vomited before his wife brought him into the hospital? Surely that would remove the sleeping pills?"

"His wife says he vomited. We've only got her word for it. She got him into his chair and into the van and into the hospital. The van wasn't checked. And the nurses say it was only dry retching, that there was nothing there left to come out, and the bit there was certainly wasn't kept for analysis." The old man sounded caustic.

"So why did Leslie Davis go for heart?"

"It does get harder on your heart as you become paralysed. In effect your body isn't giving your heart any help. The fitter you are the healthier your heart tends to be. The more moribund and inactive the worse it gets—and I understand he was a big eater of sweets. I suppose he thought there weren't many pleasures left in life … "

"But it was still guess work?"

"It was. People do go for heart when they don't want to distress the family. People just say 'oh, heart' as if it makes perfect sense. But I find it hard to believe Leslie Davis didn't want to upset the family."

"But your idea about suicide is also guess work?" Wang thought the old man might take umbrage at this but Dr Wittenbach only gave it a wry smile and said, "Educated guess work. Donald Morgan isn't the first man in that sort of situation to want a quiet end to it all. And doctors *do* feel sympathy and write down heart. We aren't monsters. Why should someone be forced to go on living when they've had enough?"

Daniel Wang didn't attempt an answer to this. And while Dr Wittenbach was making a case for suicide Bette Davidson and Wendy Fisher were poring through their father's papers to find his life insurance policy and read the fine print. Their stepmother was quite right. The policy was not valid in the event of suicide. "The bitch," Wendy said briskly, "but they won't get suicide up, not if I've got anything to say about it."

Winville, in the coming days, buzzed with rumours. Mrs Morgan, people heard on the grapevine, was trying to offload her own responsibility for her husband's death on to him. Donald Morgan found himself, if he was in a state to notice, re-positioned as a devout Christian who was utterly opposed to the taking of life in this manner. Bette expressed it robustly to her gossipy next-door-neighbour, "He always said it was a sign of moral weakness. People of character did not even consider suicide. But that woman is now trying to weasel out of it by suggesting Dad died by his own hand. It just shows what depths she'll sink to. The day he met her was the saddest day of his life, I reckon, and I'm beginning to wonder if she had anything to do with him developing that awful nerve condition. *I* think her poisoning goes back much further than she's admitting to. *I* think she planned to get rid of him *years ago* and walk away with everything she could get her hands on."

It made for a lively and dramatic story to do the rounds. Mrs Vohland heard it. But she was a rarity in town. She kept her own counsel.

*

Rabey, Diefenhalter, and Whitgreave, suspects in the murder of Oliver Hone, all arrived punctually and together. They showed no sign of being worried or anxious. Whatever the cops might try to throw at them they knew, or they believed, they could handle it. Daniel had come with Ali Deane, believing they would feel less comfortable with her, but they showed no sign of discomfort. They crowded into Buckton Station's small interview room. By the time Dennis and Brent got added into the mix the room was bursting. Dennis told Brent to sit in the doorway. He did as he was told but felt a little awkward and exposed.

"You all know why we're here," Daniel said mildly.

"Still on Hone?" Rabey also sounded mild.

"We won't tape it as you haven't been invited to have your lawyers present." As Japana used Gavin Whittaker and it was very unlikely any of the men had other lawyers it struck Dennis that Daniel might've been better to give them that option. It would be interesting to see if Whittaker was being more protective of one man over the others …

"But you will take notes?" Rabey sounded earnest now.

"Of course. Now, perhaps you would each tell us when you last saw Oliver Hone."

Whitgreave said he couldn't remember. Diefenhalter said he'd since been told that Olly Hone was one of the men he had occasionally shared a drink with but he wouldn't like to hazard a guess. Rabey said Hone had asked him about borrowing a vehicle. Japana had two vehicles at the main office which could be borrowed, for the price of filling the petrol tank, when they weren't being otherwise used. Not all the new arrivals immediately wanted to buy a vehicle. He said he had checked the office diary and Olly Hone had borrowed it on the twenty-first of November. He hadn't made a note of where Hone wanted to go but probably into Dinna. "And that's the last time I can say clearly that I saw him."

"And when did someone come and tell you he had left Japana?"

"I have no idea. A few weeks later. Maybe."

"But you must have recorded the stop on his pay. You wouldn't continue to pay into his account."

"I think Jimmy looked after that. I have no memory of putting a stop on any further transfers."

"And you cleared out all his belongings from his caravan. You must remember the date that happened."

"Nothing to do with me."

"Then who cleared the caravan?" They had been over this before but Wang saw no harm in going over it again.

"How would I know?"

"Well, what about the man he shared the caravan with? He would need to be on hand to make sure none of his possessions got touched."

"I guess so."

"So who was that?"

"Sebastian."

"Sebastian who?"

"Whitgreave, of course."

"You might like to identify Sebastian Whitgreave—if he is in this room."

"You know as well as I do that he is sitting next to me." Rabey suddenly sounded petulant.

"No, Mr Rabey, we do not know that. The man sitting next to you is John Sebastian Whitelaw, also known as John Marcus Whitelaw—"

"He was always Whitgreave to us—to the office—"

"And you never had any doubts?"

"Why should we?"

"Now Mr Diefenhalter was in the habit of ringing you early if he had any queries or problems. Who would talk to him in the main office?"

"Jimmy Hove."

"And what time did Jimmy Hove come to work every morning?"

Rabey seemed puzzled by the question. "Eight. Usually."

"So who answered the phone if Mr Diefenhalter rang earlier?"

"He never did."

"What time did you come in to the office?"

"About the same, say a quarter to eight."

"So when Mr Diefenhalter, say, had an emergency—what would happen? Say he rang just after seven?"

"The message system would pick up. Or he might ring Jimmy on his mobile."

"How long does the message bank give you to record a message?"

Rabey still seemed to be unable to link these questions to a specific problem.

"I guess—about a minute."

"So if Edward Diefenhalter rang the Japana office at 7.10 a.m. and spoke for three minutes and thirty-eight seconds he was not talking to Hove's mobile and he was not talking to the message bank. So who was he talking with?"

Wilson Rabey's face changed. Then he schooled it into mild puzzlement again. "I really wouldn't like to say. Perhaps Jimmy came in early for some reason. The Hoysteds occasionally tell us to get the trucks on the road earlier. But it's hard. So long as we have to use Gresham's then we are at their mercy." The words seemed to require a special effort.

Daniel didn't seem to care one way or the other that Wilson Rabey had shown his vulnerability. He turned to Sebastian Whitgreave. "Now, you came in two weeks ago, Mr Whitgreave, and confessed to murdering Oliver Homan-Mortlake. You might like to tell us again just how you came to do so."

Whitgreave had sounded very confident when he spoke to the detectives in Winville. Now, with two fellow employees, he seemed slightly ill-at-ease. "I'm sorry. He just got my goat. All his carry-on about his fucking *poetry*—it turned my stomach."

"So you were aware that you shared your caravan with Oliver?"

"Of course."

"But you told us when we first asked that you had never met him. So which is the true statement and which is the lie?"

"I was a bit rattled when you came by—and I never called him Hone. That confused me."

"So what did you call him?"

"Bud."

Daniel made no secret of his disbelief. "Did he mind?"

"Not that I ever noticed."

"He put up with you calling him a silly nickname but you couldn't stand him occasionally talking about his poetry."

"It wasn't occasionally. It was all the fucking time."

"And Mr Diefenhalter—you told us you had never met Oliver Hone. Is that correct?"

"I didn't realise—but it seems I did."

"And what did you talk about?"

"Well, his poetry, I guess."

"You like poetry?"

"In small doses."

"And you knew these two men, Wilson Rabey and Sebastian Whitgreave, before you met Oliver?"

"I knew Wilson, of course I did. He was always in the office. I may have met Sebastian. I really wouldn't like to say."

"When did you meet him?"

"How would I know? Men come by, they ring me with messages, I meet up in the pub occasionally."

"So you knew Whitgreave well enough to ring him of an evening?"

"I wouldn't think so."

"Then why did you ring him?"

"I didn't."

"Your phone account shows you made a call to him at 8.35 p.m. on the twenty-first of December—"

"*I did not! That's a lie!*"

"And you rang Wilson Rabey in the main office first thing the next morning." Daniel spoke without apparent interest.

Diefenhalter had sat back after his outburst and got himself slightly under control. "That's not true. I mislaid my phone … I've put it down around the yards several times."

Daniel found himself at a crossroads and unsure which way to go next. He did what he had often found to be quite effective in such moments: he simply sat in silence looking at Diefenhalter. Dennis and Ali also sat in silence simply looking at the three men. Brent Kelly hardly liked to draw breath in case it might distract … someone …

The minutes ticked by. It was Rabey who broke it by looking at his watch and then saying rather peevishly, "I've got a lot of work waiting back at the office. Sierink can't do it all."

No one bothered to respond to this. Then Sebastian Whitgreave said unemotionally, "Olly rang me. He said he was round at Eddie's caravan and he wasn't feeling well and Eddie had gone out—and would I come and pick him up. He used Eddie's mobile. He didn't have one himself."

"And you went and picked him up?"

"No. I was watching a good movie. Why should I leave it for that useless lump o' shit?"

"You might like to expand on this, Mr Diefenhalter."

"That's a load of crap. I never take anyone back to my caravan."

"You rang early next morning—why?"

"If I did—and I'd say that's a mistake—then maybe I wanted to know what was going on."

"How did you know anything was going on?"

"You just said there was—"

"What we say now is irrelevant to what you knew then." Daniel sat back and again considered where to go next.

At last he said slowly and non-committally, "On another matter. Passport fraud. You, Mr Whitgreave, and you, Mr Diefenhalter, are both using the passports and identities of dead men. That is a very serious offence. We have no choice but to charge you with fraud, take you into custody, and wait to hear what the authorities in Britain want done with you both."

Both Diefenhalter and Whitgreave stared at DSS Wang. And then their astonishment changed to anger. Wilson Rabey turned and looked at his two employees and the puzzled look was back on his face. If it wasn't genuine then he was a very skilled actor. It was Brent Kelly who said to Daniel Wang after Diefenhalter and Whitgreave had been charged and taken out to the vehicle to be taken to the Watch House in Winville and Rabey had been told he could return to Japana but not to leave the business—"I don't understand. I thought it was just Whitgreave that maybe wasn't genuine."

Daniel Wang gave a tired grin but it had a faint hint of satisfaction in it. "Why did Diefenhalter absent himself from Japana? We assumed it was to do with Hone's death—but there was also the possibility that it had to do with using a suss passport. So we got the AFP to check both Whitgreave and Diefenhalter—and they both fitted the requirements—British citizens, born in Zimbabwe, but their deaths recorded in Britain. Sebastian Paul Whitgreave died as a baby. Edward Carl Diefenhalter as a young man." He fell silent again. In a way it was Mugabe's fault. He was making the country ever less attractive for its white citizens to remain in and so they looked for ways out. The country's young white men, the good, the worthwhile, the deserving, were leaving along with the greedy, the dangerous, the sadistic, and Japana was a first stop for men with energy and money, enough to pay their way out, and a degree of initiative.

"And it was the tragedy for young Oliver Hone to recognise not one but two men he had known under other names in Zimbabwe." Perhaps it would be some small comfort to Oliver's family, after all their help, to know that their son's death was not totally in vain …

"So—" Brent struggled with this, "if Whitgreave—if his name was really Whitelaw—then who was the other one, that Mr Diefenhalter, if he wasn't really Eddie Diefenhalter?"

"A man called Brian Smith."

*

Dennis and Fiona had decided to try and get away, on their short trip to Brisbane, by eleven in the morning. If it had been left to Dennis they would probably have gone at the crack of dawn. But Fiona felt she would rather make sure the children had a proper breakfast and that they left the house in readiness for their return. Maurie Smith and Norm Jennings would feed their cat and their hens. Later, Dennis felt it was all for the best.

Because, at about half past ten, he had a ring on his mobile from Faye Kendall. She spoke so softly he had difficulty hearing her. She said she wasn't safe and she wondered if he could come and take her away …

He had hoped, with some fervency, that simply putting the Reithmuller family on notice would be enough to keep Faye safe. So what had happened? At first he couldn't think what might be important about today then he thought it was probably the day that Faye had arranged a follow-up appointment with Alistair Thompson … or was today the CWA meeting and Ethel Harvey had said she would try again to pick Faye up? He couldn't be sure. He said reluctantly he would be there in about ten minutes.

In fact it was closer to twenty by the time he saw the farm in the distance. Fiona had merely given him a faintly wry smile and continued to pack the car. And if Faye wasn't safe—where to take her? He thought the best thing might be to drop her at the local hospital. A few days of observation might tell them all whether Faye was genuinely afraid of her rather strange relatives, whether she had a medical condition, or whether she was instead a manipulative or hallucinating old lady whose frail sweetness was an illusion. He wasn't fussed on the Reithmullers but he didn't feel he had spent long enough with their old aunt to really pronounce upon her mental state.

The farm was peaceful when he drove in and parked. Mrs Reithmuller came out and said rather sharply, "Is anything wrong?"

"I've come to see your aunt."

"Well, I'm sorry but you can't. She got worse and worse during the morning and Jason's taken her into the doctor."

"Which doctor?"

"The one in Buckton."

"Lombardi or Sorenson?"

"How would I know? He said we couldn't take the risk—and they went about ten minutes ago."

"Which way?"

"Down the back way."

Possibly she realised he had come along the main road and turned off and could be assumed to have passed the car. But they might always take the back road in past the vet's place, past those little farms belonging to Dan Goodrick and the Larkins and several other families. He just said, "Okay," and walked back towards his vehicle and rang the doctor's surgery. When Joanne answered he asked if Jason Reithmuller and his elderly aunt Faye Kendall had come in.

Joanne McNally said rather blankly, "I didn't know they were coming. And they aren't here. Are you sure about that? They didn't make an appointment."

He could only tell her to ring him if they turned up. He then rang the local hospital and eventually got on to Sister Martin who said no one had come in. He then tried the Thompsons but again drew a blank.

"Okay, well, before I start chasing round the countryside for one sick old lady who does not seem to believe in doctors—or your husband doesn't—I'd best make absolutely certain she isn't here."

He walked straight over to the front door before Mrs Reithmuller seemed to realise his intentions and called out in his big booming voice "Faye Kendall! Are you there! I've come to check on you!"

Was there a faint response? He wasn't certain. And Mrs Reithmuller had come up to him and was berating him for his behaviour. "You can't go into our house just like that! We haven't given you permission—"

"Well, she's not at the doctors' surgery and she's not at the hospital. So if she's as sick as you say we've got an emergency on our hands. But you'd be surprised how often people tell us someone is missing, a kid or an elderly relative, and we bust our guts out round the paddocks when all along they were in the house or one of the sheds. So I need to check the house and sheds before I go after them." Strictly speaking no one was suggesting the old lady was missing but Mrs Reithmuller struggled to make a swift comeback.

"She's definitely not in the house—I can assure you—"

He had seen which room Ms Kendall went in to fetch her handbag on his previous visit. Now he brushed past the niece and hurried down the hall, closing his ears to her shrill "How dare you come in my house like that!" He threw open the door to the aunt's room and stopped. The old lady was definitely in bed. The blankets came halfway up her face. Only her eyes peered over. "Gone to the doctor, eh?" he said grimly as he went over and turned the blankets down slightly.

When the old lady still didn't move, only the effort to move her eyes and mouth, he said, "What's the matter?"

Again he watched her struggle to speak and her failure. "Well, the best thing I can do is what your nephew's s'posed to be doing. Take you to the doctor." He lifted all the bedclothes back, relieved to see she was in some sort of housecoat, and looked round for her handbag and a coat to add to her ensemble. Then he lifted old lady, handbag, and jacket in one heave and carried her out into the hallway, past Mrs Reithmuller who had faded into an angry muttered "We'll sue you for unauthorised entry, see if we don't" …

Another five minutes and he was on the road again with his passenger. He wondered if she'd had some sort of stroke or fit—or whether her inability to move was induced. In case Jason Reithmuller really was on the road somewhere he took the rough back road and made his quiet way into Buckton. He could go to the doctors' surgery but he thought it might be better if the hospital could find a spare bed in the Annexe for a couple of days and keep Ms Kendall under observation.

It was more than half an hour before he'd got her settled in there and Sr Martin and the matron, Susan Denby, had arranged for Dr Sorenson to come around and check her over. "I think," Ms Denby said carefully, "she may have been given an injection. If so it will wear off over the next few hours."

"I'm off to Brisbane. If you're worried about keeping her here send her on to Winville and ring Alistair Thompson. He knows something about her so he can take over. I think all her medical problems, her headaches and her paralysis, might've been induced by someone who wants to have us all believe that her health is very poor and that her family are being very noble about caring for her round the clock."

"Well, that's one for the book," Ms Denby said briskly. "Anyway, we'll keep her under observation until the doctor can see her. But why would anyone do that to her?"

"Keep this under your hat." Both the matron and the sister nodded but continued to look a little bewildered. "Apparently she lent her niece and nephew several hundred thousand dollars to help them buy the farm. I don't think they want to pay it back. And if she is seen as a bit mental, a bit odd, as well as increasingly unwell—then no one's going to get a surprise if she dies fairly soon."

He had been in two minds about ringing Ms Kendall's accountant in Toowoomba after Faye had given him their details. Her relatives might be trying to discourage her from meeting anyone locally but that wasn't in itself a crime. They might be planning her death, and making sure it would look either like suicide or simply the natural death of an increasingly frail woman, but he couldn't be absolutely certain.

The accountant, Ray Wherret, confirmed that they had done quite a lot of work for Ms Kendall over the years and more so after her large inheritance but that, after she decided to lend it to her relatives and go and live with them, they had not heard from her since. "Is there a problem with her investments or anything?" Mr Wherret seemed to be metaphorically scratching his head.

"D'you still have the means to act for her?"

"I've had a Power of Attorney for her for the last ten years. She arranged it because she said strokes run in the family and she wanted to know that everything would be in good hands if she went the same way and became incapacitated."

Hence the headaches and the difficulty in moving? He wondered if he was reading too much into it. Maybe Ms Kendall *had* suffered several minor strokes.

"So you can still act for her while she's in hospital?"

"Well, I can. But I would prefer to have some instructions from her before I do anything—if it's at all possible. I haven't seen or heard from her in more than a year."

"What I would like you to do is to check that she is being paid back at the agreed rate. Did you draw up the agreement for her to make the loan?"

"I did. She said she didn't want to ask for any interest as they were family—and I think she always felt a little guilty about inheriting all that from her fiancé."

"Okay, make sure that her relatives are paying it back at the agreed rate." The season wasn't shaping up well and the Reithmullers might well have thought, planned, hoped, they could put off the repayments until things improved. He might have had some sympathy if they'd showed themselves genuinely caring towards the old lady. On the other hand, many other farmers were paying more than ten per cent on their borrowings. The Reithmullers were extremely lucky to get an interest-free-loan.

He hadn't heard back from Mr Wherret so he had primed Brent on the possibility of some news after his departure. It still wouldn't be a police problem. Two parties had entered into a financial agreement. One side would probably claim that they were a bit behind-hand because of the very dry year. The old lady would need to take out a civil case and even then the court might only ask that they re-negotiate the repayment schedule …

Now he found himself thinking with a deep sense of relief, 'thank heavens they were too clever for their own good', because if they hadn't told anybody about the old aunt living with them she might simply have 'died in her sleep' or something equally innocuous …

Dennis got back home to find his family had finally given up on him and were now sitting down to lunch. He wasn't really sorry to sit down to a plate of vegetable soup and some toasted cheese sandwiches, never feeling he had to rush to see his mother-in-law let alone his former boss, but he said cheerfully, "Not to worry, we'll be on the road by one—"

"I hope that isn't tempting fate again," Fiona said with a smile.

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Country Casebook: Book Thirty-Six

Case No. 1: The Legend of Prickly Creek

Almost every place has had something tragic happen nearby. Prickly Creek on the Darling Downs had been seen as an unimportant little creek, usually reduced to a string of waterholes, but quite a pleasant picnic spot for people passing through the district as well as people from the local farms. But then it began to seem as though the little creek was cursed. A woman was found dead in the pool under the bridge. And a sadistic killer chose to dump several bodies in an old drum along the creek bank. If nothing else had happened then talk would gradually have faded away and sooner or later it would have joined other places with a dark reputation but more in the nature of old bush yarns and legends, not places to be avoided. Prickly Creek, though, seemed to have acquired a jinx which refused to let it be.

The call came into Buckton Police's Sergeant Dennis Walsh near midnight. It was June Hepburn who worked as a cleaner at the High School and lived very quietly with her elderly mother. She said, "I'm so sorry to bother you, Mr Walsh, but my cousins just rang to say there's a car on fire out near the Prickly Creek bridge. They think there's someone in the car."

"Your cousins are pretty reliable?"

"Oh! I'm sure they are."

"Okay, I'll head out and see what's going on."

He had been fast asleep when the phone rang but now his wife Fiona too had woken up and come out into the hallway. "Can I get you a Thermos?" she said sleepily.

"No, but would you ring Brent on his mobile and tell him to get the fire extinguishers and blanket and come out to the car." He struggled into his clothes, hauled on his shoes and socks, and was gone. He lived only two doors away from the small station but there was no sign of his junior when he got there. Then the station door opened and Brent Kelly staggered out with two extinguishers and the fire blanket, his own clothes unbuttoned and a pair of old sandals on his feet.

"Lock the door and get in," Dennis Walsh said grimly. He didn't particularly care what his junior looked like; there weren't likely to be many people to see him. His main worry was the time it would take to get there. A minimum of twenty minutes even with his foot down. If there was someone in the car then it was very unlikely they would be still safely sitting waiting—

As they headed out of the small sleeping town he said to Kelly, "Contact John Applegarth. He might be able to beat us there." The little town of Garramindi was closer to the creek, though it was still on Buckton's patch, but how fast Sergeant Applegarth might be in disentangling himself and getting on the road—well, they would have to wait and see.

"And why June Hepburn," Dennis mused a little later. "She seems an unlikely person to be having visitors at midnight … " She was a very quiet shy woman; it was hard to picture her up all hours of the night. He would need to see what her cousins were like.

The cousins proved to be two middle-aged men with a four-wheel-drive pulled off by the bridge and with luggage stacked on the roof rack and covered with a tarpaulin. The burnt car was about a hundred metres along the narrow rutty track which ran this side of the creek. It was a sad sight. The car blackened and partly burnt out. And its driver … its driver now lay on the bank of the creek but half in the water … and he was obviously dead …

Kelly and Walsh came over to the two men waiting for them near the car. "We tried—God, we tried," one of the men said unsteadily, "but we were too late."

Dennis Walsh didn't respond immediately, simply going over and looking down on the dead man. There might be more horrible ways to die, he thought grimly, though he wouldn't absolutely bet on it—but there were few more terrible sights than a partially burnt body.

"Can you just run us through it." He came back and stood beside the men.

"We came round the curve. We had hoped to be in Buckton by nine. June and Dotty are expecting us. But we got held up along the way. And as we came round towards the bridge we could see the moonlight glinting off a car—and then there was like—strewth, we didn't believe what we were seeing—there was like an explosion in the car! And then it was harder to see as we came down on to the bridge."

"We got across and turned off the road and the car was really starting to burn and we got out and came running. We weren't sure if it was just some old wreck someone had set to burn. But we could see that someone had tried to get out and he was lying on the ground and his clothes and hair and everything were alight. We tried to drag him down the bank and into the water but it was hard to get hold of him. Dennis threw his jacket over his hair to put it out and I got him by one arm and we sort of hauled him down and he tried to say something, I dunno what it was, and we realised it wasn't water here, just the moon shining off some mud. And we tried to get him down on to the wet stuff and beat out the flames. But we realised he was dead. There wasn't much we could do but bring him up the bank again."

"Well, you did what you could. Don't go worrying about it." Easier said than done. The two men would probably always regret that they hadn't got here just that little bit faster. "Could've been his heart went on him. The shock. D'you think he pulled off for a kip and maybe had a smoke first?"

Both men shook their heads vaguely. "We'd only be guessing. It could've been like that. The way the fire seemed to start inside the car."

Another car came across the bridge and parked on the verge. In another minute Sergeant Applegarth joined them. He looked at the burnt man and felt his stomach lurch. It was a hard thing to face and more so at this hour of the night. The starlit sky and a waning moon now left much of the creek bed in black shadow and the small group of men by the burnt-out car had a macabre tinge to them. Then Dennis Walsh broke up the sense of a brooding group of warlocks round a terrible sacrifice by saying briskly, "Not much you fellas can do here but if you'd come into the station in Buckton tomorrow and make a statement that should do. The Hepburns will be waiting for you." He turned to his junior, "Get on to Winville, would you? Suspicious death. They'll need to send the morgue van. John, I don't know that there's much we can do here except wait for Winville. But we'll probably need to cover the car if they can't take it tonight. If there is a cigarette there we don't want anyone messing round—or the wind blowing anything away. The other thing is—there's no sign of the petrol tank going up which suggests everything had been turned off and the engine was cold. I'd say it's the upholstery and whatever he had on the seats which has burned—and the bloke himself. I wonder if he was wearing some old duds with something spilled on them, kerosene, turps, something like that."

"Nothing suspicious?" John Applegarth looked around and gave an involuntary little shiver.

"They didn't see anyone else. Doesn't mean there wasn't … but if he dropped off to sleep with a smoke still in his hand … then it looks less likely he had a passenger. Once we know who he

is—we'll probably have most of our answers. I wonder which way he was heading when he decided to pull over."

"This track is easier to see if you're coming from the Buckton side," John said thoughtfully. "But if he's local then he'd know the track was here anyway."

"But if he was local would he need a kip?"

"Maybe he used to live here years ago and now he lives a bit further west."

"Could be. So we'll need to make sure nothing's left smouldering." With the windows up the fire was starved of oxygen but that wasn't totally reliable. "But I wonder if we can get the number and send it through. They can check for an identity that way. I think most of the glove box stuff is beyond us."

John wiped a very dirty number plate with his handkerchief and read it out to Dennis. The glove box had possibly already been open, now its contents were thoroughly scorched but probably still accessible with great care. He thought it would take Forensics quite a while to tease the blackened mess apart. And the car was a fairly elderly Holden Camira, probably dark blue.

Dennis went over to the Buckton vehicle where Brent Kelly was still talking to someone. He handed in his notebook and said, "That's the details. They might be able to track it down for us—unless he stole it or borrowed it or whatever."

Kelly passed the details on before saying to his boss, "It'll be quite a while before they can come—they want to know if we want to wait."

"Of course," Dennis said grimly. There mightn't be much traffic on this road at this hour of the night but even one person coming along here out of curiosity could be enough to mess up what might turn out to be a crime scene. And it would be a shocking scene to come on to unprepared if it was some public-spirited farmer's wife …

Brent Kelly remained in the car, not least because he was suddenly embarrassed about his sandals, but Dennis and John walked back up towards the burnt car and its unfortunate occupant. "Bit hard to tell," Dennis finally said, "but I don't think we're looking at a young man."

John Applegarth agreed with this. "I wonder if he was heading for Garra?"

"How busy are you?" It struck John as an odd response to his question but he said, "I'm fairly well on top of things. Touch wood. Dave left everything in pretty good nick. And I haven't had any big issues. I heard about all the trouble you had with Long Hitch and the Booths and the Mortons and everyone. But all that seems to have gone quiet. I guess you scared them."

"Don't know about that. Seeing Ranke and the others died and those useless bods on Long Hitch managed to get their cattle hormones and everything under the wire—well, they're probably still grinning when they think about it. And they never told us if we were right in thinking that plane was carrying some yellowcake samples when it came down—I s'pose it's all still classified—so I was just glad not to have to worry about it any more."

"Still, Dave said he never would've got on to any of that, not without you."

"Helps to know something about cattle, I guess … "

John thought this was putting it mildly. But he only said, "So how's Brent making out?"

"Tries hard." He dropped his voice slightly. "I just wish he'd get his personal life into some sort of order. But that's his business. So long as he gets the work done … " The two men went on talking fitfully while Brent Kelly sat in the car and yawned. He was sorry there was nothing else for him to do here; it would take his mind off more personal things. Like Naomi and Iris and his boss's possibly empty threat to get his dad deported back to Belfast … if only he could be sure it was empty …

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It was nearly forty minutes before a car from Winville turned off the road and parked and disgorged the unlikely team of DSC Deane and Sergeant Hassell. In theory Hassell looked after anything to do with traffic in Winville. In practice he usually ducked and slid it on to someone else. He didn't look enthusiastic as he came over.

"What is it? Some hoons burning a stolen car?"

"No. The driver was inside and managed to get out. But died. More likely he was having a kip and left a smoke to smoulder. But it's not up to us. The body can go straight to Winville once you've got pics but I think the car'll need to be checked here before you move it."

Hassell stood there pinching his rather fleshy lips for a minute or two. Then he walked over and looked first at the dead man then at the car. "Yeah, the car lighter's out of its socket."

It seemed to be the clincher for him. "Okay, soon's Tom Dicks turns up we'll get the bod on his way. Did he get himself down there—or you did?"

"Two people saw the fire and tried to get him down to the creek. They'll come in tomorrow and do a statement."

"Shouldn't you have kept them here?" Hassell gave way to a yawn.

"Only heading for Buckton. No point in us all standing round half the night."

Hassell looked like someone ready to take issue with this. Then he only gave an 'on your head be it' shrug. "So any idea who he is?"

"If it's his car you'll have all that by tomorrow."

The big van owned by the hospital in Winville turned off the road and came bumping slowly along the rutty track. Tom Dicks had been picking up bodies for forty years and it took a lot to upset or surprise him but he came over and looked down the bank and said earnestly, "Poor sod."

It was pretty much how Dennis felt. And in another few minutes the body had been carefully eased on to a stretcher and into the back of the van. "How d'you want the car treated?" Dennis turned back to Sergeant Hassell. Ali Deane stood in the background and observed and listened. It probably wasn't a case for CIB but she didn't trust Aidan Hassell not to contaminate a crime scene and he was notoriously unobservant. And she didn't look forward to the long trip back to Winville with him. He was neither interesting nor sympathetic—and he made several passing digs at her husband, Constable Hussein, including the all-embracing "we're only storing up trouble for the future, that's what that Harding bloke keeps saying … and there's times I agree with him." She thought it more diplomatic to ignore him. But it still left her feeling ruffled and uncomfortable and she would have another forty minutes on the road home with him.

"Leave it. I'll get Wang to come out and give it the all clear tomorrow."

As Walsh and Kelly drove back towards Buckton Brent Kelly said slowly, "You really don't think there's anything suspicious?"

"Not unless we can find any signs of anyone else being there. Could be suicide, I guess, but a pretty nasty way to do it to yourself. I think we'd best come out early and check around. Wang may be thorough but I don't think he's any too good on footprints."

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The whole thing, Brent Kelly thought, looked different with the early morning sun on it. Now they could see that the sheen of mud in the creek bed was starting to crackle as it dried out round the edges but he wasn't surprised that it had temporarily fooled the two men. And the car looked so much sadder in broad daylight.

Dennis said, "Not much we can do about the driver's side with everyone trampling round. But stand back and let me go over the other side. There just might be a sign of a passenger getting out."

Suiting his words he went over the ground very carefully, almost bent double, but after working his way further up the track then working his way slowly back again, he straightened up and said, "Unless the guy's a jack-in-the-box I don't think he could've got out that way and not left a sign." Even if someone else had leapt from the car into the dry grass they would've left some evidence, he thought. And there was no sign of a shoe or a foot in the soft film of dust where cars had occasionally passed up and down the packed ruts and stirred the surface.

"So just the one man?"

Dennis nodded, "Uh huh, and Hassell's right. The lighter is missing but we should be able to see it. Aren't they mostly made of metal?"

Brent had never smoked but he said, "I think so."

"Well, it's not obvious. And it doesn't seem a very *big* fire. I think those blokes saw it simply because it was dark. It's mainly the upholstery and these things he had on the seats seem to have damped the fire down a bit. I'd say that was a suitcase and a pillow and a couple of rugs in the back.

I'm not sure what was on the front passenger seat but it looks like a box of something, fruit maybe, and I think it's a bit big for something you'd sit on your lap." If the car had sat a while, the engine grown cold, and the dew settling … but those two men *had* spoken of an explosion … yet the engine and the fuel tank were still intact … just the vinyl mainly and it was said to give off toxic smoke …

Constable Kelly followed all this with keen interest. It all seemed to make sense when Dennis went over the likelihood of what things were and the way things might have happened. "So he was perhaps going to stay with someone?"

"Looks that way. I wonder how far he was going? Would you pull off for a kip if you were only going to Garra?"

"Well, you might, if you didn't want to arrive at this time of night. You might prefer to have a little rest and then arrive in the morning."

"Could be." Dennis left it at that and went off up the bank of the creek as far as the bridge. He wasn't sure that he really expected to see anything but the man had quite likely got out to stretch or take a leak or even just to see how much water was in the creek. But there were no obvious signs of anything. "I wonder if he had food with him, a sandwich, packet of chips … "

In the end he took several photos and left the vehicle for Winville to collect after running tape from the corner post of the nearby paddock right across to the bridge. With luck it would stop any passers-by casually turning in before they noticed the burnt car. Winville could remove the tape when they'd completed their end of the investigation.

It was only half past eight when they got back to Buckton but the two men from the night before were standing on the station doorstep. Now the officers could see that they were both gnarled and tanned and calloused; obviously they were used to hard physical work and probably not afraid to tackle a burning vehicle and its driver. One of them had a pinkish-coloured bandage wound round one hand. "You got a bit burnt?" Dennis said. He couldn't remember noticing anything about the man's hand last night.

"It's a funny thing but I didn't realise how badly it was blistered until I got up this morning."

"All we could think of last night," his brother said, "was what had gone on there—and feeling pretty bad that we hadn't got there in time."

"Okay, come on in and we'll get your details and you can both write out a statement—well, if you can't write, you can either use a keyboard or we'll tape it for you."

The two men gave their names as Dennis and Elvis Mitton from Hartmore Downs near Thargomindah and said they were going to stop over with their cousin for a couple of nights before going on to the coast. "We haven't been in twenty years. We've been looking forward to it. Just finished shearing and got on the road."

"You get called Elvis?" Dennis said drily.

"No. Folk call me Al. Or they do if they're wise." This had the sound of a joke, often made.

"And you had a mobile phone on you?"

"Yep." Al took it out and showed it off like a new toy. "We bought it for the trip. Only just getting the hang of it. And the only local number we knew was June's."

"Okay, go back over everything you can remember from last night."

This was largely what they had already told police. But they both agreed that there was a very faint light in the car before something had gone whuufff! and given out a small explosion—

"When you say explosion—what size are you talking about?"

"It wasn't like in the movies where you see a car turn into a fireball. It was like … " They both communed. Then Al went on slowly, "like, say, you're lighting the fire under the copper and you throw on a bit of petrol or kero and it goes whuufff and flares up and then it gradually dies back a bit but this was like … like it caught other things … and we thought we could see someone moving … and we hurtled round that bend and over the bridge and pulled off there and went running and the guy was trying to get out of the car and his clothes and his hair was on fire."

Dennis considered this. "So he might have been asleep with his head sort of fallen forward—"

"We thought maybe he'd been smoking and dropped his butt between his legs … maybe … but we'd only be guessing."

"When you helped him out did you see any sign of anything in his hands?"

Again both men looked at each other. This time it was Dennis Mitton who said, "Well, yeah, I think he did have something in one hand. It was alight and he dropped it. I didn't take any more notice as we were trying to get him down into the creek bed."

"What d'you think it was?"

"Well, you've got me there, mate, but if you want a guess I'd say it was either a hanky or a rag … maybe he'd been cleaning his points or something."

"No sign of a smoke?"

"Nope."

"And you said you thought he tried to say something."

"Yeah, he did say something. We were more concerned with trying to get the fire out. The front of his shirt was burning and his hair and his face was a horrible mess—"

The other brother agreed with this. "But it might've been 'Tell' … yeah, tell someone."

"I guess he had someone expecting him." The two men looked at each other but couldn't come up with a name.

The phone rang and Brent answered, took a message, then came into the small interview room and said, "That was Winville. The car was registered to a Harold Bellingham and there's an address in Drayton." Kelly handed his slip to his boss.

"Good oh, let's hope he told his neighbours where he was heading."

"There's no report of the car being stolen."

"No, I wouldn't think you'd take time out to kip like that if you were in a hot car," Dennis said drily. Hot suddenly seemed to take on grimmer meanings. "Harry Bellingham," he said in a more musing way. "Doesn't ring a bell but get on to George Hickman—"

"Winville is going to go public, see if anyone saw him or the car anywhere last night."

"Okay, so nip round to the pub and see if Bill or George or Maurie saw a stranger any time yesterday. Chances are he came through Buckton."

Dennis got both Mittons to write out a statement, took their mobile number, made a note of their holiday plans, thanked them for getting in touch, and said they were free to go on with their trip. Sometimes Good Samaritans turned out to be very bad Samaritans but he thought these two were exactly what they said they were, that they had seen and done things just as they had told him.

And if it wasn't a sad accident then they might also be the means of—

"Just before you go—you didn't see a car parked anywhere back along the road or in a farm lane or anything?"

A car could be somewhere there by the creek but it would have to drive a long way along that track before it would be out of sight of anyone coming round that curve and on to the bridge. A person could've hidden either in the long grass or down there in the deep black shadows under the bridge.

"There was an old ute, I think, in the lane of that place on the right before we came round to the bridge. Well, a ute. I don't know about the old part. I didn't take much notice. It was pretty much in the shadows of those kurrajongs or whatever they've got growing there. It wasn't near the road."

"Mightn't of been a ute," his brother said cautiously, "just the faint light caught something there. Might have been farm machinery—"

"Thought it was a ute," his brother said without rancour, "but you could be right."

"And nothing else anywhere along your route?"

"Not that I noticed." Both men nodded.

The Drexlers had that big grain place just the other side of Prickly Creek. Some farms had dogs, if they ran sheep or cattle through the stubble or if they just happened to like dogs, but he couldn't remember ever hearing one way or the other. He made a note and saw the Mittons out. Then he rang John Applegarth in Garramindi and asked him to check with the Drexlers, whether they'd left anything parked in their lane last night, "and I'm going out to Prickly Creek again. The Mittons think the poor sod was clutching something in his hand. We didn't find anything near the car this morning but if it was burnt it might've drifted in the air or been tramped into the dust."

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Adrian Hassell, along with Constable Atkinson and a tow-truck from Winville, were at the creek when Dennis turned up again. He looked at the mess around the car as the men discussed how best to move it. If he'd missed something near the driver's door then there was a good chance he'd never find it now. He got out and went over. He was surprised, still, that only the central part of the car had burnt. It suggested that the car had sat there long enough to grow cold and for the dew to settle. It also suggested that there had been something damp in the boxes, fruit, bottled water, or something heavy like blankets or an overcoat, maybe something treated with fire retardant.

The fire had been fiercest round the driver. The rest of the interior had smouldered, some things burning, others just glowering away. Hassell had removed everything, wrapping them in heavy plastic and stowing them in the police vehicle. To Dennis's question he said, "Looks like three cartons, a couple of blankets, a pillow, a small suitcase in the boot, and the junk in the glovebox."

"Good. They might tell you where he was heading and if someone was waiting for him or he had a job lined up somewhere. Did you find the car lighter?"

"Nah. Must've burned."

"Or there wasn't one. Did you find a lighter or matches?"

Hassell said they hadn't but "doesn't mean much. A match would burn completely in that level of fire."

"Yeah but you don't bring one match with you."

Hassell disagreed, saying a box would go up as easily as a single match; "Wouldn't be the first time some old sod went to sleep like this."

"True, but I'd say you should be treating this as a crime scene until you're sure it's not. A guy doesn't carry one match and one smoke on him. There should be some sign of it if he was a smoker."

"It's not your call," Hassell said rather snidely.

"No. But unless you want to look like Doug Towner—the most useless cop between here and Mt Isa—then an open mind might come in handy—at least till the inquest."

For a moment Hassell seemed to be in two minds—whether to flare up at this or ignore it—then he only said: "Don't reckon they'll bother with one. You can see where he's set his duds and his shirt and the front of his hair alight. Classic pattern." Clearly he wanted to be done with the case and gone, not standing round arguing with Dennis Walsh.

"Doesn't mean some clever clogs can't work out how to make it look like an accident."

Hassell gave that a bark of laughter. "For what? A car on its uppers? A few old duds? A box of apples? You must be joking."

"No, mate, I never joke." But he could see he wasn't going to change Sergeant Hassell's mind. Constable Atkinson had come to stand in silence behind Hassell, and Walsh could only hope he wasn't being too influenced by Hassell's slapdash attitude.

The tow-truck driver and his off-sider came over to say they couldn't risk towing the vehicle, it might break apart, and that they would push it on to the lift and raise it. "Maybe you guys can give us a hand."

Hassell nodded, reaching in to release the hand brake then standing back to let the other four men push the vehicle backwards on to the lift. Another ten minutes and the car was secured on the back of the truck. Hassell gave his hands what he probably saw as a symbolic dusting off, the case was virtually resolved, just the post mortem, and he could close the file.

When all the Winville people had departed Dennis Walsh said "Useless bugger" to the empty landscape and began another careful search of the area. As they moved the car he wondered if that piece of cloth the Mittons thought they'd seen might have blown in under the vehicle. But despite quartering the area where the car had been and down to the creek he could come up with nothing to fit the bill. He was about to accept that whatever they had seen had burnt completely when he came upon a tiny scrap of blackened cloth. It had obviously drifted in the disturbed air the fire had created. He carefully eased it into a small plastic bag and placed it in his own vehicle.

He spent another half hour up and down the creek. Had someone hidden under the bridge? It was a definite chance. The only trouble was that people often stopped by the bridge. It might be a truck driver. It might be a young couple. It might be kids mucking round by the one small remaining pool in the creek. He couldn't get a clear enough footprint to give him a line …

He finally headed back towards Buckton and a late lunch. But halfway there he changed his mind and turned left and headed for the Grant's farm. Ailsa Grant was said to be the best dressmaker in the district. She was well in to her sixties now and he didn't know how good her eyesight was. But she might be able to give him some guidance …

The Grants, Norman and Ailsa, were both home. He asked them how their granddaughter Megan was getting along and they were full of praises. Megan had blossomed out into an attractive poised teenager and they were convinced that it was all Fiona's doing. "Your wife did wonders for our little girl," Norm said rather gruffly as his wife put the kettle on and an extra plate down for Dennis. "You wouldn't know she was the same child now."

"It had quite a lot to do with Megan herself, trying hard, lots of willpower—"

"But Fiona gave her the … the inspiration," Mrs Grant said as she came over with a teapot and sat down.

"Fair enough." Dennis was hungry enough to slap some cold roast and homemade chutney between two slices and hoe in. "But that isn't why I dropped by. I just wondered if you could give me an idea what this scrap of material might be—or was before it got burnt."

Mrs Grant took the plastic bag gingerly and put on her reading glasses. After turning it over and looking at it very thoroughly she said, "I'm sure it's a hanky. The Asian ones are flooding in and they're machine-stitched, unless you buy the most expensive ones. If it was hem-stitched I might think it was done locally."

"What makes you sure it's a hanky?"

"Because it's a very narrow hem. It just might be a cotton scarf but I doubt it. If it was a tea-towel it would have a wider hem or a selvedge. A table napkin, something like that, would also have a wider hem. If it was a piece cut from a shirt you wouldn't have a corner like that."

"And you think it's cotton?"

"I'm pretty sure. If it was nylon it would melt. It doesn't look like silk. The weave is too fine for linen … "

"Thanks. That's a good help."

But the question remained: Mr Bellingham's hanky—or someone else's?

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Brent Kelly was sitting in the station eating a pie from the bakery and drinking from a can of Pepsi. It wasn't the healthiest of diets. But Brent seemed to be filling out and looking bigger and stronger even without much in the way of fruit and veg in his daily fare. Maybe it was the country air and the exercise …

"Got anything?" Dennis came in and put his camera and the small bag of evidence down.

"George Johnson says there were a couple of guys he didn't recognise in last night. But he says he didn't take all that much notice because he was busy training Josh Binnie. And George Hickman says he never heard of a Bellingham round here."

The long time barman at the Coolibah wanted to take life a bit easier. He and the others who ran the pub as a joint venture had agreed to take Josh on as a trainee bar worker—and they would take Josh's fiancée, Sophie Miller, on to handle functions and learn to run the place when she finished her course in Toowoomba. Dennis wasn't sure exactly what the course was but he thought, once the two of them got some skills and some confidence, they could be an asset. They were going to get free use of a room in the hotel, after the Dairy Festival was over, and a small wage. Sophie would still help out at the newsagency.

"Well, soon as we get a reasonable photo go round and show George, see if he or Josh can pick the bod. If he stopped in that'll give us some kind of timeframe—and maybe he told someone where he was heading for. Get on to Winville for a pic and find out where the p.m.'s at." What a picture of the dead man would be like was an issue but Dennis was inclined to think it was the burning of his hair and eyebrows which created the initial sense of shock. They might be able to

touch up the picture slightly. “And tell them he had something in his hand as he got out of the car, almost certainly a handkerchief. I’m going to try a little experiment, just to get an idea on how fast a hanky would burn—and how.”

It involved sacrificing one of his own big cotton hankies out behind the station. To his surprise his own hanky took a little to get alight. Perhaps it wasn’t completely dry. After all, it had been in his pocket for several days. “So … the guy’s bought something to eat, maybe a packet of chips and he pulls out his hanky and wipes his hands and leaves it there … on his thighs … between his thighs … maybe half out of a pocket … and lights a smoke and he’s sleepy and he drops the butt into the hanky … ” He considered this course of events. “But it doesn’t explain why there’s no sign of a cigarette butt, of a packet of smokes … of anything to do with smoking.”

Brent said diffidently that maybe the butt was inside his shirt or fallen down and stuck in his waistband and that Winville would find it. Dennis agreed this was possible. “And maybe we’re too fixated on smoking. Maybe he lit a match to check his watch or look at a map or something—and he’d spilt something on himself and it caught fire—we’ll have to wait and see. Anyway, you can take that bit to them when you go to see Heber. I’ll have a chat with George once we’ve got a reasonable photo of the bod to show around—and then it’s pretty much out of our hands.” Kelly was seeing a psychiatrist, Marcus Heber, in Winville once a week. In the beginning he had resisted the idea; as time went on he seemed more relaxed about it or possibly he liked having an excuse to go to Winville regularly …

John Applegarth rang in the late afternoon to say that the Drexlers hadn’t had anything parked in their laneway; they never did. Someone might’ve preferred to turn in for a kip on a long drive rather than park on the verge but they hadn’t seen or heard anything.

“Do you think it’s suspicious?” John said cautiously. “I didn’t notice anything coming or going but I wasn’t really looking and the moon was nearly gone by then.”

“Given that we haven’t found any kind of lighter or matches, a packet of smokes, a butt, anything to make that idea look good—then I’d say a bit of suspicion is warranted. There might be another perfectly ordinary explanation. But don’t let Winville steamroll you into accepting it as a sad accident. Just keep an ear out round Garra. He tried to say to the Mittons something about ‘Tell somebody something’. They didn’t catch it but they think he was trying to say a name.”

“It’s going to be on the news tonight. Someone might come forward.”

“I’d say there’s a good chance he stopped at the pub here but I’m waiting on a pic or at least a decent description. With luck someone who knows him’ll come forward and solve the case for us.”

The news item didn’t show a picture but gave a pretty thorough description of both man and car. It was enough to make George Johnson pick up the phone and ring Dennis to say, “Does sound like the bod who was in here for a while. Had a couple of drinks. I think Craig challenged him to a game of pool but I’d reckon he was gone by nine. He didn’t tell me anything and he only ordered a bitter lemon and a packet of crisps when he came in. If it didn’t seem totally out of character I’d say it looked like it was Craig who shouted him a drink—but as I told your young fella I was busy telling Josh what to do and I wasn’t taking all that much notice.”

“Okay, well, when you get a spare minute, George, write down everyone you can remember being in—even if you didn’t see them with him.”

“It was pretty busy. They’ve got a couple of extra blokes putting in these extra vans, I’d reckon they’re mostly Goodrick rellies—maybe this guy was too. They say everywhere’s already booked out for the Big Week.” People were starting to call the Dairy Festival ‘the Big Week’.

There were large overhead banners on all the roads leading into Buckton to welcome people and even though the events were still weeks away a festive mood was beginning to build up. Maybe Mr Bellingham had responded to it. Then again maybe he’d just stopped into the pub to go to the toilet and get a small snack. He still had another thirty to forty minutes … Dennis re-thought that … because they didn’t yet know where he was heading for so they couldn’t guess how much more driving was ahead of him … but if he wasn’t traveling fast then he could be assumed to be at Prickly Creek by about 9.30. So unless he did a detour for some reason then the idea of him settling back for a kip made most sense. It also made it harder to believe that a smoke around 9.30 would

have finally burst into flames just before midnight. But maybe that was something else he needed to experiment with …

And festive mood or not, he couldn't come up with a realistic image of Craig Goodrick shouting drinks for a stranger. Craig might come over to the bar to collect a round of drinks—but only if the stranger got out his wallet and handed him the money—and knowing Craig he would probably put the hard word on the stranger to buy *him* a drink. Being kind to strangers wasn't Goodrick's most obvious virtue …

Case No. 2: Unwanted Guests

It was Fiona who said to Dennis he might like to watch 'Australian Story'. He wasn't much of a television person and preferred to spend that time putting his kids to bed if he was at home. "So what's on?"

"Your friends John Duarte and Sam Hoysted," she said with a touch of irony.

"So Duarte's finally found someone to take him seriously?"

"I'll set up to tape it, just in case." Sam Hoysted had gone to prison for the murder of his wife Sandra. He claimed, now, that he was innocent. He also claimed that he had taken the rap because he was afraid, at the time, that there might've been an argument between his sons and their stepmother while he was on his way to Sydney in his private plane …

Dennis didn't think much of Sam Hoysted but he also thought the conviction should've been seen as unsafe because three of the men who had investigated and sent Sam to trial were also trustees for Sam's sons' massive trust fund. None of them had publicly mentioned this connection to the Hoysted family during the investigation or the committal hearings.

John Duarte was a Brisbane lawyer who certainly wanted to get a re-trial. Whether he had also come to believe Sam was innocent was less certain. When legal avenues had failed him he had finally decided to go to the media. How compelling a case he had managed to make to the ABC Dennis couldn't guess. But it would probably make quite good television.

The story asked 'What happened that evening? Did the court system get it right?' and then the camera began a recreation of the known movements of Sandra Hoysted on what was probably the last day of her life. It was a simple but quite effective way to begin. Sandra took the family dog, a Dalmatian called Hugo, out for a walk at about three p.m. She usually followed the same route but sometimes went clockwise and sometimes anti. Although she wasn't a particularly extroverted person she did stop to chat with several 'regulars' on her walk. John Duarte had done what Winville CIB had neglected to do: he had done a house-to-house. And he had found two people who were certain they saw Sandra on that fateful day though neither had spoken with her. It gave her route for that afternoon and a rough time frame.

The TV program also showed that if Sandra had continued along that route she would have passed directly in front of the homes of both DI Doug Towner and lawyer Gavin Whittaker and would have passed the entrance to the little cul-de-sac where magistrate Michael Hull had then lived. The program did not dwell on this simple fact but instead turned to the evidence of the couple the Hoysteds had employed as gardener/handyman and cook/housekeeper while they were at home and caretakers when they were away. Dennis had urged Winville to offer the Millers safe haven or protected witness status if that was what they needed to feel confident enough to speak out but it had fallen on deaf ears.

Dennis couldn't guess at the deal Duarte might've done with the couple but he had obviously removed them from Winville to Brisbane by the look of the background to their interview. And Mr Miller said that Sam Hoysted had grown increasingly antsy as he had waited for his wife to return and see him off. When it came four o'clock and there was still no sign of Sandra or Hugo he had finally said "I'm going" and had taken a bag out to his car and driven away.

The Prosecution, in Sam's trial, though not at his committal hearing, had asserted that Sam had met up with his wife along the way to the aerodrome and had been angry that she had made him

late to get on his way; and that Sam had told her to get in the car and she could drive it home from the airfield later—but that their argument had then spiraled out of control and Sam had knocked her down and ended up by putting her body in a storage container inside the hanger.

The show then traced Sam's likely route to the aerodrome which did not overlap with the likely dog-walking route. Then it panned across the area where Sam had parked and into the hanger itself. It showed the padlock to the main doors and pointed out that a local security firm plus Sam's friend who was in the USA had three keys to the hanger between them. It then showed Sam's route to Sydney and his two stopovers and the time of his arrival at Bankstown airport and the time he picked up his rental car. It then logged in his return flight, his time of arrival in Winville, and then returned to film the Millers who said he was back in time for dinner at 7 p.m.

The cameras then showed where Sandra had been found about ten k's west of Winville and spoke with two people who had been at the aerodrome on other business when Sam flew in. Neither saw Sam back his car up to the hanger or carry anything large out to it. But as they did no more than wave to him before going on with their own work they couldn't swear to the time Sam drove out or which way he turned at the entrance. He could've made that twenty k round-trip but it would've been seriously pushing it. Alternatively he could've returned later than night and removed the body. As it would've been there for nearly six days it would have become seriously unpleasant to move. The Millers said they noticed nothing unusual about Sam or the car.

With Sam home and adamant that he hadn't taken Sandra with him to Sydney it finally became a Missing Persons case. There was no sign of Sandra, or anyone else, removing anything from her room. The Millers could give a clear description of what she had been wearing that day. And they provided another piece of information which had never been presented to the court. The dog had been witnessed by several people wandering along the streets where Sandra normally walked him and he had returned to the front gate of the Hoysted house at a little after 5 p.m. Mr Miller had let him in but he had seemed rather restless and ill-at-ease all evening. The teenagers had tried to play with him a bit but he had showed little interest, frequently going to the gate and pushing his nose through the bars.

Then the program asked the question which should've been asked years ago: why were Sam's two sons, Sandra's stepsons, never questioned. The program sketched in the date they returned to Brisbane and the Millers confirmed that the boys did leave then. "By the time Sandra was found in that culvert two weeks later everyone seemed to have forgotten that Neumann and Randall Hoysted were there when the dog returned trailing its lead. Sandra was extremely fond of the dog and several people have queried the official belief, both at the time and since, that she would simply abandon the dog on the street to drive to the airfield with her husband."

"So it all hinges on the poor bloody dog?" Dennis said.

The presenter seemed to hear the unspoken corollary to this question. "Two weeks later Sam Hoysted gave the dog to Gavin Whittaker, ostensibly for his children to have as a pet. This was not brought up in the trial but several neighbours regarded it as suspicious." The documentary then moved on to the finding of Sandra's diaries and her letters to her mother. The Millers confirmed that the Trustees had been due to meet at the Hoysted home that evening and they had been asked to put out savouries and drinks—but that Gavin Whittaker had rung about five thirty to say the meeting had been moved to his office. His then receptionist, now living in Toowoomba, confirmed that he had asked her at about four-thirty to set up some drinks and nibbles, though he hadn't given any reason for the change of venue.

The program ended with John Duarte saying, "Sandra Hoysted several times expressed her concern over the way the Trust fund for her stepsons was being run. She believed that the Trustees were taking more than a realistic fee and that many of their investment decisions were not being taken with the boys' best interests in mind. She said this to her husband several times. He resented the aspersions being cast on his best friends and it had led to several arguments. She had noted her worries in her diaries. She had mentioned her concerns to her mother. She had several times said things to Mr and Mrs Miller. She had years of experience in accounting and was well-placed to express an opinion. The four trustees all had some degree of motive in wanting her silenced. But

this was never mentioned in the trial of her husband where she was simply presented as a discontented and argumentative wife who had provoked her husband into losing his temper."

He said simply and sincerely, "I have spoken with dozens of people who remember Sandra Hoysted as a kind and compassionate woman who tried hard to fit into a small country community and always wanted the best for her husband and stepsons. What exactly happened to her that evening remains a mystery."

"So he didn't chance his arm," Dennis said drily as Fiona clicked off the video-recorder.

"You mean—he still thinks Sam had something to do with Sandra's death?"

"Looks like it. Michael Hull would've been in court when Sandra was walking the dog. But all the other three trustees were free agents up to a point. Doug regularly nicked off early to get in a round of golf. Gavin only had to organise his clients around that space. Eric Kramer could say he needed to do some shopping in Winville. They were never checked and it's not very likely people have kept records back that far."

"And who changed the venue for the Trustees' meeting?"

"Michael Hull told me they went to his house that evening—so someone's telling porkies."

"Perhaps they thought Gavin's receptionist would make a more independent witness? She would set everything up and then go home. She wouldn't know for certain where the actual meeting took place."

"But we would make the assumption it happened there. Yep. But why would that matter?"

"Because Sandra was somewhere else and they had to decide what to do with her—maybe?"

"I think you're right. She had to be kept somewhere until her jacket smelt of decay, then it could be left in that container at the hanger, and she had to be kept well out of sight until Sam and his trip to Sydney were well and truly in the firing line. It was easy for people to assume that Sam was lying through his teeth because he was hardly Mr Clean. And then Sandra had to turn up because they wanted to get rid of Sam as well. He mightn't know diddly-squat about trusts but he still might come out with a question they didn't want asked."

"So—do you think Sandra *was* having an affair?" There had been vague rumours about Sandra and Frank Obidini who had worked at Japana years ago and had supposedly shot himself.

"No, can't say I ever took that too seriously. They'd only met, apparently, a few weeks before—and even that wasn't certain. But if they did meet I reckon Frank told Sandra something about the way Japana was being run."

"But wouldn't that strengthen the idea that *Sam* didn't want Sandra to know about the cannabis they were growing there?"

"I don't reckon that was it—and he had the power to take Frank down with him on that. I think it had something to do with Ansvar gaining an interest. But I'm blowed if I know how or what might've bothered him—"

Ansvar was a large agri-chemical company in the USA with, reportedly, a fair slice of South African money behind it. The Neurand Trust which owned Japana and ran it under the name of Bruloder Inc was also said to be partly made up of Ansvar shares. Dennis had never been able to unravel the financial skeins. Now he wondered if Sandra Hoysted had been able to …

"So here we go round the mulberry bush again," Fiona said with a slight smile.

"I know. Sorry. … Y'know, every time I bump into Herb Wilkins the old coot tells me I haven't got to the bottom of everything—but as he hasn't got any more clues for me and I've had enough of chasing after crooks sitting safe in the US or South Africa I just fob him off with another drink … there are limits."

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It was DS Greg Sullivan who called in a couple of days later to say that Daniel wanted them all to continue to treat the Prickly Creek death as suspicious. "He definitely had alcohol in his stomach," Greg said casually, "but it didn't look like he was either a drinker or a smoker. Or not recently. And we've found he lived in a caravan behind a house in Drayton but the people in the main house are away for a few days. A neighbour says he's certain Harry'd been on the wagon for quite a while and he didn't think he smoked. But he couldn't hazard a guess where Harry was heading for. He said Harry had work at one of those farm machinery places this side of Toowoomba

but he had an idea he'd been laid off. The way the season's going people aren't rushing out to get new equipment."

"No." Dennis sounded glum. "So what actually killed him?"

"His heart went on him. But he'd breathed in a fair bit of smoke too. Wittenbach thinks he was asleep and woke up to find himself on fire. Poor sod. If he had the driver's window open someone could've chucked something in, I guess, and it looks like those two guys that found him had the sense to close up the car, starve the fire—except they ruined any fingerprints—if there were any—"

"It was quite a cool night. He might've had the window closed. It might support the idea that whatever it was smouldered a fair while. But it's not likely he had the door locked, he wouldn't be expecting company out there, so someone could've opened it … "

"Wittenbach thinks there was something spilt on his shirt and trousers. Could be alcohol but he won't commit himself. But once we know where he was heading—it'll maybe fall into place."

Greg didn't sound terribly interested in Mr Bellingham's fate now that he'd passed on the few details he had. Instead he said, "And it looks like we're going to lose Daniel. He's looking at getting into some uni down south, do some course about why people commit crimes, that sort of arty-farty stuff. But I reckon it's just an excuse."

"Because of Bella Seymour?"

"I'd say so. She sounds pretty flaky to me. But she writes to him all the time. One day she's out on some East Timor rally and then she's on a van serving food to the homeless and then she's going round to help refugees—every week it's something new. I don't reckon she knows if she's coming or going."

"No harm in doing things when you're young, find out what you really want to do—"

"I guess not. But I'll guarantee she'll lead him a merry dance—and why he'd want Ralph Seymour as his father-in-law—God only knows. He struck me as a pretty cold fish."

"Takes all sorts, Greg. So what d'you want us to do about Bellingham?"

"Nothing. We couldn't get a photo that wouldn't scare people—but when we can maybe get one from his flat I'll send you a copy. But it looks like he let his guard down, had a few drinks when he hadn't drunk in a fair while and he thought he'd best pull over and grab forty winks, maybe he'd heard you're hard on drink-drivers—"

"Not as hard as I should be. But that seems pretty likely."

"And it looks like he might've been heading somewhere he'd heard there was work going, maybe just on spec."

"Could be." The man was obviously planning to stay *somewhere* a few days, a week, maybe more if he got lucky.

*

Bill Borrie, the long time licensee of the Coolibah, now semi-retired, sounded rather quavery when he rang the station and said, "Dennis, we've got a psychic here. Is that legal?"

For a moment Sergeant Walsh thought he must have misheard. "Is what legal?"

"Y'know, if she wants to charge people to have their fortunes told."

"She's staying there as a paying guest?"

"Yeah. She came last night and she gave me and George and Maurie what she calls a reading this morning. She didn't charge us but she might like to charge other folk. We said she could have the small dining room when we weren't needing it. We're booked out next week but we don't mind to have her stay this week."

"Guess I'd best come round and check her out." He tried to think just what was legal and what wasn't but it was hardly a subject which had come up in his postings. People sometimes invited people round to their homes and no doubt did palm-readings and séances and Tarot cards and other vaguely occult activities. But he couldn't remember hearing of someone wanting to set up shop in a pub before now.

Bill was waiting in the front hall. These days he looked increasingly bent and frail but he said quite cheerfully, "She seems to know a lot. She told me things I hardly knew myself. And she told Maurie something good was going to come to him here—"

"I guess they all say that. Wouldn't be good for trade to be all doom and gloom."

"Yeah. Maurie said, you mean here, right in Buckton? And she said, yeah, right here in this pub. But she didn't say when." Dennis treated this to a sceptical eyebrow. "But you can go in," Bill went on. "She's just sitting in there. Mrs Michaela Martin."

"So how does she plan to get the suckers in? Advertise?"

"Word of mouth, I guess. Dunno if it's legal to advertise."

"I've seen the ads in the paper—the big papers, I mean. They even claim to be able to tell you your future over the phone. I'd say that's pushing it."

"Well, see what you think. And if she can't do it here … " Bill let it trail away; if she was breaking the law he hoped Dennis would get rid of her, not tell the pub to order her to move on.

Mrs Martin looked up as Dennis came to the door of the small room where he had, years ago, brought Fiona out to dinner for the first time. She was in her fifties, her hair grey, and wearing a cardigan and slacks. But he thought, unwillingly, that she had an unusually pleasant expression.

"Mrs Martin?" He came in and sat down, unasked. "So just what are you planning to do in Buckton?" For her part she saw a large solid man with his grey hair cut very close and his very fair skin reddened by sun and wind. He brought with him a sense of someone who would tend to see things in black and white, only allowing shades in on sufferance.

"Help people if I can."

"By giving them a lot of mumbo-jumbo?"

"No. Would you like to just sit there in silence for a couple of minutes?"

Dennis was tempted to say no, he was a busy man, but he thought he might as well see how she went about things. At last she said quietly, "You worry about your wife, about whether she is happy and contented in Buckton."

"Did Bill tell you that?" He wasn't fussed on someone probing him for private and personal details.

"You do not need to worry. Spirit tells me your wife is a happy woman, that she has found a life here which brings her great satisfaction, that she is happy in her marriage and that her children have brought her a deep sense of fulfillment. There may be small problems occasionally but they are surface things. She would not change this life for the one she had before."

She drifted back into silence. He was half-tempted to say it wasn't beyond the bounds of possibility for half a dozen people in Buckton to pass on information about Fiona. And yet—he did worry; that he had talked her into sharing a life which didn't use her talents and knowledge, that he had pressured her to stay in Buckton … that he hadn't considered putting in for a transfer to a more congenial posting …

"And you yourself," she said after a considerable pause, "have a touch of … perhaps you might have thought of it as second sight."

He shook his head. In the rare case when something had come to him unbidden, perhaps via intuition, he had always believed there was a perfectly ordinary explanation, that his subconscious had seen and observed …

"You are worried about a current case, a sad death." She didn't seem to expect him to say yes or no. But in a minute she went on calmly, "Spirit tells me you must look for the man's daughter. She will explain everything to you … and she too needs some help and support."

He didn't rush to say "Thanks for the tip" but he supposed it might be a way to check her bona fides.

"I don't charge," she said. "Though I don't say no if someone offers a donation. I am sponsored to travel in country areas where I can sometimes give help that isn't otherwise available."

"So who sponsors you?"

"A group in Brisbane. And I was left quite well off when my husband died two years ago. I travel for a few months in each year, a few days here and a few days there. I was given a gift. I always feel that if I can use it to make people's lives more positive then I am using the gift as it is meant to be used."

"Well, I can send my constable round. He has his problems." It probably came out sounding rather cynical.

She smiled slightly. “No, he doesn’t need me. He has you.”

“Except I nearly sent him into a nervous breakdown by yelling at him.”

“Perhaps it brought things to a head. If he would like to come, of course he is welcome.”

Dennis got up. “Well, so long as you keep a low profile and keep it so no one is pressured to donate—”

“That has never been my way.” He thought she was telling the truth; that she had never been the sort of woman he had half-expected to find, all mysterious props and equally mysterious ambiguous pronouncements and a sharp eye out for the most credulous and gullible …

Outside he found Bill Borrie waiting with Nanci Coleman. “You wanted to see me—or Madam Starlight?” Dennis said drily.

“Mrs Martin,” Nanci said rather coldly. “But if it’s any satisfaction to you—Derek is resigning at the end of the year.”

“Good oh. Well, I won’t be sorry to see the back of him. But I assume you’re staying on?” Afterwards, he wondered why he’d said that. What Nanci Coleman did or didn’t do was none of his business. She gave him a long rather expressionless look but didn’t say anything. He went on out of the hotel. He would tell Winville to look for a daughter. If it was all pie in the sky he wanted it cleared out of the way as fast as possible …

*

Dennis said to Fiona late the same evening, “Are you happy here—in Buckton?”

She was used to his blunt questions which never came with a gentle lead-in but which nevertheless expected answers. “I’ve been too busy to be thinking about me and Buckton … but yes, I mostly am. Why do you ask?”

He told her about meeting Mrs Martin and she listened with interest. “I suppose it means she has a spirit guide … but how much her guide claims to see … ”

Still, the whole thing *was* interesting and she wondered about going to see Mrs Martin herself. Perhaps she could ask about the vague worries she sometimes felt about Robbie, that something wasn’t quite right but she could never decide what she meant by ‘right’. He was growing well. He seemed healthy. His talking was increasingly clear. He enjoyed his toys and their cat Biffy. He had settled in well to his new bedroom. There was nothing obviously wrong …

But the following morning brought her a quite different dilemma. Norman Jennings and Maurie Smith lived in what had been the old police house between the station and the house she shared with Dennis. Maurie usually got himself breakfast, tidied up a bit, and wandered off to the hotel to start getting lunch ready there. Norm usually got up, fed his dog and his chooks and then pottered round the yard or watched TV. But Fiona noticed his bedroom curtains remained closed which was a little unusual. Norm had the small bedroom on this side of the house. Maurie had the bigger bedroom which had once been Dennis’s. But as Norm had the whole house to himself all day it seemed a fair trade.

He might simply have left his curtains closed. But there was no sign of him going out to his half dozen hens and the dog seemed a little lost as he sat by the back door. In the end she walked over and knocked on the front door and called out. There was no answer. Both Norm’s car and Maurie’s sat in the drive so Norm hadn’t gone anywhere. She was reluctant to intrude. Although she always smiled and waved when she saw Norm out in his yard and he always waved back she couldn’t really say she *knew* him. But he was in his late eighties and she finally went round the back, knocked, and then pushed the door open. The house except for a ticking clock and the hum of the frig was silent.

She went along the hallway, peering into the various rooms, and knocked on Norm’s bedroom door. No one responded. At last she pushed it open and looked in. Norm was in bed and his stillness suggested she had come too late. She went over and lifted a wrist but his skin was cool. The room itself was quite warm with the morning sun just touching the window.

There was nothing she could do except ring the ambulance service, then Godfrey Waddell who would most likely do the funeral seeing he had buried Norm’s cousin and long-time companion, Marguerite Poulson. Then she thought she should ring Dennis as well. There was no

sign of anything suspicious but it would scotch any rumours if anyone wanted to think that Maurie had been remiss in any way …

Dennis was out but Constable Kelly said he would come over. She was glad of that. It wasn't that she could envisage people criticising Maurie but as Norm had quite likely left the house to Maurie she thought it was as well that she had found Norman. As there was nothing more to do after Brent arrived she went home and made lunch for the children and then took them for a walk downtown. She wasn't sure whether it was a good idea to take them in to see Mrs Martin but as Dennis had said, a little reluctantly, that she seemed a pleasant woman she could see no reason not to let them come with her. Bill Borrie seemed to have constituted himself Mrs Martin's agent as he hovered in the hall, letting people in and out, but he said to Fiona, "This's sad news about Norm. I always thought he was good for a few more years." She was surprised that he knew already but probably someone had been on to Maurie. Possibly Brent …

"He always missed Marguerite, I think, and perhaps he didn't do the same amount of exercise he used to." She thought it would probably prove to be Norm's heart and that he had died in his sleep.

"Maybe not." Bill obviously didn't want to dwell on the thought of death. "She's got someone there but she shouldn't be long." He pointed to the closed door of the dining room. And in another minute or two Margaret Seymour came out, sketched a smile in their direction and went on out, looking faintly embarrassed. Margaret had begun doing regular stints in the Combined Churches' Op-Shop and Fiona had heard on the grapevine that she and her husband had joined the local Anglican church. She wondered if Mrs Seymour was merely curious like herself …

Elise was given a smaller chair as Fiona sat down with Robert on her lap. It was true. Michaela Martin did have a warm personality and radiated kindness and sympathy. Perhaps twenty minutes in her presence was good for people regardless of any psychic help …

Mrs Martin just said if they could all sit in silence and stillness for several minutes. Then she said, "Spirit tells me you worry a little … but that there's nothing to worry about. When he is about eight or nine you will become aware that he has a most unusual and precious gift. It will bring some problems with it but you will manage. It will go again but he will have the confidence by then to develop other aspects of his self."

Fiona found this rather mysterious but not worrying. Elise though said, "What is a gift? Do you mean a present?"

"No. A gift. A talent. You have many gifts, my dear, and you will learn to use them wisely."

She was silent again for a definite pause before saying to Fiona, "You don't need me but there are people who need you, especially a man who is very ill. I think he would be glad to hear from you one more time."

Fiona nodded. Bryan Adey? He accepted that there was no way back now but he was still conscious and aware … "Do you take names and addresses? Anything like that?"

"No. I am not a social worker. Sometimes I don't receive a message and I can take people's details in case something comes to me later."

Fiona wondered about this when she heard that Maurie was very upset. Mrs Martin had told him something good would come to him and instead Norm had died—and as the rumour round Buckton had it by nightfall Norm hadn't got round to changing his will which left everything to Marguerite. As she had predeceased him he was now effectively intestate and they would need to look for his next-of-kin. "And that will be Marcella's children," Mavis Barnard told Dennis when he called in to the service station for petrol.

"Don't think I've ever met a Marcella," he said drily.

"There was James, George, and Anne. James had Marguerite. Anne was the oldest and she died many years ago. She married Cyril Jennings but he was killed in the war. She had Norm and his sister Marcella … I think she died a few years back but she married a Jerrold and had three kids. I've never set eyes on any of them and I'm sure none of 'em came to Margie's funeral—but then it was a pretty quiet do and she left most of her estate to Norm. But I doubt if it'll take 'em long to come out of the woodwork." She sounded a tad sarcastic. "Norm probably had a fair whack to leave."

Mavis was right. However he heard about it Chris Jerrold was in Buckton within two days and giving Maurie notice to vacate his uncle's house. And local solicitor Charles Mather did some private sums and thought the estate, all up, could be worth over $700,000. Even divided three ways it would be an impressive windfall.

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Maurie had always accepted that he would probably outlive Norman, that Norman had no obligation to leave him the house or anything else, and that eventually he would pull up stakes and move on. He said rather mournfully to Fiona that it didn't really matter. She had noticed that they didn't usually do much together. Norm would potter around with his chooks, take his dog for a walk along the creek, sit watching TV. Maurie would sometimes sit in the front yard and listen to the birds. But he spent most of his time at the pub. Bill Borrie would no doubt let him have a room there. It wasn't ideal. Maurie wasn't an alcoholic but he was quite capable of drowning his gloom in glass after glass. "I didn't expect anything," he said to Fiona. "We weren't … mates. But it's hard to get yourself organised to move on. An' that Chris fella never once come to see his uncle."

"You're always welcome to have a room in our house, Maurie," she said. But he only shook his head vaguely and she didn't push the idea. She understood he might not want to live in such close proximity to Dennis. But although Maurie didn't see himself as having any particular mates beyond Bill and George at the pub several people round town when they heard Maurie was going to be evicted by the nephew felt it was unfair and offered him a room or a caravan.

It wasn't that he wanted a room in someone else's house but the unexpected offers touched him. At least he need have no fears about being out on the street. It was Fiona, though, who gave the problem most thought. What Maurie really needed was a quiet shabby old place to himself where he could simply potter round in his own way and at his own pace.

"Dennis," she said over breakfast, "I've been thinking—and I wondered about Jack's house. There it sits empty for more than ninety per cent of the time. Would it be worth asking him? Maurie would be out a fair bit so they shouldn't get on each other's works when Jack is home. And Maurie can put in a bit of a garden, a few chooks maybe, and feel it's home."

Jack Cox owned the house the other side of the Walsh family and as he was an oil driller he was away for long stints. The house always had a rather neglected forlorn air. But as his grandfather had left it to him he seemed to feel it was as good a home base as any.

"Yeah, why not. I'll give him a ring, see when he's next planning to be back. It may be months before they get Norm's estate sorted out but this nephew seems to be throwing his weight around already."

"I guess he'll have to share it with his siblings—but it's still a very nice windfall. He could be a bit generous when it comes to letting Maurie stay on there."

"The bugger is already talking about clearing out my trees, just putting down some lawn. I feel like making sure he doesn't find a buyer."

She smiled a little tiredly at that. She and Karen Dalton and Anne Grumm had finished putting up all the entries for the butter wrapper competition but it had been a mammoth job. There were too many for the RSL Hall so the Youth section had gone into the High School and the Junior entries to the Primary School. It had involved making extra boards to give visitors the times when the displays would be open to the public and Karen had had to take the farm truck to Winville to get some extra display boards. One of their judges, Patrick Guest, would be arriving from Brisbane tomorrow and they had rented a small unit and provided linen and stocked it with food so he could come and go as he pleased. The other judge, Renata Bingham, would come out from Winville every morning until the judging was finished. Fiona thought, as she helped put the entries up, that some of them obviously weren't of a very high standard; but that still left hundreds which would be difficult to separate. She didn't envy the judges their task.

"And given the drought it will just end up as a dustbowl if he removes the trees. He's only allowed to do a tiny bit of hand-watering so he'll need to stay on in Buckton to do that … or hire someone … and I really don't see that house moving in a hurry … "

"Well, it's his look-out. He could've let Maurie stay on."

"I know. By the way, I rang Bryan Adey this afternoon. He's finding it hard to talk but his son was there with him and he, the son I mean, said Bryan would like to leave a little something to the kids. I said just a little memento and he said he would be in touch. It would be nice if Winville would do something."

"Such as?"

"Well, what if they put an extra seat in that little park behind the station and put a plaque on it? Something like that."

With so many other things to take up his thoughts Sergeant Walsh had done no more on the case of Harry Bellingham. He just hoped Winville were being thorough before they signed off on it. When they finally came up with a useable photo he wanted to go round to 'have a chat' with Craig Goodrick. He thought Craig might've tried to touch a stranger for something, maybe even try and flog him something suss—or distract him while another member of that clan sneaked out and quietly siphoned most of the petrol out of his tank or pinched … had Bellingham had his keys on him when he went into the pub? Presumably. But Craig just might've got him a couple of drinks if he thought it would take Bellingham's eyes off his keys for a while. A game of pool. A pretence of being neighbourly and hail-fellow-well-met. He couldn't imagine Craig shouting anyone anything unless he could see a clear benefit to himself …

They found DSC Ali Deane had sent an e-mail to tell them, when they opened up next morning, 'Thanks for the tip. He's got a daughter. Meryl Brown. She lives in Garra and has a young child. She's got a guy there called Lewis Gruen. We've asked JA to go round and find out whether her dad was heading her way. The mother Roberta Brown died eighteen months ago of breast cancer. The daughter then seems to have gone looking for her dad. But this is mostly speculation still. Between the daughter and the guy he rented the caravan from we should be able to fill in his background OK. Hassell still says it was an accident and we just didn't find his matches. If he didn't smoke now it's just possible he weakened and accepted one if someone offered it. Maybe he thought he'd have a smoke by the creek while he let the grog settle. Or maybe he felt a bit nervous about going to see a daughter he hadn't seen in – who knows how long. Even if the daughter and neighbour can fill in some gaps they maybe can't tell us what made him pull in there by the creek. It still may come down to an educated guess. The inquest will be in early November.'

An educated guess. But the Goodrick clan just might be able to move it from a guess to a probable. "George still hasn't given us the list of people who were there that night," Dennis said suddenly, after reading Ali's screed. "You'd best get on to him. He'll say he's busy but go and stand over him till you get it."

"That woman is still there," Brent Kelly said rather diffidently. Standing over people wasn't something he was good at.

"So?"

"They say she can read your secret thoughts."

"So? Since when are your secret thoughts that depraved—"

"It's not that! But it's *personal*. I don't want people … "

"Fiona accepts you don't want to have any contact with your mum. And maybe it's mutual. So what else is so personal that it has to be kept a deep dark secret?"

"My dad."

Dennis was tempted to say 'How so?' but let it go. He could probably guess anyway. "She sits in the small dining room there with the door closed. She's hardly going to ambush you. So head round there now. She's probably still having her breakfast."

He watched his junior head out, reluctantly, and thought back to Mrs Martin's statement that Brent 'had' him. He wasn't sure what to make of the idea. But the phone rang and he put his musings aside. It was Fiona. She said simply, "I've just had the news from Mum. Bryan died early this morning. I just thought you would like to know." She sounded rather emotional.

"Yeah, I guess it was only a matter of time. Thanks for letting me know."

Not exactly the end of an era but he suddenly felt a touch sentimental. That he was here now in this small crowded station, dealing with the endless stream of tedious misdemeanours, had a lot to do with Bryan Adey persuading him to stay on when he had tried to resign. Should he be

grateful? Or should he resent that fact? It was a bit like asking Fiona if she was happy in Buckton. After a few moments of thought he came down cautiously on the side of … perhaps gratitude wasn't quite the word he had in mind …

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Brent Kelly came scuttling into the pub to ask if Mr Johnson was around. Emma Doig was vacuuming downstairs and she said in surprise, "You're hopeful. George won't be in for another two hours."

"He was going to do a list of everyone he could remember being in the bar the night we think Harold Bellingham stopped in here. The boss sent me round to pick it up."

She was also surprised by this. Dennis should know that George was never in at this hour of the morning. "Well, come in and I'll have a look. He might've left something there for you."

She hunted round the bar area without finding anything. So she simply lifted the phone and said a minute later, "George, Brent is here to pick up that list you were doing of customers—"

"Oh heck! I forgot all about it. Look, tell him—tell him I'll drop it round to the station on my way to work."

"Have you written it up already?"

"No. 'fraid not. Things have been a bit hectic." Emma was tempted to respond to that with a snort. But there was no point in getting George all flustered. She just said, "Well, I hope you *can* remember who was there that night."

"I know Craig and all his mates were," George said with a decline of his spirits, "and one of 'em spilt something on the pool table—I could still smell it next morning."

"I know." She didn't waste words. "It still smells. I'd like to charge a new table to him, the careless little son-of-a-bitch."

Craig Goodrick wasn't particularly little but as Emma spoke George had the sense that he *was* small; as though she had in her incisive way cut him down to his real size; the rest was simply hot air and bombast. But none of this was aiding Brent. Emma said to the young constable, "While you're here d'you want something to eat? Bill's still eating breakfast."

"No. No, I won't, I'd best get back—"

"You don't want to talk with Mrs Martin?"

"Of course not. All that stuff is the work of the devil—"

"True," Mrs Doig said drily, "but it hasn't stopped Father Colgan coming round to see her."

"I don't believe you."

"Well, off you go and I'll see to George if he forgets."

But when Brent got back to the station and repeated all this Dennis said sourly, "So what did Craig Goodrick spill on their pool table?"

"I don't know. They didn't say."

"Then I'd suggest you get in the habit of asking questions like that. It isn't easy to burn a pair of heavy jeans and a thick plaid shirt. Spilling something flammable on the poor coot'd help a fire along."

He hadn't thought of it like that and looked crestfallen. But Dennis didn't belabour the point, only telling him to get his routine work cleared out of the way. "You'll need to be out at the showgrounds by five. I'm not expecting trouble but not everyone's too fussed on Saul."

Saul Harding had billed his Buckton rally as 'Monster'. Everywhere else he had been content to harangue however many or few people turned up. But Buckton was home turf and he knew there were people who would come along regardless of whether they ticked his box or not. He had wanted to have alcohol but Dennis had told him he'd have to be content with the CWA ladies dispensing tea and sandwiches—if he cared to hire them. In the end Saul hadn't bothered with refreshments. But posters had sprouted all around the district, stuck on trees and fences and light poles, handed out as flyers at the pub, put up as a large board on top of his car. He had been pleased to hang on to the coat tails of the Dairy Festival though without offering it any help. But whether anyone would turn up to protest his policies or whether his crowd would get over-enthusiastic and rowdy—it was hard to second guess the response but Brent Kelly would be there to try and tone things down …

Dennis had estimated that maybe sixty people would turn up. But Brent when he called in to let Dennis know in the late afternoon said there were more than three hundred people there. “And anyone looking like a troublemaker?”

“There’s an oldish woman at the gate with a placard.”

“What does it say?”

“It says—‘Don’t listen to Saul. He’s mad.’ ”

“Probably his sister Martha. Anyone else?”

“No. They’ve got a big sort of covered truck going round and round the ring with messages plastered all over it. Someone said it’s probably his wife driving it.”

The vehicle had all kinds of messages. Why should local pig farmers be losing out to Canadian pork. Why should Queensland sugar producers be losing out to half the world. (Not that most Bucktonites would care deeply, Brent didn’t think, so long as the sugar was cheap and plentiful.) Then there was Saul’s bugbear: Asian immigration. There were also questions on roads and hospitals and welfare. There was also one about a ‘pedophile principal’ and why the Education Department didn’t care which Brent didn’t see as it was down low but the people in the grandstand saw it and wondered. Some had heard the rumours about Derek Coleman at the High School. Others were unaware of the police interest in him and wondered if it had anything to do with Nelson L’Estrange at the primary school … Nelson was a bit … prissy …

Saul was an unexpectedly powerful speaker. Not a trained orator certainly. But a man who seemed to understand just which buttons to press and when. He got several rousing cheers along the way and a prolonged round of applause at the end of his harangue. He stood on a makeshift dais facing the main stand, surrounded by his sound equipment and some banners; most of them saying simply ‘Vote 1 Saul Harding’ but some of them trumpeting ‘Vote for Saul. He cares’ and ‘A Vote for Saul is a Vote to Keep Our Way of Life’.

He said he would take questions and there was a roving mike for anyone with a soft voice. But the question which boomed across the dusty grounds came from the far gate where Martha Harding had set herself up with a loudhailer. “Talk about caring! Bollocks! This is a man who sold the family farm so Japana could turn it into a dust bowl! What good’s that ever done for any of you lot?”

“My dear sister has a wonderful sense of humour. It’s known as sour grapes.” He turned the sound system up so it drowned out Martha’s response. Only the few people near Martha could hear anything of what she was saying about Saul’s son Luke and the father-son foray into making and selling banned drugs and the way Saul had made her the scapegoat. Only when Saul stopped for breath could anyone else hear any of Martha’s words. And even this didn’t last for long. Saul had hired a half dozen youngish men to hand out leaflets and act as security. Two of these large men headed for Martha.

Brent also quietly headed in the direction of the gate. It wasn’t likely that they would try to rough Martha up. But they might well try to bundle her off the grounds. Before he got there though one of the men reached Martha and tried to snatch the loudhailer from her. Martha was made of stern stuff and she fought back, screaming “Don’t you dare touch me! You bloody gorilla! Keep your hands off me!” Brent realised she had come prepared for just such an action and the megaphone was tied to a belt round her waist. In the unedifying scuffle Martha let fly some ear-piercing screams. The two bouncers could be heard adding their own obscenities to the mix. Brent Kelly said rather diffidently, “Ms Harding, you’ve made your point. Would you mind leaving the grounds now?”

Martha looked mulish and he wondered what to say or do next. But then she suddenly lifted the loudhailer again and yelled, “Yeah, I’ve made *my* point. Now you know what sort of bastard is asking for your vote! The man who wouldn’t give the Proctor family a minute of his precious time in their hour of need!” But Saul had begun to talk again and only a few people heard this last bit. And not everyone there knew who the Proctors were. Then she turned and marched away. Constable Kelly drew a relieved breath and turned back to tell the two men to go and sit down.

But the brief interchange had brought George Hickman down from the stand. He had come to report it briefly for the *Buckton Bugle*. Departing from his usual practice, the *Bugle* would come out

just before the Dairy Festival so it could direct everyone to all the events and welcome visitors. George planned to put out a supplement in early November so that he could list all the prizewinners and people's reactions to everything. Now he caught up with Martha just as she went out the main gate. Brent thought Hickman asked something about 'what was that about the Proctors?' but he turned his attention back to the main audience.

And he had the feeling the mood had changed. Saul had had them in the palm of his hand—and he had squandered the moment. The squabble with his sister was juvenile. His willingness to set two large burly young men on to one middle-aged woman was unedifying. And he had avoided her questions. He might be a glib speaker, good at riding the crest of a wave, but would he make a good member to represent them? Brent couldn't guess at their individual thinking but people in the stands had turned to each other and were carrying on conversations rather than listening to Saul's answers and a small trickle of people had begun to make their way down and away towards their vehicles. Kelly wasn't certain he knew how best for any public figure to handle such a situation without losing the momentum but he had the vague feeling: if Harding couldn't deal with one crotchety sister then how would he deal with tough questions in Parliament?

The same question had come to George Hickman who was suddenly sorry he only put out a small monthly broadsheet. He thought he could've made a good story out of this evening and he was sorry it couldn't immediately go out to a wider audience. Perhaps it was time to start thinking about creating his own web-site for the *Bugle*, for moments like these that begged for lengthier coverage. He had given Saul and the other candidates brief interviews in the previous edition and Saul had come over as very confident. It might be to do with expressions of support from members of the public or it might simply be Saul himself. He had always been pretty sure of himself. But he hadn't done the one thing which now might make all the difference. He hadn't tried to mend fences with his sister …

Case No. 3: The Ladies

No one had warned Sergeant Walsh he might get a visit from Harry Bellingham's mate, Eric Dwyer, or possibly Dwyer decided on the spur of the moment to come to Buckton. Dennis Walsh found himself being confronted next morning by a man who seemed to mingle truculence and apology. "Help you?" He couldn't infuse it with a lot of enthusiasm. He had been called out to a gate-crashed party last night quite late and was feeling his age this morning.

"It's about Harry … Harry Bellingham. He was me mate all these years."

"Okay, come on in. Can you use a cuppa?" If Dwyer had just driven out from Drayton he must've got on the road quite early.

Dwyer sank into a chair in the tiny interview room and accepted the mug Kelly handed him and took a biscuit from the battered old tin the constable proffered. He had a mop of grizzled curls, a tanned and lined face, and a fair-sized beer gut. He also had, Dennis gradually decided as the interview went on, an ability to empathise …

"Okay," Dennis settled heavily into a chair. "Tell us what you know about Bellingham."

Dwyer undoubtedly knew a lot about Bellingham but putting it into some sort of coherent form obviously challenged him. At last he said, "You know we was in Westbrook together? The Home."

Dennis nodded. Whether it would be worth trying to get Bellingham's records, if they had survived, was debatable. Hard to believe he had died out at Prickly Creek because of something which might have happened more than forty years ago.

"It was a lousy shithole of a place," Eric went on. "Harry was there a lot longer than me. I'd reckon he was about a quarter Abo and he come in from somewhere further west. Muckadilla, I think it was. He told me a few stories but mostly he didn't talk. He was a real silent sort of fella. Maybe it helped him stay out o' trouble, the way you sorta wouldn't notice he was there. He'd been there since he was a kid, only about ten. I come when I was fourteen."

Why Dwyer had been sent there was irrelevant to Bellingham's death but Dennis asked him anyway. "Me dad died an' left me mum with six kids—so she farmed a couple of us out to rellies—an' me Uncle Stan use' to help himself to a bit of stuff, fell off the back of a truck, that kinda stuff. Dunno if mum knew. I reckon she was just too worn out to care. But Stan thought it was no good feedin' an' waterin' a kid if that kid wasn't any help. So he'd take me along with him. That's how I got nabbed. I always reckoned it wasn't fair. If I didn't do what me uncle wanted I got belted. If I did I got sent to the Brook an' got belted there. By jingo they was free with their belt. That bloody Golledge had this great big thick belt, they reckoned it come off a horse's harness, an' he'd get stuck into you—an' he'd keep goin' till you was wrecked. So whichever way I chose—well, it was heads you lose an' tails you lose … " Despite the intervening years Mr Dwyer obviously still found this difficult to talk about.

"And Harry, did he tell you what he did to get sent there?"

"He told me he let some sheep out of a paddock, or maybe a yard. See, he was on this property a while, an' he knew all these sheep was their killers for mutton, they was doomed, an' he felt sorry for 'em—an' the owner of the place reckoned he was a troublemaker an' got the police to take him away. I reckon it was easier in them days—you only had to say this bloke's half-caste, quarter-caste, whatever it was—an' they'd say yeah, for sure he's a troublemaker. Maybe there was more to it. But I couldn't believe in Harry doin' anything bad. He just wasn't that sort. But he spent at least eight years there, gettin' knocked around. He never tried to escape. He never argued back. He was like this sad little kid that you think is goin' to burst into tears."

"So he had a better time in there than you did?"

"No way, mate. Because those buggers got stuck into him, straight up the bum any time they caught him in the bath shed, sent him over to some of the staff. I dunno how much went on. He'd never talk about it but some of the older boys'd boast about it. I knew next to nothin' about sex when I come there. Me uncle was more interested in muckin' round with all his gadgets an' stuff than women—an' it made me sick to find out what was goin' on. I was a big kid. I was handy with me fists. Uncle Stan'd say, put up your dukes, kid, like he was in Hollywood somewhere. So I wasn't bad. An' I said, leave that kid alone, an' they did … not all the time, I don't reckon … but a fair bit. An' so Harry was like this kid that thinks I'm great. First time in me life. It was a funny thing, y'know."

"That was good of you."

"I never thought of it like that, not really. Y'see, it was Harry himself. He had these big scared brown eyes an' he'd look at you—an' I reckon it was more like not wantin' to see some useless bugger kickin' his dog. You feel like you've gotta step in an' rescue it."

Dennis nodded. "So you were both there together till—when?"

"Till we turned eighteen. It got a bit better after Golledge left but Kolberg an' Essex an' some of them other mangy bastards stayed on. My God Golledge was a sadistic bastard, a real big bastard, I still have bad dreams about him all these years later. It was him, an' the government, they musta known what was goin' on there, they took away our childhoods, that's what I reckon. You was always scared there. The littlest thing an' you'd be in strife. They'd put you to what they called 'walkin' the Path' for anything. One kid got put on it for singin', can you believe, just up and down, hour after hour. When I heard about people gettin' stuck on a treadmill—y'know, I thought, that's it, that's what it was like. Completely useless. It didn't teach you to read or write, didn't teach you how to look after cows or grow vegies … just up an' down till your feet ached an' you had blisters all over. Didn't matter how hot or cold it was."

"So you got out in the end." Dennis thought Dwyer would be late forties, maybe fifty.

"We did. An' there you are out in the world. No skills. No one to say a good word for you, an' people wouldn't want a Brook boy, like you was contaminated or somethin'. An' Harry had no family. He didn't know where they was after all those years. I was luckier. Uncle Stan was a useless bastard but a mate of his give me a job an' that was okay. I said to meself, I'm goin' to save up, just that, nothin' else, just so's I never need to be poor again. People don't pick on you so much if you've got a bit o' dough. I drank a bit but I'd put money by each week an' mum'd say I was doin' the best thing."

Dennis nodded again. “And Harry?”

“He was buggered, everything was buggered. He didn’t know what to do with himself—an’ they just said, get on your way, they never give you a scrap o’ help to find work, to find somewhere to live. You was on your own. You’d been bossed around every minute of every day an’ suddenly you got to make all the decisions. That’s hard, mate, that’s bloody hard. Harry got a job on a farm for a while. He knew how to milk a cow. That was about all he knew. But he never was in good health, the poor old bugger, an’ he was all to pieces in his mind. He give up that job an’ went fruit pickin’ for a while … an’ we lost touch for about … six years maybe. An’ then he turned up one day at me mum’s an’ she sent him on to me. I was at the Foundry by then.”

“In Toowoomba?”

“Yeah. Wasn’t much of a job, but the money wasn’t too bad. I got Harry in there but he couldn’t hack it. He’d get these headaches all the time, stonkered him. He told me he’d been with a girl for a while but they’d split up. That she’d had a kid but she told him to piss off, that she was sick of him.”

“D’you know why?”

“You got to think how it was for Harry. He didn’t have a clue when it come to women. Didn’t know how to talk to ’em, didn’t have a clue what girls expected, we was all like that a bit, seein’ we never saw a dame hardly, only the matron, an’ they didn’t encourage you to get sick, my god they didn’t, you’d say you had chilblains, you had a cold, you couldn’t hardly speak—an’ they’d tell you you was a bleedin’ little waster an’ get back to your work. It was a bit better for me. I saw me mum a couple of times while I was there … an’ I had two sisters … but it was still pretty hard. But Harry he never talked hardly, I reckon that might give a girl the willies, the way he’d just sit there an’ you wouldn’t know where his mind was … ”

“So the girl was Roberta Brown? The one that broke up with him.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t find that out till years later. Harry just said it was no good hopin’ … an’ he found another job at the saleyards for a while, that wasn’t bad, he was good with animals, like he was very quiet an’ they liked him. I had a dog then, Bruno, an’ he loved Harry. He’d come an’ sit next to him, didn’t matter if I was in the room too. I said to Harry, that was when I got enough together to buy a house … it’s me house where you lot found me out at Drayton … I said, why not come out … an’ Harry said he wouldn’t live in it with me … he thought I was getting’ sorta settled, y’know, I might be wantin’ to find a dame … an’ so he says if we can find an old van somewhere … an’ I knew a bloke, had an old plywood van he was going to flog off an’ get one of them new aluminium ones … an’ he let Harry have it for fifty dollars. He’d come over an’ have dinner sometimes, have a bath, use me washing machine … but I knew things were never goin’ to get better for him. Y’know what I think?”

“No. What?”

“I reckon he was like those folk you see in the movies now. The ones that split themselves in half. One part sorta keeps in touch an’ does what it’s told. An’ the other part’s off in fairyland.”

“Could be. If the trauma gets too serious … ”

“Yeah, I don’t know all the jargon. But it was like Harry wasn’t there half the time. But he got settled in okay. An’ I didn’t mind havin’ him there. It was like … we was mates … but it was sorta like I felt I’d been given this job, it was me job to look out for Harry. He’d drink a fair bit, an’ he’d get cheerful enough for a while, an’ we’d go back over things. That’s the trouble now. I’ve got this dame in me life, Deb, an’ she’s a real nice woman, I’m not sayin’ she’s not, but she can’t begin to know what we went through, Harry an’ me an’ the others.”

Dennis agreed. It was partly why he rarely spoke of his first marriage, his life before Buckton, because there was no one here who could really understand it and he didn’t want to have to try and explain anything. Brent, too, nodded. Every week he faced the difficulty of trying to explain his childhood to Dr Heber and every week he found himself stumbling to find the words, glossing over some things, dwelling on the less painful things.

“I won’t say Harry got to be an old alco,” Dwyer said as though he felt an obligation to be fair, “but he come pretty close. But the pub was handy so it wasn’t a big issue. He had an old Falcon then, he’d tinker round with it a bit, but he’d ask me if it was anything serious. I reckon he was

always better with animals than machinery. Seems funny that he got that job floggin' tractors an' ploughs an' headers an' all the rest. But he was quite good at it. Not pushy. You couldn't imagine Harry bein' pushy but he'd … it was like he'd give you the feelin' he had all day to spend on you, I reckon that was what the farmers that come in liked about him. It was pretty hard on him when they said the season was goin' that bad they'd have to put him off."

Dennis nodded. "And when did Meryl come into the picture?"

"Well, that was me. Well, sort of. I seen this bit in *The Chronicle* to say Roberta had died, an' I said to him, wasn't that your girlfriend, back all those years, an' he said, yeah, an' I said, are you goin' along to the funeral? He sorta ummed an' aahhed a fair bit. It was like he didn't blame her for dumpin' him, he didn't have tickets on himself, nothing like that, just sad he didn't know how to deal with women—though I reckon from some of the things he said now an' then, that she was a pretty sharp-tongued bitch at times … an' then he said no, he wouldn't go, that it'd bring back memories … an' I don't know what got into me … but I said, want me to go along? He was a bit amazed but then he said, if you want, you can tell 'em … an' I said tell 'em what? He just sat there an' said, she had a kid, she had a little girl an' I done nothin' for her. Tell her I'm sorry."

"You didn't know about Meryl?"

"Well, I sorta did an' I didn't. Harry never come straight out with it. But I reckon he knew. An' I reckon he couldn't talk about it because it'd be just another thing he'd lost."

It might make sense. It reminded Dennis of Maurie Smith. Maurie couldn't really believe that anything good might ever come to him. "So you went along?"

"I did. An' there was this pretty girl, about twenty, twenty-one, an' I could see straight away she was Harry's kid. Those big brown eyes. An' I got to talk to her a bit afterwards like. I thought of invitin' her around but then I reckoned that wasn't the best idea, that Harry'd like some warning. An' she told me she'd just got a job out at Garramindi an' she was headin' out there—so I writ down Harry's address an' said, drop him a line, it'd make his day—an' about three weeks later this letter come for him. At first he thought I was hoaxin' him, y'know, some big joke, but he finally said, okay, I'll write back. I reckon he could see I wasn't jokin' when I said she would really really like to hear from him. Here's a girl's just lost her mum, why wouldn't she want to get to know her dad a bit."

"Makes sense."

"Yeah, well, they kept on writin', not that Harry was much chop with a pen, but he tried hard, an' I said she could ring me an' I'd go an' get him, so he passed that on an' she rang him about, dunno, it was after Christmas, but a fair few months ago. So they'd ring each other once a week, an' he liked to hear her talk. But nothin' was goin' to turn Harry into a talker. But he did say it was time he pulled himself together. First he just said he'd cut down a bit—then he said he'd go on the wagon, see if he could lose a bit—" Eric Dwyer patted his own ample gut, "an' he'd cut down on the smokes. I didn't believe it'd happen but Harry was dead serious. He'd still come to the pub with me an' Deb sometimes but he'd just sit there an' have a bitter lemon an' say it's all he wanted. He give up his smokes too. Jesus! We couldn't believe it. Here was an old slob like Harry—an' he was sayin' I want her to be proud o' me. All that took will power … "

"And then she asked him to come out to Garra to live with her?"

"Well, not live, not straight off. She said she could borrow a van, park it there, an' he could stay a while, see how he liked it there. By then she'd had a bub, a little boy. She called him Jon Bellingham Brown. He was tickled pink. He used to go an' buy things for the kid all the time. But then she took up with this other guy. Dunno his name. Harry might of mentioned it but I don't reckon he did."

"Did she tell him things—about her new guy?"

"At the start of it she seemed happy enough but then she started sayin' he was a bit of a control freak, like he didn't want her to go anywhere unless he come too. Didn't even want her to go shoppin' or round to have a snack without him. That sounds like desperate stuff to me. But I dunno that Harry saw it like that. He seemed to think if he'd done more with Roberta, y'know, gone shoppin' with her, took her out for a snack, then maybe it would of lasted. I don't reckon it would but I didn't say nothin', no point in makin' a fuss about it, an' he was happy."

"So he said he'd go out for a week or two?"

"Yeah, that's right. He told me he might look around for work while he was out that way, dunno what chance he'd have, just as dry out here … but I said, go for it, Harry, but if nothin' comes up, well, your van's here for you."

"He didn't consider taking the van?"

"Nah, poor old thing, I'd reckon it'd fall apart if you tried to hitch her up behind the car. She hasn't moved in more than ten years."

Dennis nodded. He hadn't been anywhere near the Dwyer back yard but he suspected it was probably the kind tidier neighbours wished could be blitzed with a blow torch. Possibly the unknown Deborah had similar thoughts. Yet it struck him that both Harry and Eric, though they had gone through the hardening and brutalising regime at Westbrook Farm Home which had undoubtedly set many 'graduates' on to a career of crime and violence, sounded pretty decent sorts of men.

"So, anyway, Harry got on the road. He bought a box o' fruit for Meryl an' he had some toys for the kid an' a bit of his own stuff."

"So how d'you reckon he felt about meeting someone who was a stranger to him?"

"Heck, he was a nervous wreck! It was like he'd staked everythin' on it, him an' Meryl an' the kid, one big happy family. I kept sayin' to him, Harry, don't expect too much. God knows what her mum brought her up to believe about you. I was tryin' to bring him down to earth a bit, y'know. But I reckon they'd worked a lot of that stuff out when they writ letters an' rang up, so I wasn't all that worried. But when I heard Harry'd stopped into the pub here for a drink I thought, oh no! That's torn it. An' if he had a drink—did he go overboard an' say, I'll just get one packet of smokes, just calm me down a bit. I was shit scared he'd undone all the good work he'd done on himself. An' then the copper that come round said he was dead."

Eric Dwyer didn't strike either Dennis or Brent as a sentimental man. But now he sat back and they could see his eyes glisten with tears. "Another cuppa?" Dennis said briskly.

Dwyer hesitated then held out his mug. Brent went away to reboil the jug. Dennis said only, "I'd say he was lucky to have you."

"D'you know what happened? Did he drop a smoke on the mat?"

"A bit hard to say yet. But I'm not sure he was smoking. It could've been an accident but I'm not entirely happy about it. So we won't sign off on it as an accident just yet."

"But—Harry—why would any bastard have it in for Harry? You think someone maybe wanted to pinch somethin'? His wallet maybe? I'd reckon he had a bit on him—y'know, to give to Meryl. A coupla hundred at least."

"That's the question, isn't it?"

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Eric Dwyer finally finished off his second mug and said he better be getting along. "I went in that pub—where they said Harry had his last drink—an' I asked 'em about a bed for the night. Meryl said I can use the van. I said I'd just like to see her little boy, Harry's grandkid, an' have a bit of a yarn—an' she said she'd like that. She's maybe goin' to try an' find what happened to Harry's mum an' dad but I don't reckon there'll be any joy there, not if Harry didn't know. But the fella at the pub said they was booked right up, all the things you folk've got on. So I dunno if I should try somewhere else or just get on the road."

Dennis could understand that Eric might not want to turn up in Garra till he'd got himself under control again, back to his usual laconic self …

He said, "Well, hold on a tick, I'll see what I can do for you." The motel and the caravan park were likely to be booked out too. He went through and rang Kieran Dobbs and asked if he could put Mr Dwyer up for a night. "He's Harry Bellingham's mate." He said he thought he would probably be no trouble.

Kieran had a moment of blankness, what was Dennis on about, then he said briskly, "The bloke at Prickly Creek, you mean? Okey-dokey, send him round." 'No trouble' as a description from Dennis probably meant honest and reliable. And accommodation *was* at a premium in Buckton this week.

Dennis came out to the front of the station and gave Mr Dwyer directions on how to find the house over past the butter factory. But while Eric Dwyer, some twenty minutes later, was exclaiming over Kieran Dobbs's wonderful collection of old farm machinery and household items and saying "This would of cheered Harry up no end" though Kieran thought it was Mr Dwyer who was getting the bit of cheering-up from it—Dennis was smiting his forehead and saying in a sudden burst of recrimination "Holy bloody strewth! This is a cock-up and a half!"

"What is?" Brent Kelly collected up the coffee mugs.

"His bloody wallet! We never found one. Not a peep. And a leather wallet wouldn't burn to ashes in that short time."

"It might have been plastic—"

"Even so. There was nothing on him. Nothing by the creek. Winville sent us that list of everything they found in the car including the glovebox. Not a bloody peep. Which means … "

"Maybe those two guys stole it? They knew he wouldn't be needing it any more. Or he left it in the pub."

"I'd say the Mittons are honest. Still, they'll have to be asked. It could've fallen down behind a seat in the car. He could've dropped it somewhere, left it in the pub, had it stolen there … "

He seemed to stop and consider all these possibilities. Then he said grimly, "The drinks, the game o' pool. There's this guy leaning over the pool table, there's Craig round behind him, spills something, the bloke's brushing it off, thinks it's Craig trying to spoil his shot, Craig lifts his wallet. Yeah, could be. I think we'd best have another chat with Mr Dwyer before he heads to Garra. Not that it'll do any good if it was a Goodrick. The wallet'll be gone by now. Nip straight round to Kieran's and just ask him if he can describe Harry's wallet. He just might be an odd bod and carry stuff loose. And ask if Harry ever played pool. And drop into the pub on your way back. Someone like Craig'd strip a wallet in ten seconds but he might've chucked the actual wallet. Emma or George might've found one outside or in the bin."

But Mr Dwyer had had a sandwich with Kieran then changed his mind and got on the road to Garra. Maybe he felt that another long drive, the dry air gusting through the cabin of his station-wagon, would do more to bring him back down to earth, let him get his emotions well under control again. Constable Kelly rang through to Sergeant Applegarth to pass on the questions Dennis wanted asked. And no one in the pub had found an abandoned wallet.

*

Constable Kelly sometimes marveled at the image of himself on a horse. It seemed so impossibly remote from his growing up in one of the most crowded and decayed of areas in Belfast. No horses, except a few remaining dray horses, ever came into view there. But he, with Freda Donnelly's brisk encouragement, had moved on from a walk to a trot to a canter and then Freda said he might like to move out on to the track they had made just inside the boundary fence so that experienced riders could get up some speed.

His first thought was to say he couldn't possibly go out and gallop on his usual mount Sir Ned; he wasn't nearly ready. "Nonsense," Freda said casually, "you've been improving faster than any beginner I've seen in years. And I'll be there with Bradman."

Sir Ned was in his teens and a solid calm horse with a comfortable stride and Brent, to his own surprise, had discovered that he genuinely liked the horse and looked forward to seeing him once a week. Sir Ned seemed to reciprocate. It might have nothing to do with him. Sir Ned might simply be trained to come over to the fence whenever customers came. But he couldn't banish the thought that the horse recognised him and seemed pleased to see him walk over to the yards.

As the horses gained pace on the dusty track his first feelings of nervousness gradually gave way to an unexpected exhilaration. He hadn't known that to gallop on a horse of Ned's size and reach would give him a wonderful sense of power and excitement. Freda, though, wasn't about to let him go off into some starry dimension. She rode alongside him, constantly reminding him to keep his hands down, to lean forward slightly, to keep his feet balanced in the stirrups …

As they came round towards the entrance and slowed he said, "That was amazing. I didn't think I could do it."

"You'll be show-jumping in another six months," Freda said briskly. "You'll have to start thinking about getting your own horse."

This too seemed to be an astonishing thing to take on board. His own horse! If he had ever thought of a pet of any kind it was only in the area of a budgie or a goldfish. He shook his head. "I don't think I'm ready for that."

But when he passed this on to Naomi Burkett, the new vet's daughter, who also came out to ride occasionally she just said, "Why not?"

"I don't know anything about looking after horses—for starters—" And then there were practical problems for someone who lived in a tiny bedsit. He could hardly squeeze in a saddle, let alone other harness, grooming tools, a horse rug … the mind boggled …

Naomi and her mother had taken over the veterinary practice in Buckton and although some farmers had been pretty dubious, not because they were English but because they were women, they were gradually gaining acceptance. Brent liked Naomi very much but he was careful to see it just as a pleasant friendship and he was certain that was all Naomi wanted. He still sometimes secretly hankered after Iris Hitchener but he knew that relationship was dead and gone and although Iris was pleasant and polite in the occasional times when they met she never showed any sign of wanting to see him again. What he didn't really see but which Dennis and Fiona and the Catholic priests saw to some extent was a growing maturity. He still carted round many unresolved problems but he was slowly growing less defensive about talking them out with Dr Heber and his relations with local people were more relaxed. He went round to see Warren Pounder and his wonderful model railway at least once a week and sometimes secretly wondered how he could start his own railway. The cramped police flat was hardly big enough to set down a small siding let alone tracks and turntables and landscapes … and now he was considering gear for a putative horse … would it come down to having to make a choice?

"Yes, you do," Naomi had taken the Walsh pony Freddie over to the vet surgery and had him in a paddock there and worked him in her spare time. "You're learning about horses all the time, as well as about riding." Freddie had some very bad habits including a belief that he was expected to go at one pace—full gallop—and to stop like a cowhorse with his haunches practically touching the ground. But gradually he was responding to Naomi's patient handling. Now and then Brent brought Elise and Robert Walsh over to help groom the pony and get to know him. It might be six months or more before there was any likelihood of Elise being allowed on to his back but the pony was learning to look forward to the children's visit and both Brent and Elise were picking up the basics of horse care, almost without trying. "I sometimes see ads in the papers for horses and I might go and see a few of them. Would you like to come with me?"

"To give you advice?" Brent said with a sudden wry grin.

Naomi hesitated. She had thought of it more as company but now she said, "Why not? Two sets of eyes are better than one." Brent, in another moment of surprised recognition of his changing self, realised he would love to go out with Naomi and look at horses to buy …

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It was Freda who rang and asked him if he would like to join them on an evening ride through the week. They and six of their students would ride round some of the quieter back roads and then come back to the riding school and have a barbecue. "I haven't ridden out on the open road," Brent immediately said, picturing Sir Ned careering away with him and all the other riders sniggering behind his back.

"I wouldn't suggest you join us," Freda said rather tartly, "if I thought you couldn't handle such a ride without any problems."

He didn't like to argue with her. Nor did he like to ask her if Naomi Burkett had been invited. He could say no, he was too busy, and it would be partly true. Dennis wanted them to clear the books if they possibly could so they could concentrate on traffic and visitors during the Festival. But he also understood that Dennis would probably say "Go", that he would see it as a way of getting to know people and the back roads of his patch, that he would see it as exercise and improving his riding …

It seemed simplest to say he would come. Naomi wasn't there but the other riders, all strangers to him except for Freda, seemed quite pleasant and friendly and one of them, a young woman who introduced herself as Melissa Gwynne, said it was the first time she had ridden outside the paddock. And he soon realised he need not have worried about Sir Ned. He was probably the calmest best-behaved horse there.

It was a relaxed evening and Brent thought riding a horse round the back roads and small side lanes past the various farms gave him a rather different view of things. For a start he was up higher. And he didn't have to concentrate on the road surface. And he was going at a different speed.

But the evening abruptly changed its pleasant chatty tenor as they came up the slight rise past the Pickering farm. Father Colgan had told Sergeant Walsh he had heard on the grapevine that Paul Pickering had a new woman on the farm. Paul Pickering, in Dennis's view, was a handsome psychopath who talked young women on various farm exchange schemes from overseas to come and live with him. Dennis always wondered how they heard of Paul and why none of the schemes actually vetted the farm and its owner. "I think you haven't taken on board the seduction of cyberspace, Dennis," the old priest said. "People leave their sense of judgement to go begging and think everything they read must be true."

Perhaps. And he hadn't found, so far, a reason to go by the farm and make sure the woman was safe.

Now the riders saw a big ute come out the gate of the Pickering farm. Brent could see it was a young woman who had got out to open the gate and wait for the car to drive through. The farm also had a grid but it had been allowed to fall into disrepair. Now she looked back along the track to the group of riders coming up the slope. The car drove out on to the gravel road and waited for her to come over and get in.

But the young woman closed the gate then stood as though turned to stone. The driver got impatient and tooted the horn. Probably Pickering was going into town for one of his rare visits to the pub. The woman looked towards the riders, then back to the car, then surprisingly she began to run towards the little group. She reached Freda at the head of the group and cried out "Help me! Don't let him take me back!"

Several of the horses shied and cavorted a little. But Sir Ned simply slowed and came to a calm halt. Freda looked towards Brent and said "Maybe you'd handle this."

She might be expecting to see a dazzling display of police procedure but Brent only managed to say rather feebly, "What's the matter, madam?"

"He's mad! He's a mad man! I cannot stay there with him!"

"Okay. You don't have to."

The car, or its driver, had continued to sit a further minute in the middle of the road. Now it moved off slowly down the rise and turned left towards Buckton. Brent hesitated. Should he offer to come down to the farm with the young woman? Should he suggest she walk along with them? In the end he did what he often did; got his mobile out of his saddlebag and rang his boss and told him where they were and what had happened.

Dennis had just got home and was being 'taught' some of the rhymes Elise had just been teaching her little brother. He didn't particularly want to go anywhere but he finally said, "Stay there then and I'll be out in ten minutes." He had just, with a feeling of relief, taken off his shoes and socks.

Elise immediately asked if she could come with him. And as soon as she asked, Robbie clamoured to come too. He turned to Fiona. "What d'you think? I've got to go and pick up another of Pickering's victims. Brent says he's not there, that he was heading into town, so I guess it would be okay." In the end he left with both Robbie and Elise in Fiona's car. If nothing else it would tell the strange woman she was safely back in the land of normal people.

As he came up the slope and along the rise to the Pickering gate he could see a woman standing with the group of riders, several of whom had dismounted and seemed to be chatting with her. He pulled into the dry verge and got out. "Okay, what's the trouble?"

It struck Brent, if not the others in his party, that the minute Dennis arrived the problem seemed to shrink down to something easily manageable—whereas he, under the impact of the

woman's rising hysteria, had been having horrible visions of Paul Pickering coming back to accuse them all of … of what? Alienating the woman's affections perhaps. Interfering in …

A few minutes later Dennis had talked the woman into getting into the car and going back to the farm to get her things. Brent felt that he probably hadn't covered himself in glory; not in his own eyes, not in the eyes of the group. But as the car turned into the farm gate he could see Elise waving to him. He waved back. The whole group of riders waved back. It didn't really seem to matter. He knew how much his boss's kids enjoyed their occasional opportunities to come out on a 'case' with their dad. They, at least, would be pleased he had called on Dennis for help.

By the time he'd had a barbecued sausage in a roll and a piece of apple pie and come back to Buckton the station except for its light over the front door was closed and dark. He went in cautiously and a little stiffly and found a note on the counter for him. It said simply 'Taking Maria Callas round to the pres. for the night.' He had some vague idea that Maria Callas was a Greek singer. Surely this must be some kind of joke? Or was it a very common name in Greece? And pres. must surely mean presbytery.

In the morning Dennis simply explained it away—"Well, she certainly sang for her supper—or whatever. Soon's I got her in here she started saying her dad would kill her and no one'd want to marry her now—she went on and on and I couldn't shut her up. I was just glad I'd dropped the kids off first. I said she'd best go round and confess in that case. They said she could stay there for the night and they'd take her to the doctors this morning. But she said something about being Greek Orthodox and her dad would kill her and I said 'you'll be safe there, it's the one place Pickering won't come'. But you'd best check on her, see if she wants to lay charges." He hadn't known if the killing part of it had to do with sex with Paul Pickering or going to see two Catholic priests. Buckton didn't run to anything as exotic as an Orthodox place of worship.

Brent felt very nervous as he went round to see Father Meagher and Father Colgan. He knew he wasn't good with women and particularly not with hysterical women. But there seemed no help for it. And the young lady was simply sitting down to breakfast with the two priests and looking quite cheerful and calm. Father Colgan said drily, "Another one for breakfast, Carmen," to his housekeeper and to the young constable, "So the dreaded Paul is at it again?"

"I—I don't really know. I haven't got my head around it all."

"Well, sit down and have some toast and coffee, and we'd better think what's best to do. Oh, and we've found his recruiting web-site. I'll show you in a minute. He's got himself on there like some Hollywood heart throb. I'm not surprised that girls are willing to risk things to come and work on his farm. It must be a shock when they actually turn up and see it. And he offers to sponsor them to help them get a work visa. I wonder how many he knocks back."

Father Meagher turned and looked at 'Maria Callas' and then back to his colleague. He thought the deciding factor would be that faint hint of vulnerability. Girls whose farming parents or relatives were poor; girls who weren't very confident or tough; girls whose relatives would not or could not come here to check that they were safe and well.

"And your name isn't really Maria Callas, is it?" Brent said naively.

Father Colgan seemed to find that very funny. But the girl, after a startled look at him, just said, "No, it is Irina" but then she added on a very long surname. Possibly Dennis was merely saving himself a bit of brain fag.

"So—what next? D'you want us to charge Mr Pickering?"

She turned and stared at Constable Kelly but only shook her head. "I must go home."

"How much time is still on your visa?"

She got up and went away and brought a little bag of documents back with her. He went through them carefully. Everything seemed to be in order and she still had another ten months that she could stay here and work. "You don't have to go home if you don't want to. We can maybe find you somewhere safe to work. Have you always done farming work?"

He tried to think of someone who might need a hand on the farm and came up blank. Dennis would be sure to have ideas—but then Dennis didn't mind to foist people like this young woman on to local people … Dennis would probably have not only a job and a place to stay but a husband lined up before you could say Jack Robinson. The thought surprised him.

She nodded. “My father he has goats. We milk them for cheese.”

“Well, that … that sounds interesting.” But his mind remained blank. A few people round the district had a goat or two but he couldn’t think of anyone who kept goats as a business.

“I can show you some pictures.” She seemed to think his hesitation was due to doubts about her bona fides. He thought of saying “Oh no, that won’t be necessary. But I just can’t think … ”

Father Colgan saved the day by saying drily, “Well, it *is* a Dairy Festival we’ve got coming up. So why don’t we have a look at those pictures later? Maybe we could turn it into a display and you could tell people what it’s like in Greece making cheese from goats’ milk. We still haven’t done anything about a display in the church.”

“It is not Greece,” she said rather diffidently. “It is Cyprus.”

“Interesting. Well, what say we put our thinking caps on? We could maybe borrow a couple of goats and have them in the churchyard and people might like to come in and chat about it with you and it just might lead on to the offer of another job.”

She didn’t jump at this idea, perhaps because she couldn’t envisage the scene John Colgan had in mind, but later she told Dr Sorenson in a small voice that it was the sex there that was making her sick and she thought she would be better off dead than having to tell her father …

Brett Sorenson wondered if she meant she was pregnant. He profoundly hoped not. Paul Pickering, from the little he knew of him, wasn’t someone he would wish on anyone and certainly not this frightened young woman. But as he took her history he felt he could rule that out. She did literally mean that sex with Paul made her sick.

She was reluctant to let him examine her but finally consented. He was horrified to find the mess she was in, the skin of her thighs chafed and raw, her genitals swollen and bruised.

“You mean—he’s wanting sex when you’re in this state?”

“He never stops.”

“He keeps wanting sex all the time?”

“He … he starts to have sex and he goes on and on and I say ‘stop please stop’ and he never stops. He is like a … like a machine.”

“Well, you’re not a machine so let’s see about getting you healed up. I’d like you to spend a couple of nights in hospital to rest up and you’ll feel better with nurses there to change your dressings. I’m going to put light pads on these raw patches but I’d like them to find somewhere very private where you can sit with some sun and fresh air on this mess. I’ll see what they can arrange for you.”

It was strange, Brett Sorenson thought later, after Sister O’Brien had taken Irina under her comfortable wing, that many men would give their eye-teeth to be able to last a little longer when it came to sex—and their partners too—but there was obviously a happy medium. It must’ve taken long bouts of sex to get her into that state of festering painful rawness …

Father Colgan meanwhile was getting on to a couple of their parishioners who kept a few goats to see what he could organise and by nightfall he had the promise of two Saanan nanny goats, both with twin kids, that he could borrow for a week, provided he made sure they were well-fed and watered. It seemed a job tailor-made for Irina when she was passed fit.

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Dennis was tempted to forego the regular speed checks on the road out towards Burleigh. They had enough else on their plate. But in the end he said ‘what the heck’ and got the camera out. It wasn’t that the police were invisible on the long straight increasingly flat road. It was more that many people couldn’t resist the temptation to put their foot down—or simply didn’t realise that their speed had crept over the limit. Many country roads had no limit but a past decision had been made, he wasn’t sure who by, to keep it to 120 kilometres per hour. It made sense. The school bus stopped and started. The tanker turned in farm gates. Occasionally stock were being moved from farm to farm. And there were people like Ken McLaren who seemed to be allergic to fixing their fences. And there wasn’t much left of a heifer if she got hit at 120 plus …

Instead the afternoon turned up an old Fairlane with four Murris, three young men and an older woman. The youths were all set to argue. They hadn’t seen a sign. So how the hell could they

know … But Dennis only said shortly, “Then you need your eyes tested. You’re not fit to be driving. There’s three signs coming out of Buckton.”

They challenged this, saying again they hadn’t seen them, and it was an open road, wasn’t it? All three young men stood around him, angry and argumentative. Dennis remained unfazed, simply asking to see the driver’s licence, and asking whether they wanted to pay an on-the-spot or face a summons. He wasn’t happy about their behaviour or the fact that they had already got a few drinks under their belts. He went back to his car and got the breathalyser as well. The driver was under the limit but only just.

“What the heck d’you think you morons are up to? How much grog’ve you got on board?”

“None of your business.”

It wasn’t a crime to buy it and cart it. But there was a good chance they would pull off somewhere, Prickly Creek maybe, and flip some more cans. The older woman, possibly an auntie or even a mother of one of them, got out of the car with her handbag and a large hold-all which she had been clasping on her lap and stood there looking worried. Dennis turned to her and said grimly, “I don’t blame you, madam, I wouldn’t travel with these idiots if you paid me.”

But in the minute that he turned and spoke to her the three young men seemed to make a collective decision: almost as one they threw themselves back into the car and took off with a spurt of gravel. A couple of the small stones struck the woman but she didn’t say anything. And he wasn’t sure if she was shocked or relieved to see them dwindle into the distance; perhaps a bit of both. He could get their destination from her, no doubt, but he went back to the car, saying only, “Get in and I’ll drop you back in Buckton”, and made a call to John Applegarth in Garramindi to tell him the three young hoons were heading towards Prickly Creek in a cream Fairlane. “All Murris, all with brains the size of peas, don’t risk anything but clock them as they come past the turn-off if you can. I’ll guarantee they’ll be way over the limit.”

Sergeant Applegarth said he would see what he could do and that he had some info on the Bellingham case and would ring later. Dennis came back to the police vehicle. The unknown woman had put her bag at her feet and got in the front passenger seat. He got in. “I’m Dennis Walsh. I assume you’re related to those morons?”

It wasn’t the way to start a beautiful friendship but she said only, “Yeah, okay, I am. I’m Dorita Muga. They’re all me nephews. I told ’em to slow down but they’re goin’ to a rodeo thing an’ they’re runnin’ late.”

“They’re going to ride a bronc like that? Dead pissed? They must be mad.”

“No, it gives ’em courage. But they made me nervous. They said they’d take me to me daughter’s place along the way. I want to see her. But I got a bit scared in there.”

“So where’s your daughter?”

“In Dalby. She jus’ got a job there. She’s jus’ left school but. So I want to see she’s okay, y’know.”

“Well, I can’t take you to Dalby but I’ll take you back to Buckton and get some details about those nephews of yours and then I’ll see if I can find you a safer way to get there.”

She was overweight and rather untidy but she had a big flashing white smile which suddenly made him think of his first mother-in-law. Wilma. He had mended some fences with her when he’d taken the family up north to the family station beyond Normanton and up to Aurukun to see Wilma, before they went overseas last year. He knew she had never got over losing her daughter Norena, the first Mrs Walsh, even though she had other children. The loss still seemed as fresh as it had been thirty years ago.

But she was a big-hearted woman. She didn’t seem to resent that he had found himself a second wife and a new family. Perhaps it had something to do with Fiona’s tact and kindness too. Or something to do with Elise’s outgoing friendliness. Elise now knew about Norena and her lost little half-sister Danielle, though not the tragic details, and she was happy to sit and listen to Wilma’s stories and see her few pictures. She had said to Wilma, “She is really my big big sister, isn’t she?” Wilma had liked that.

Dennis took Mrs Muga into the Coolibah, thinking they might know of someone heading Dalby way, but the only people there were George Johnson and Maurie Smith sitting over a coffee

and some cake. Dennis came over and said, “Mrs Muga needs a lift to Dalby. D’you know of anyone heading that way? I’d take her myself but I’m pretty pushed for time.”

George got up and went over to get another mug from behind the bar. “You sit down and have a coffee,” he cut another slice of cake, “while we see what we can conjure up for you. I’m George and this’s Maurie.”

She looked around the quiet room and back to the two men. It was Maurie who said suddenly, “Why don’t I take you? I can be back by six and Bill can start things for me.” The pub usually served dinner round seven unless a customer wanted something earlier or later.

“Okay, I’ll just get those details from you and I’ll leave you to get on your way.”

She gave him the three names and their home addresses and where they were heading; then she hesitated before saying rather diffidently, “They’re not bad boys. They jus’ … they jus’ sorta push each other, y’know.” Dennis nodded. Put three youths together and sooner or later they started egging each other on to do something stupid.

He had seen drunks try to ride broncs and bulls. He had seen drunks in the show ring. The idea that a few drinks gingered a rider up and gave him more courage was, in his opinion, one of the more stupid fallacies that seemed to have acquired immortal life.

“They probably aren’t bad boys,” he said grimly, thinking back to Eric Dwyer and Harry Bellingham, “but they’re not doing themselves any favours by going crazy out on the roads.”

He didn’t see George wink at Mrs Muga as he closed his notebook and went out. But as soon as he’d gone George said, “Maybe your young rellies were lucky. Dinny’s tough but he’s fair. Anyway, what say I make you some sandwiches for the trip while Maurie goes to get his car.”

When Maurie brought his old Dodge around and helped his passenger in and took the picnic basket George had put together with a Thermos and some sandwiches and some fruit the afternoon was well along. “Don’t worry about rushing back,” George said cheerfully. “I’ll see if Emma can come back for a while.”

That George might be playing cupid did not occur to Maurie. But as he headed out of Buckton Dorita Muga said, “It’s not Mrs Muga, y’know, that copper got it wrong. I use’ to have a fella but he knocked me round a bit. I went an’ got a job cleanin’ in a pub in Bollon, that’s where me daughter grew up, then we went to Toowoomba, an’ now she’s got a job in a pub in Dalby. She seems pretty happy but I wanna be sure, she’s my only bubba, y’know.”

“We need an extra person in the pub,” Maurie said vaguely.

*

John Applegarth was true to his word, ringing Dennis later to say, “Looks like you scared them, Dennis, they came past okay but I doubt they were doing more than eighty—or maybe they thought you might’ve rung every cop shop along their route.”

“Well, that’s something. So what else have you got for me? Dwyer came to visit you, did he?”

“He did. He and Bellingham’s daughter came in to see me this morning. I said how come she didn’t come in sooner, when they put that stuff on the news, it would’ve saved us some trouble. She said, first off she just thought her dad had changed his mind about coming—then when she heard the stuff over the radio she got scared. She didn’t want to be associated with it all. She says we can’t blame her, that she’d never even met him, just talked on the phone and sent cards, and she thought maybe he wasn’t like the guy he’d pretended to be, something like that. I didn’t realise they hadn’t met. And she’s got this boyfriend that’s a bit of a control freak, I don’t think he’s the father of her little boy, but he acts like he’s the guard at the door of the harem, you know, expects her to tell him where she’s going and what she’s doing and who she’s going with and all the rest. She rents a granny flat from a Mrs Little and she arranged to get an old caravan and park it in the driveway for her dad to stay in.”

“S’far as we know at this point it was just a sad accident. Why would she be scared to come forward? A couple of beers didn’t turn him into a monster.”

“She didn’t say so but I get the feeling that was the boyfriend putting in his oar, working on her to get her all worried about owning up to the dad. He hasn’t got a record but he’s the sort of guy you keep a bit of an eye on. He probably thought he didn’t want us coming round every day.”

“Could be. So what follow up are you planning?”

"It's a bit hard to know. Hassell told me it was a sad accident and now we've got the identity we can simply sign off on it. It looks like Wang handed the case back to him when the p.m. didn't come up with anything suspicious. I thought I'd go and have a chat with Mrs Little this evening but there isn't a lot more I can do."

"So what did Eric Dwyer say about Bellingham's wallet?"

"Says he never noticed particularly but he'd be pretty sure Harry always had it on him. He couldn't give me a description, just that it was dark, but most wallets are black or brown."

"Has anyone checked to see if he had any credit cards?"

"Not that I've been told. I'll check."

It was an awkward situation, spread between Winville, Garra, and Buckton. And with Hassell trying to get everything damped down and signed off on …

"And I'd say this Lewis Gruen might be worth checking, a bit of background, where was he the night Harry died—"

"She says he was with her all evening."

"Well, see if Mrs Little noticed anything. And have a look at the phone accounts for both Meryl and Lewis. Get an idea … Bellingham didn't have a mobile but you've got his home phone, haven't you? At least, it's not his, it's Eric Dwyer's, but it's pretty much the same thing."

John agreed to do a little more digging. But the message that Harry Bellingham had tried to give the Mittons when they came to his aid was almost certainly "Tell Meryl—", not anything to do with his death. Still, Dennis thought he might take a minute to get on to the Mittons and see if that rang any bells. What would he have wanted to tell his daughter as he was in extremis? That he loved her? That it was all his fault? That someone had done something to him? That he wanted his possessions to go to his newly-found daughter?

Elvis Mitton answered their shared phone and said they were having a great time at the beach but they would hit the road in a couple of days. "Are you planning to head back through Buckton?" Dennis said briskly.

"We can," Mr Mitton said cautiously. "Why?"

"We've found Harry Bellingham's daughter. Her name is Meryl Brown. Does that ring any bells? When he tried to say something to you?"

Mr Mitton paused before saying, "No, I can't say it does. We've gone over and over it—and although we thought he must be saying a name we haven't come up with anything that fits. If it didn't sound a bit weird I'd say he was trying to say 'Tell the cops—' but maybe it was just something a bit like that. We tried to think of a name that might be similar."

"Well, thanks for that. If anything comes back—give me a buzz."

Weird? Dennis considered the thought. It was hard to confuse it with 'Meryl'. But there were plenty of other things to confuse it with. He said it a few times, 'the cops', 'the cops', and he started to believe it was possible the Mittons had heard just that. But it begged the question: tell the cops—what?

*

Dennis Walsh didn't relish the thought of having to go back to Winville for the case of Adele Morgan accused of trying to kill her husband; or, more specifically, she had accused herself. The forensic evidence did not seem to add up and the case was a mess, not least because the death of Donald Morgan had been signed off on as a heart attack complicated by his motor neurone disease. Walsh didn't really expect this hearing to bring clarity to the mess but it couldn't be thrown out. Adele Morgan *had* confessed to trying to do away with her husband … and Dennis and everyone else who had heard the tape believed she was telling the truth on it … or the truth as she saw it …

Last time a number of women had turned up in very vocal support of Adele Morgan. DS Sullivan said he'd heard on the grapevine that Adele had rung a friend from her teaching days who had got a number of other women to come along and create a small demonstration outside the court house; but somewhere along the route something had got misunderstood or the women hadn't understood, or hadn't accepted, that there are other kinds of spousal abuse beyond physical abuse and the whole thing had been counter-productive, not least, Sullivan had told Dennis Walsh,

because people weren't going to take seriously the idea that a man who was gradually losing all movement in his limbs could still be beating up on his wife …

"If anything," Dennis had said in response to this, "it was the stepdaughters who were the real abusers—but Donald sounds an unpleasant sod so there's also the likelihood he was happy to see his daughters get stuck into Adele. But don't ask me if it was only verbal or whether they ever got physical … "

He had to be in court because he had taped his interview with Mrs Morgan in which she admitted to trying to poison her husband with the sap from lily-of-the-valley leaves and stems and flowers. But magistrate Graham Kelso didn't seem any more enamoured of the case than Mrs Vohland had been when she had found it on her list a month ago. This time Adele had only Barbara Landy from the general store in Norwilla and two unknown women as support and the two stepdaughters sat well away from them. The hearing did not seem to have aroused other local interest except for a young woman from the *Winville Courier* who sat at the back with her notebook. Winville didn't run to reserved seats for the Press. And maybe local people were getting tired of listening to the stepdaughters banging on about their evil stepmother …

Kelso listened to the tape. He listened to Dr Davis's description of the exhumation and post mortem on Donald Morgan. And then he said drily, "Mrs Morgan, you have said you tried to kill your husband. The post mortem results do not bear that out."

"But the intent was there. My husband wanted to die. He told everyone that. And I was quite willing to help him. I hated the thought of being tied to an incapacitated man I had come to hate."

Kelso did not immediately respond to this. He steepled his fingers and looked out over the small court room. Then he said carefully, "The fact remains that neither the post mortem evidence nor the interview with Sergeant Walsh are sufficient to warrant taking this case any further."

Before he could go on both Wendy Fisher and Bette Davidson stood up as though jerked by the same string. "That's rubbish!" Wendy said loudly. "You heard her! She intended to kill our poor father and she's been too clever for the useless cops we've got round here!"

"Sit down, Mrs Fisher, or you will have to leave the court room."

For a moment it looked as though it would turn into a battle of wills then both Bette and Wendy sat down with the greatest of reluctance.

Kelso felt they had a point. The police had straggled along with the case, showing about the same level of direction as Brown's cows, but it was partly the fault of Dr Davis. To have written a death certificate for Donald Morgan so glibly, even though the man had been rushed to hospital by his wife, and had continued to vomit or dry retch after reaching medical care, and was dead within thirty minutes of arriving, surely suggested an immediate post mortem would not go amiss.

"I am not going to speculate any further on this case until the medical side of things can be tested at an inquest. I am going to request that an independent expert look at *all* the medical evidence, including the drug regime Donald Morgan was on before his death. To have tested a sample of vomitus does not seem beyond the bounds of possibility for a hospital—"

"They were all in cahoots with her!" Mrs Fisher had once more leapt to her feet.

"Mrs Fisher." Graham Kelso glared at her and she sat down again.

He then set a date for the next hearing and moved on to the next case on his list. It had an unsatisfactory anti-climactic feeling about it. But Dennis was fairly good at reading between the lines. Graham Kelso appeared to have some problem with the drugs, the number, the combination, perhaps one particular drug, which Donald Morgan had been prescribed before his death. And so the whole thing would drag on. But perhaps that was his intention. Neither Adele Morgan nor Leslie Davis had come out of the process smelling of roses. They would now continue to be the focus of gossip and speculation. That in itself was a form of … if not punishment then embarrassment and humiliation. A life in the pillory so far as local people were concerned. Dennis thought the case would continue to come up regularly, Mrs Morgan and Dr Davis continually called to court, and then it would finally be dismissed for lack of evidence. Unless Kelso's 'expert' could find something which had eluded Drs Wittenbach and Davis.

He didn't waste any more time speculating on it, and he didn't really want to be around when the stepdaughters came out because they were still convinced that if it wasn't for the foot-dragging

by the police their stepmother would now be under lock and key. He went downstairs and round to the station nearby and asked to see Sergeant Hassell. Aidan Hassell was not one of his favourite people but the Bellingham case had largely been put back into his hands as a traffic 'incident'. Dennis thought this was a mistake. Hassell was a lazy sod and there was little likelihood he was beavering away with the case.

Stephanie said, "He's down at the canteen. I've told him you're here to see him. Take a seat. He shouldn't be long." The canteen here was merely a coffee and tea machine and a widow who came in to make sandwiches and rolls and heat pies and pastries and serve out shepherds' pie or slices of pizza. But she was actually an excellent cook and her homemade pies and cakes and salads, when Dennis had occasionally sampled something, were superior to the commercial ones. She was also cheap and friendly and discreet. He sometimes thought that Winville didn't appreciate how lucky they were.

Hassell came through carrying a salad roll and said rather sourly, "What is it? I'm busy."

"Looks like it," Dennis could be testy too. "The Bellingham case. Remember it?"

"So? Stupid sod. If he was stupid enough to drink and smoke and nod off—hardly World War Three."

"Except we have it on good authority that he'd given up smoking at least six months before."

Dwyer had been adamant: Harry had gone on the wagon, thrown away his smokes, lost a bit of his belly; in other words he had taken the opportunity to be a father seriously enough to really pull himself together. He had failed to knock back the offer of a drink, or so it looked like, but had he failed to knock back the offer of a smoke?

"He accepted a drink, they found it in his stomach—so that's bullshit what you said about him being on the wagon—and I'd say he accepted a smoke. Got to the bridge, pulled off, finished his smoke but didn't hoy it. Thought he'd have a quick snooze but forgot the butt was still there."

"And three hours later it suddenly flared up."

"Could be. It'd smouldered away, maybe on the floor and then it got to something spilt, bit of grease, and it flares up. Just accept it, mate, it was a sad accident."

"And what happened to his wallet?"

"Got burnt."

"No, nothing in that car was burnt beyond recognition—and certainly not a wallet."

"He left it somewhere, sat it on the bonnet while he looked for his car keys, drove off and left it somewhere. It's not an issue." As he'd spoken, Hassell had grown more cheerful. Possibly the logic of his own words convinced him of the truth of his beliefs about the case. "No one saw anyone. No one heard anyone. Accept it, chum, there was no one else there and the poor bugger set himself on fire."

Put like that Dennis had his own moment of doubt. None of the tiny discrepancies, the lack of a wallet, that possible handkerchief, the lack of smokes or lighter, the words the Mittons may or may not have heard, a vehicle possibly parked in the Drexlers' laneway, were sufficient to build a case on. But Dennis couldn't bring himself to accept Hassell's view. A couple of drinks would not be enough to turn Bellingham's sleep into a drunken stupor. If that fire had smouldered for three hours … then it would have woken him much earlier …

But he had nothing else to put against Hassell's certainty.

That sense of Craig Goodrick acting out of character wasn't enough to make the death more than an accident. If Craig had lifted the wallet then that was simply Craig being his usual light-fingered self. It probably had nothing to do with the death by the bridge three hours later …

But he couldn't bring himself to go along with Hassell's view. It might merely be dislike of Sergeant Hassell. He was honest enough with himself to see that that might come into it. He didn't want Hassell to be proved right. Maybe. And it wasn't as though Meryl Brown was jumping up and down and demanding 'justice' for her father. If anything she might find 'sad accident' easier to live with. It was more that vague sense that something didn't feel quite right about the apparent sequence of events. If there was someone who had got away with this as the simple answer to … he couldn't decide what it might be an answer to … then that person would be feeling very cocky and

they might well be tempted to use this method again if and when they faced what they saw as a problem in the future.

But he thought the real spur was Eric Dwyer. The friendship had undoubtedly been born out of adversity, two kids finding comfort in each other, in shared misery, but it had stood the test of time. Eric Dwyer was honestly happy about Harry coming to meet and stay with his daughter. He wanted the best for Harry. And Eric Dwyer, Walsh believed, had genuinely been deeply distressed by his mate's death …

Case No. 4: The Heirs

Chris Gerrold had relented, possibly in response to local criticism, and told Maurie he could stay on a bit longer—if he would mind the chooks and find a home for the dog. But Maurie just wanted to be gone. He hadn't minded living with Norm. The old man just pottered along and didn't complain about anything. But now the house seemed to be full of thoughts of death, of vaguely felt ghosts of Norm and Marguerite, and since Norm's funeral, where he'd had to stand alongside the three Gerrolds, his one thought was to pack and move.

Jack Cox had only said vaguely that Maurie might like to come round when he, Jack, got back in a couple of weeks and discuss it. Dennis had said to Fiona, "Has Jack got something against Maurie?" But it might just be they had woken Jack, tired after a long shift, or he needed time to think how such an arrangement might work. The house was still full of Cox family belongings. Possibly Jack needed to think whether to get rid of some of them, or push them into one room and lock it, or simply give Maurie the run of the place as is …

Then again Jack might be like some local people who were quick to say 'I'm not a racist but—' It wasn't something they said twice to Dennis Walsh. His grim 'but what?' put them off trying to spell out a vague 'them' and 'us' scenario.

"So we're not much further forward. Maurie needs to be out of that place. It's not a good atmosphere, just living there on borrowed time."

"Well, I spoke to Naomi and she and Jon haven't got anyone in the little flat. They said Maurie's welcome to have it. Though the Cox place would be better so he could keep the dog and the hens if he wants to … I said we could have them here until he gets settled."

"So that Gerrold guy doesn't want them?"

"It doesn't sound like it. And he can hardly put Norm's old dog up for sale."

Naomi Duggan and Jon Dundas had a tiny flat tacked on to the back of their old house. It was quite pleasant and Maurie didn't have much stuff. But Dennis could see a sub-set creeping in; George Johnson had been going round telling people, anyone who showed any interest, that Maurie had fallen for Dorita Muga. As she was now living in Dalby with her daughter it was a bit hard to see how any romance might be expected to blossom. And Maurie was nearly thirty years older and convinced that no woman would ever be the slightest bit interested in him …

But George was adamant that she would come back and that Maurie needed a decent-sized house for when she came. "You got this from the horse's mouth?" Dennis said next time he saw George.

"I'm an old hand," George said drily. "You take my word, Dennis, there'll be wedding bells there soon."

"Has this got something to do with that Mrs Martin that was in the pub last week—and her story about good things coming to Maurie?"

George couldn't help looking faintly sheepish. "She did say it. I'm not kidding you. And everything she told me about my life was spot on. So why shouldn't it be spot on for Maurie too, the poor old bugger."

It wasn't his accommodation or anything to do with Dorita Muga which brought Maurie into the station a day later. "It's me name," he said to Dennis. "Ever since that young fella o' yours said

there was no reason why I couldn't take it back—I been thinkin' about it. But I don't know how to go about it."

Dennis hadn't heard anything about Kelly talking to Maurie but it wasn't hard to put two and two together. "You mean—you want to be Michael Kelly-Atkins again?"

"Yeah, that's it. That's what me mum chose—so why shouldn't I be that?"

"Shouldn't be too hard. We'll have to see if you had a birth certificate. If you didn't—or they found a way to wipe you off the planet—then you can just put in to change your name by deed poll."

"Yeah, well, that's what I'd like to do, if it wouldn't be too much trouble."

"You'll need to get on to the New South Wales register, see if your birth is there. Brent'll get you a web-site or an address and the two of you can go on from there."

"And how would I find me dad? I know he was a bastard but just to have a name in there."

"You could ring that bloke in—was it Armidale—that Michael Bruce that was a friend of your mum's. He'd be able to give you a name and he'd know your birthdate—or pretty close." And as Maurie turned to go out again with a phone number and an address Dennis said wryly, "See you around, Mr Kelly-Atkins."

But a couple of days later Brent Kelly said the register couldn't find any relevant birth, not even in that year. "Maybe he's got it all wrong," Brent said with some hesitation.

"Or maybe he was a blackfella," Dennis said grimly. "But get on and see how to change a name by deed poll. It's probably simpler. But I wouldn't mind to find a way for that Evans bastard that fathered him to be brought to book." All very well to say this but it would be difficult to do anything about it at this late stage. The man was quite likely dead by now. But it would be nice to find a way to make the family face up to that undischarged responsibility. "After the festival is over we can look into it. There must be ways to force men to face up to their responsibilities."

"Maybe his mum seduced that man, that Mr Evans."

Dennis turned and gave his subordinate a long look. Brent reddened and didn't try to say anything more. But it was a faint relief to be sent out on a job. It probably was a silly thing to say but things like that just seemed to spill out before he'd taken the time to think …

"We can ask for one of the family to take a DNA test but I'll guarantee they'll say no. Okay to sneak round to the kitchen or maybe a shed down the back where she probably had a bunk—but not something to own up to … " Dennis was still pondering on how they might go about this when the phone rang.

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Seduction was hardly the word for the errand that brought Superintendent Brophy and DSS Wang out to Buckton late the next morning but sex certainly came into it. Brophy rarely left the comfort zone of the station in Winville so Dennis Walsh thought Daniel Wang must have done some tough talking—or Brophy saw some kudos somewhere. "It's your principal," John Brophy said quite cheerfully. "We've tracked down that video and it *is* a prohibited import. So he'll have to face the music."

It was hardly the best timing, Dennis thought, not when a festive mood was all around the town. But he squashed any inclination to say "Can you hold off until everything's over this weekend." Derek Coleman would not get a summons before next week at the earliest. And the thought that something was finally going to be resolved gave Dennis a degree of satisfaction.

"We've caught six other men in our net but it's all still under wraps," Daniel Wang said as though reading Walsh's thoughts. "Three other school principals, a chemist, a builder, and a photographer. They passed the stuff around. Brisbane has got a line on the importer."

"The bods didn't know who was getting the stuff through Customs?"

"No. Well, they did. But it turned out to be a false name. The real Terence Witting is about ninety and stone deaf. So we're still waiting on that end of things. We're hoping to have our end wrapped by the end of the year. With luck they'll all be in court early next year."

"Fair enough."

Brophy and Wang drove round to the High School and told Matty Ainsworth they'd come to have a chat with Mr Coleman. She looked at them and immediately knew what they wanted to chat about. "He's upstairs in his office. D'you want me to let him know you're here?"

"No. We'll go on up."

She watched them go, John Brophy, broad and not very keen on stairs, Wang slimmer and taller, and she felt she was watching the silent end to an era.

Derek and Nanci, she mustn't forget Nanci, would leave and there would be little to remember them by except names in the High School year book, the way Derek had set up his office. They had never made friends here. They had always looked down a bit on local people. But would it have any lasting impact on the school? It was a curiously difficult question to answer.

And what of herself? Derek would be retired and gone before it came up in court. People here probably wouldn't hear the details or care very much. And if he pleaded guilty there probably wouldn't be any details anyway. Not unless a reporter got on to the story behind the brief information on the court lists in the paper. There would be a new principal, a new regime, possibly a new family to be curious about.

But she thought of her own private agonies. Life had never been the same since she had seen snatches of that violent video of Derek's. She had lived sixty years of quiet pleasant perhaps slightly dull existence and she had always been able to think well of people because she was spared the knowledge of their deepest darkest most depraved aspects.

Then in one brief hour that comfortable, perhaps rather complacent view of human nature had been shredded. And once it was gone she had found herself struggling to re-build the ideas and attitudes and views which had enabled her to see the best in everyone she came into contact with. The anger she felt towards Derek Coleman for bringing pornographic videos on to the school premises went beyond his obvious contempt for the moral welfare of his staff and students. In some deeper way she could not forgive him for what he had done to her.

Of course time passed. Things faded. Once he was gone the memory would probably dwindle. But she wanted people all around Buckton to know what sort of man had been in their midst all these years. She didn't want people to assume he had resigned because he was getting on in years, because his wife wanted to leave Buckton, because he had been offered a better job … she wanted everyone to know the truth. They didn't need to know every detail. Just that … yes, if people had gone to the police years ago and said they believed Coleman was watching porn, then the police would have had to act. They couldn't ignore local concern on such a sensitive issue … but what had people *known* as opposed to speculated?

And as she thought about it she thought it was probably Derek himself who had spread the rumour. That way people just laughed and didn't take it seriously. Mr Coleman? Of course not! He's an excellent principal. And once it was settled in people's minds they wouldn't find it shocking if the police now came out and said it was true. Because it had gradually entered local folklore as nothing more than a harmless foible.

She sat there and felt an unexpected and powerful anger grow.

Ten minutes later, the two men from Winville came downstairs, one of them raised a hand in her direction, and went on out. She hesitated then went after them. "Are you going to tell everyone?" she said as they turned and waited for her to come up to them.

"No, we'll treat it as discreetly as we can."

"Then *I'll* make sure I tell everyone." Now she felt like someone literally on fire with anger. "We all trusted him, we respected him, we thought he wanted the best for all the children. And instead he dragged us down into the gutter with him. I *saw* that video. I saw the way he was *enjoying* it. I felt like someone being taken down into a sewer. Why should he be allowed to go away quietly? If it was one of the students being naughty, breaking the law, they'd be off to court in Winville straight away. Why should he be treated with kid gloves?"

"For the sake of the school?" Wang could see her point.

"Oh no, that's not good enough! The rumours have gone round and round anyway. We need people to know that it was Derek—and Nanci I guess—and nothing to do with other staff or the school." She sounded adamant.

"We've charged him with possession—"

"Good! I'd like to see him gone today."

"I'm afraid it won't be quite that quick. But he will be gone—"

As they went out to their car John Brophy said in a rather bemused way, "So not the popular bloke we thought then?"

"It seems not. I didn't want to disrupt things with exams coming up and everything. But maybe getting him out of there as quickly and quietly as we can makes more sense. If they all feel like her then we're not helping matters by keeping him there."

Brophy thought this through and agreed to it. "But it'll be up to the Education Department, won't it?"

"We can get on to them this afternoon. Tell them he's been charged. They can stand him down. Indefinite leave or something. They'll probably prefer to do that than have it look like the department never queried anything … "

But as he got into the car Wang said, "And what about his wife? She's in charge of pre-school children. She must've known what he was watching night after night. Maybe they even shared … "

Brophy shrugged. "You'd think so. But she'll probably have an excuse."

"Then we'd best go straight round, catch her before he has a chance to get on to her and talk about police fitting him up or something."

It was the moment Nanci knew would come, she just didn't know when, and now she had a police car at the gate of the childcare centre and two unknown men getting out. The feeling of dread and humiliation was so strong that for a minute she thought she was going to faint. She went over to the sink and gulped a half-glass of water as her assistant showed the men in. Then they said she wouldn't be needed, they had come to talk to Mrs Coleman about a private matter.

Karina Barry went away and Nanci could hear her outside talking to some of the children. The littlest ones had finished their lunch and gone down for a nap. She just hoped that Karina could keep all the others fully occupied.

"Can I get you coffee or something?" she said with an effort.

"No." Daniel Wang knew she knew why they'd come. He wasn't sure if that was a help or not. "We have just charged your husband with being in possession of a prohibited import. You knew he was watching material that had never been near the Censorship Board, didn't you?"

Dozens of words seemed to jostle in her mind, some of exculpation, some of self-pity, some of anger, some … she couldn't bring them into line. She felt tears rise and wondered if they could ever possibly understand what it had been like living with Derek.

"I didn't *know*, not for sure, but I sometimes felt uneasy—that—that things weren't … that his videos were … I hated his fixation with porn … but he bought most of it when we went away on holidays."

"Went away where?"

"Sometimes to Canberra, the Gold Coast, Sydney … overseas. A couple of times he told me he'd gone along to see stuff being filmed. I thought it must be pretty tame stuff if they'd let him in."

"Why didn't you come to us?"

"I did. Once. I took a video to Sergeant Walsh. I guess it wasn't real porn. Just two people having sex. It wasn't violent or anything. He thanked me for bringing it in."

"It was something which came to your husband via his circle?"

"No, I'm sure it wasn't. I heard later that it had been made out at that place next to Japana. They called it the Caritas Centre or something. Derek didn't seem to know why it had been sent to him. Maybe it was meant to compromise him. I really don't know." She dropped back into a rather sullen silence then said suddenly, "What are you going to do with me?"

"Would you be prepared to be a witness?"

"To what?"

"To how he got the videos, how often, anything he said about them, addresses he sent them to, we've got part of the circle who shared the stuff. We probably haven't got all the members. We'd like to round the whole lot of 'em up, not have some of them keep their heads down a while then pop up again later."

"People we met at conferences, that sort of thing?"

"It could help."

"You're asking me to wreck the little that remains of my marriage—to be Judas in the eyes of my stepchildren?"

"Yes."

She took a long breath then expelled it with an audible sigh. But it was another minute before she said slowly, "Very well. What do I have to do?"

"You can come to Winville or you can make a statement to Sergeant Walsh here. We can tell him to expect you—"

"I'll talk to him this evening. I know he hates us but at least he knows … what Derek is like."

It struck Wang as an odd reason to prefer to go into the station here. It was only much later that he wondered if Nanci, in a curious way, found it easier to talk about the whole thing with someone who found it hard to deal with. Dennis Walsh simply regarded Derek Coleman as a sleazebag and his fixation with violent sex an embarrassment. He wasn't secretly trying to psychoanalyse her or plumb the intimate depths of her marriage.

Case No. 5: Butter Draws a Better Crowd

Everyone in Buckton seemed to have some small query for the police—about parking, about shops putting prices up, about signs obscuring entrances, about the planned fireworks on Sunday evening putting cows off their feed, about minor skullduggery going on under the mantle of the festival—but it was brought home to Dennis a couple of evenings before the launch of everything that he wasn't the only one starting to feel a bit weary some evenings.

Sometimes he found the energy to make love to Fiona and then dropped off to sleep almost immediately afterwards. He felt certain she never felt dismayed or offended, that she understood it wasn't boredom or a lack of pleasure. It wasn't anything about not loving her. But this time he was surprised to find that she had gone to sleep in his arms. He knew she had been extremely busy. She had managed to farm things out to many people. Anne Grumm had done much of the secretarial work for the butter wrapper competition. Various people on the schools' staff had helped with putting up the displays. George Hickman had done a lot of the organising for the Saturday gymkhana, the CWA ladies had taken on much of the work for Saturday night's dance and supper after the official opening and prizegiving. The Shire Council had organised the fireworks. Kieran Dobbs had come up with the archival film material, which would be shown on the Friday night, about cheese and butter production on the Darling Downs, which included some brief footage of Buckton in the 1940s, and had helped set up the display of old farm items over at the Butter Factory. The Reverend Julian Chandler had taken over the co-ordination of the stalls for the combined fête on Saturday afternoon. But somehow things had kept coming back to Fiona; her calm good sense, her tact, her organisational skills. And she had found and organised their special guest for Saturday night. She had helped the film crew to find their way around town and out to Cathy Binnie's farm and had provided all kinds of other help. And although Patrick Guest, one of their judges, was a pleasant friendly man he had expected Fiona to wine and dine him several evenings … although there were other people willing to offer hospitality some of them felt they were too nervous, too unsophisticated, to deal with someone like the urbane and witty Mr Guest …

Now Dennis moved his arm carefully so as not to wake her. She had said something over dinner about rain being about the only thing which could spoil things and he had said drily, "If you can bring rain the sods'll want a Dairy Festival every month." She had laughed at that. "Yes, I do want rain. Some people are nearly out of water. But I suppose it's what city people say."

"Except you're not a city person any more, only a little bit somewhere in the back of your mind … "

"People still tell me I don't understand this and that—and then they say 'but of course a city person wouldn't' … I don't know how many years I will need to live here before they forget … well, not forget exactly but just accept me as I am … "

Now he looked down on her sleeping face, just visible in the faint light from the hallway, and was conscious of a great feeling of tenderness. He wanted the weekend to be a great success for the sake of the district but most of all he wanted it to be a success for her. He knew she had put some of her own money into it. He knew it had taken up her time for months. He knew she had persevered when people said a competition for a butter wrapper was just plain silly …

And he knew, and she knew, that they probably could not stave off the inevitable. The Butter Factory would eventually close. But she had given it a reprieve, a chance to weather the immediate storms, and if they could stay competitive price-wise then … there was always that small possibility that they would survive …

But more than that he always wanted things to go well for her … simply because he loved her.

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John Applegarth rang next morning while Dennis was out dealing with an altercation. It didn't really surprise Dennis Walsh to be told that it was Lynnell Morton making trouble. She had insinuated herself into the RSL Hall where several of the local CWA stalwarts, including Bronwen Applegarth and Vera Hopgood and Patsy Pounder, were putting up some decorations and removing all but the few chairs for the dignitaries on the stage and a few for the elderly round the side by the RSL committee room. People would mostly have to stand for the formal part of the evening. It wouldn't be possible to move all the chairs in the space between the end of the official activities and the start of the dance.

The old wooden hall with its tongue-and-groove walls, its tin roof and wooden rafters high above, was a hard place to make look smart and cheerful but long experience had helped the women know how best to draw the eye away from its shortcomings.

Mrs Morton had got herself a reputation as a troublemaker over the years, though there were still supporters among her clan, people who felt that her fearless way of tackling the various forms of authority round the place should be admired. Dennis Walsh knew that some of her relatives like Mrs Scully said things like, "At least, Lynnell's got spunk—not like my spineless bloody husband. The cops say to him, roll over, and the poor booby just rolls over and waves his legs in the air." If nothing else Pauline Scully had a way with words.

Over the years Lynnell had tangled with the hospital, the shire council, the social worker from Winville, neighbours, but principally with the police. And as her relatives were mostly Goodricks they were mostly ready to cheer her on every time she took a verbal swipe at the local police. Dennis privately thought she was a nasty piece-of-work.

Now she was berating the women for going along with "that stupid dame's ideas" and more in this vein. When Mrs Applegarth asked her to either lend a hand or get out of their way she said "You poor boobies! Just doing the work for her. Why isn't she down here and up that ladder? She's younger—but I know what it's like. You're too scared to ask her to put her money where her mouth is. She thinks she can just swan around here while everyone else does the dirty work—"

"Do you *mind*, Mrs Morton, we've got a lot to get done and you're getting in our way." Mrs Applegarth was no shrinking violet.

"You know what my daughter calls her?" Lynnell showed no sign of either leaving or helping. "She always called her Miss Snobby Bobby. It's always good for a laugh when I pass that on. And you know something else? They talked Tara into saying Gordon was the dad of her bloody kid but she told me, cross her heart and hope to die she was that serious, that he wasn't—that it was that fucking bloody Dinny Walsh with his big dick—and he just walked away from her, she never got a penny outa him."

"That's not true and you know it," Mrs Pounder often regretted living so close to Mrs Morton; though she was able to ignore that fact except for the times Lynnell forced herself on to Patsy's notice; the trouble being that Lynnell seemed to enjoy bringing herself to her neighbour's notice. "I saw what you did to your granddaughter—and you should be ashamed of yourself."

Up to that point it had been noisy but nothing more. Now Mrs Morton suddenly flew at Patsy and grabbed her by both shoulders and started to shake her. "You interfering old bitch! You sit there with that disgusting pervert of a son that sneaks through people's yards—and you dare to criticise *me*—"

It was at that point that Vera Hopgood slipped out and went to get Sergeant Walsh. She was afraid that Lynnell would do more than shake Mrs Pounder and yell in her face. And the argument and Lynnell's language distressed her deeply. She didn't believe women should speak like that.

By the time Vera came back with Dennis Walsh Mrs Applegarth had been pushed into yelling back at Mrs Morton. She knew it was playing straight into Lynnell's hands; Lynnell thrived on a good loud 'let's wake the pigeons' barney. The trigger had been her son John. Lynnell was only too willing to lump Sergeant Applegarth in with "that sleazebag Dinny Walsh—never happy unless he's getting stuck into someone—they should of chucked him out years ago!" And on and on in this vein.

Mrs Applegarth was usually calm and considered in her response to most things. But she was a tiger when it came to rising in defence of her white-haired boy. She was deeply and almost inarticulately proud of him. And to have Mrs Morton with her unpleasant sleazy talk doing him down … It never occurred to her that Lynnell might be jealous of her, of her handsome son, of the simple fact that she had a son …

Dennis came in, heard Mrs Morton, went over and said, "You're on a Good Behaviour Bond, Mrs Morton. If this is good behaviour I'd hate to see bad behaviour."

She turned from Bronwen Applegarth to face him. Then before anyone knew what she was going to do next she spat straight in his face. "You fucking bastard! I know what you're like when you get your pants down—"

"YOU-ARE-ON-A-GOOD-BEHAVIOUR-BOND!" They could probably hear him half-way to Winville. It disconcerted the CWA ladies. But it didn't deter Mrs Morton. She came screeching back at him, screaming abuse all laced with sexual stuff, and trying to rake him with her fingernails. But Dennis wasn't having any of this. "You've had your warning, madam. You'll have to face court again." But it took him several minutes to get Mrs Morton outside without actually laying a finger on her, something she would no doubt find a way to use against him. As it was "Police brutality" came easily and loudly to her lips, along with more obscene abuse. But he wasn't worried. Mrs Applegarth and Mrs Pounder, if not Ms Hopgood, would undoubtedly stand by him if Lynnell tried any comeback.

But the whole thing left a nasty taste in the mouth. He was a very private man and he hated the way she brought sex into any verbal stoush with him. In this case she had gone beyond criticising him and had fired off her sleazy insinuations at Fiona. And she might try to spoil the weekend. He had to find a way to neutralise her before then if he could.

He regretted that she had only been put back on a bond after beating up two of her grandchildren. He wanted to see her do time. The magistrate seemed to have difficulty in believing that a granny could actually bash up her grandchildren. But then the Lynnell in court looked a comfortable matronly respectable figure. Not a vicious foul-mouthed she-cat. Now he thought that at least it would make it a little easier to justify charging her again. Mentally he ran the various possible charges through his mind. Affray. Disturbing the peace. Bad language. Attacking a police officer. Assault …

And could he get her up in court before the Festival kicked off on Friday? There wasn't much time to get her processed. But he would do his damndest to get her out of Buckton before she had a chance to make more trouble …

When Lynnell and Dennis were finally out of earshot Mrs Applegarth said rather wearily to the other women, "What *is* it with Lynnell? She's got a nice home. She never seems to have any money worries. She's got friends and family here. But she goes out of her way to be unpleasant. I just don't know why."

The words seemed to fall into the waiting moment. Then Patsy Pounder said quietly and tentatively, "Because she hasn't got a man, that's why. She's jealous. She could be content with what she's got. But it's never been enough for her."

Vera Hopgood thought of pointing out that she didn't have a man either, though certainly she was content with the life she had and had no real regrets, but she saw that it went beyond the mere fact of having a man in Lynnell's life. "It's more than that, I'm sure, but I just don't quite know how to explain it." She felt it needed someone else to take her vague intuition and put it into words.

Patsy nodded slowly. "I know it sounds perverse … but why does she keep trying to convince people that Dennis was the father of Tara's baby? It doesn't make sense. I don't believe for one minute that she ever wanted him as a son-in-law."

"No-o-o," Mrs Applegarth, too, found herself musing on this question. "No, that really would be pretty bizarre, wouldn't it?"

"But she did push Tara to claim he had raped her. I remember all the to-do that was going on at the time. D'you think she believes that she can somehow get him removed if it has something to do with sex? That the department would have to take that kind of rumour more seriously than people just saying he's too tough?" Patsy too felt the real explanation existed somewhere in the shadows beyond them.

"I think … but what do I know, I've lived a sheltered life I s'pose you could say," Vera said it slowly, "but I think Lynnell *is* jealous. I'm just not sure exactly what she is jealous of … but I cannot help thinking that she is jealous of Fiona and that doesn't seem to make sense."

The other women considered this but couldn't venture a response. It was true that Lynnell often said nasty things about Fiona. It was much harder to imagine Fiona offending Lynnell. And when it came to more material things—what did Fiona have that Lynnell didn't have, or hadn't had? Lynnell had had a decent hard-working husband and three daughters. She had been left quite comfortably off as a widow. But none of the women there knew that Bob Morton had come to see his marriage as a terrible mistake … and that that knowledge still rankled and festered in his widow's mind …

"And speaking of rumours," Bronwen Applegarth said more briskly; she had the secret belief that Lynnell would be a lot happier if she simply joined in with local committees and did something to help other people but maybe that was an old-fashioned view, "they're certainly whirling round about the Colemans—but I can't say I'll be sorry to see him go. I never thought he gave Jenny and Kate the sort of … of respect … I wanted from him."

The women considered this aspect of the principal. The two Applegarth girls, John's younger sisters, were now finished with High School. Jenny worked in a shop in Winville. Kate was just beginning a course to train as a legal secretary. Vera said carefully, "Lucy would agree with you. She is very relieved that he is going." Her niece, Lucy Hopgood, taught at Buckton High. "She never felt very comfortable with him."

"And Nanci?" Mrs Pounder put in. But no one knew what plans, if any, Nanci Coleman was making …

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"I took a message," Brent said. "It was Sergeant Applegarth." He picked up his notes. "He says he went round to see a Mrs Little and she says that Lewis Gruen—I'm not sure how you spell that—wasn't there for long on the night Harry Bellingham died. She is certain he was only there for tea and then he left again. She says he was there all night the previous night. But he says she got a bit muddled when he started going over it again and she ended up saying she was sure but she wasn't *absolutely* sure. I don't know what the difference is."

"Depends what she was linking it to. And how nosy she is. And what sort of memory she's got. And whether Lewis comes round and makes a big racket."

"She says he's got a nearly new black Ford ute. She says it is very powerful and he revs it a lot. That's how she usually knew if he was around to see Meryl."

"So if he came or went quietly she mightn't notice?"

"Well, I guess so. He didn't say."

"You *can* bloody well ask," Dennis said testily. "You aren't just the poor boob that takes notes. You can think and ask questions. And ask people to spell names—"

Brent bobbed his head. It wasn't exactly that. He knew John would not mind if he had some questions. It was rather that he wasn't a fast thinker and the questions he should've asked didn't always come to him until much later. Like checking the spelling of Gruen …

"So did he have anything else?"

"Not exactly. But he said that Lewis isn't popular with the other younger guys around town and that he is really hard on his girlfriend, that he always describes her as a slut or a slag when he talks about her to other people. But Mrs Little says he was really jealous, that he would yell at her for just looking at some other guy. She knew about the dad coming to stay but she didn't know his last name. She thought it was Brown. But she was really hoping that the dad might be able to do something … she didn't know exactly what he could do … but maybe make it harder for Lewis to … to come round all the time and carry on."

"So why didn't Lewis want Meryl and the kid to come and live with him? That way he'd have them under his eye all the time. Did John say?"

"I think he just has a little flat. And he expected Mrs Little to tell him if any other guys were coming round. Sort of spy on Meryl for him."

John had obviously done quite a bit of digging into this relationship. But was the unknown Mrs Little a good guide? "Is this Lewis guy handsome, I wonder? I know what some elderly widows can be like as soon as there's a handsome young bloke in the offing. Maybe she wanted him herself?"

"I didn't ask. You think Mrs Little was angry that Meryl was playing around … or something?"

"God knows. I'll give him a ring this evening. See if he thinks she's a reliable witness."

But John Applegarth was adamant that Mrs Little was a quiet sensible woman who was obviously distressed at the way Gruen spoke to and treated his girlfriend. She thought she would be much better off without him. But he said reluctantly that Lewis Gruen was quite good looking and that he never had trouble finding girls but that he seemed to have a thing about Meryl Brown and that she was a very pretty girl and her baby was quite cute.

"So d'you know who the baby's father is?" Dennis wasn't sure if it was relevant. But if Meryl herself was getting back in touch with the dad she had never known there might be something else wandering round in there, renewed feelings about her baby's father maybe, another man they had not yet tracked down and questioned.

"I asked her but she said it was none of my business. Mrs Little thinks he's married, that's why it's all a big secret."

"So he wasn't willing to come out and give her any support, publicly?"

"No support. Full stop. But I can ask around. Someone must know in a place this size."

"I wonder if he's on the kid's birth certificate?"

"Probably not."

"So the kid's going to spend his life in limbo, never knowing who his daddy is?"

John was young and happily married and he had to admit he hadn't particularly thought about this aspect of it.

Dennis said rather grimly, "I know it makes me sound like some old fossil but every kid in my book deserves a mum and dad—and if they can't always be there, at least to know about them and get some support. Here's a young woman, single mum, just lost her dad in a horrible business, her mum died of breast cancer, her boyfriend's a right little shit—see if you can get that dad out of the hole he's hiding in and make sure everyone knows what a coward he is."

John wasn't sure that this was part of his brief. He didn't know the story of Maurie Smith and that it might be on Dennis's mind. He wasn't sure that it would help them resolve the issue of just what had happened to Harry Bellingham. But it was always easier to go along with Dennis than try to put together a compelling argument to suggest that he might have exceeded his job description. He said he would see what he could do … If it was craven at least it got a 'thanks' from Dennis.

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The Show Committee had got permission to spray the grounds with extra water but it had done little more than temporarily lay the dust. No sweet green turf met the arriving Pony Club

children. The various church and other stalls had to deal with a faint but permanent haze of dust. The small merry-go-round stood amidst the churned earth. The various food stalls worried about dishing up sausages-a-la-dust. The Winville Highland Pipe Band had agreed to come and do a turn in the ring over lunch and their members were not wild about getting their magnificent turn-outs brown and grubby, their white sporrans might end up anything but, and their pipes might get clogged. But for all the problems a happy air filled the ground. The decision to combine all the separate annual church fêtes with the annual Pony Club gymkhana and add in several other activities including foot races and novelty events such as sack races and egg-and-spoon races had been popular. The prize money for most things was small but Alison Healy and George Hickman between them had made certain that almost every child would go home with something and Fiona had added extras to the lucky dip in the hope that no child would miss out on something exciting …

And even if people were regretful that they couldn't have had at least a brief storm to green things up it had made it easy for people to know what to bring and what they could leave at home. Fine and 28 degrees was the weather forecast with light winds developing later. Fiona had brought hats and suncream. So had most people.

The Pony Club events were underway by ten. The stalls were ready for business by eleven. There was a puppet show from Winville and a pet parade just after the band had done their couple of turns around the ring. Then the foot races got under way. There was an Open Mile around the ring won by a man from Bongeen but with local teacher Evan Conroy running second.

Then the younger children got to do their events. Elise didn't get very far in her sack and dropped her egg from her spoon. Afterwards she told her dad she hadn't practiced enough. But the last of the foot events was a Gretna Green in which the older teenagers and young adults had to carry a smaller child on their back. Brent Kelly had offered to carry Elise and Megan McPhee, when no one noticed Robbie in his quiet clinging to his mother, offered to carry him. He knew Megan quite well and wasn't shy with her.

But it was Brent who showed unexpected talent in racing down to help Elise up and then the long run back. Other competitors soon caught them up but Elise was a fighter and she seemed to be able to imbue Brent with something of her own fighting spirit. They crossed the line just ahead of one of the Rogers boys carrying Tara Morton's little boy. Tara and her partner Gordon Drewe had come out for the day only because she knew her mother wouldn't be here.

It was the first time that Dennis Walsh had seen Tara since she'd left Buckton and he thought the move had been good for her. She seemed a lot more relaxed and confident. And the little boy looked happy and healthy—and very like Gordon. Dennis didn't feel he needed anyone to tell him he had done the right thing in arresting Tara's mother yet again but this mother and son seemed to act as a reinforcement to his belief that Lynnell was a danger to her two younger daughters and her various grandchildren.

The foot Gretna Green was followed by a mounted one. Then there was a walk, trot, and gallop, while the jumps were set up for the various age groups. Dennis took Robert away with him to see that everything was safe and quiet around town and see if anyone was wanting him round at the station. As he left he saw Naomi Burkett arrive on an attractive pony, its coat shining, and its tail neatly plaited. It took him a moment to realise that it was his children's pony Freddie, he now looked very smart, stepping out nicely with pricked ears, and he thought he would make an ideal pony for Elise in another year. Naomi had brought him out to the showgrounds just to get him used to being with other ponies and surrounded by children and noise. But she had obviously put a lot of work into him. She said she was happy to do it for the fun of it, for the learning experience it was, for the pleasure of seeing a rough rather neglected pony begin to show his real potential. But he wondered if he and Fiona should do something for Naomi in return.

He was still musing on this as he buckled Rob into his car seat and drove away …

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Every one of Buckton's few eating places was humming in the early evening and the Bowls Club had opened their dining room to anyone, not just members, wanting a simple meal in pleasant surroundings. Wylie usually cooked the light lunch that the Club put on but he had arranged for one of the Brumby girls to come in and help him do the dinner. He had kept it simple, only two choices,

but it was still too much to do on his own. The only trouble was—she hadn't turned up. Mr Low was a fairly easygoing sort of person and he simply went ahead putting things in to cook. He rang her mother who said she *must* be there, she had left half an hour ago.

"Well, I'll wait a bit longer, but I need a hand."

Jane Brumby had been busy. As the only commercial hairdresser in town she had been on her feet all day as women came to be tizzied up for the evening's excitement. She couldn't imagine what could have happened to Sarah as the Bowls Club was only a couple of blocks over. But for the 'honour' of the family she didn't feel as though she could leave Wylie in the lurch. After all, it was kind of him to offer Sarah the job and he had offered her a hundred dollars for the evening which was a lot more than she could earn doing odd jobs around town.

"I'll come down and give you a hand, Mr Low, at least until Sarah turns up. I can't think what can have happened but I'll have a look along the street. I'll be about five minutes." She could ask her other daughter Yasmin or her son David to pitch in and help Mr Low out but he had asked for Sarah, saying he had found her responsible in the only other time she had helped out at the Club—and David was somewhere out round the town with his mates anyway …

There was no sign of Sarah on her short walk and she tried to think what might have happened. Sarah had been out at the showgrounds for part of the day and she had got a bit sunburned, mainly because she thought wearing a hat was a bit yesterday … but it was hardly likely the sun had gone to her brain and given her some sort of seizure … and she had seemed quite normal while she got ready to go round to the Club …

Wylie, as Jane had half-expected, was coping perfectly calmly. The tables were laid. Everything looked to be under control. But she came in and began to help him get the salads ready. He was offering a choice of chicken and mushroom casserole or roast lamb with vegetables to be followed by fresh fruit salad and handmade buttermilk icecream, then a cheeseboard and coffee.

He hardly needed Sarah except for actually waiting on tables and helping to clear up afterwards. But as Jane worked briskly the feeling of anxiety gradually grew on her: what on earth could have happened to Sarah? She might've detoured into town, though she hadn't given any hint of going anywhere except the Club—to see someone, to pick up something, maybe in the hope of catching a glimpse of the reputed heart throb coming to officially open the festival seeing she was going to miss the first part of the dance—but surely she should be here by now.

When almost everything was ready she said rather embarrassedly, "Wylie, I honestly don't know what that girl is playing at—but would you mind if I ring home—and if she's not there I'll ask David to go down and see if she's in one of the shops or something. I can't imagine anything serious has happened."

He waved a hand towards the phone. "Be my guest."

Young David Brumby was not wild about the idea of going looking for his sister. He was going to go round to the hall later, just in case, as he had done several entries for the butter wrapper competition though he knew he didn't really have a hope …

It was a half hour later when he came into the Club and told his mother he couldn't find Sarah anywhere but that Mr Benson had seen a motorbike stop and pick up a girl though he didn't know if the girl was Sarah. "A motorbike!" Jane Brumby said rather blankly. "Who on earth could that be? And why would she get on a motorbike when she only had a short walk?"

David said rather snootily that he didn't have a clue but it was the sort of stupid thing Sarah would do. His mother didn't seem to take this in. But Wylie said, "Did she ever go anywhere with anyone who has a motorbike?"

Jane considered this but finally said, "Not that I know of."

"Well, does she have a boyfriend?"

"Not really. She occasionally goes out with a group from school but I don't think there's anyone special." And then she seemed to reconsider this because a frown gathered and a faintly worried look came over her. But she didn't add to her vague statement.

"Okay, well, there's not much we can do. But you might ring Dinny Walsh and ask him to keep an eye out for her—to send her straight round here if he sees her anywhere. But it's not likely … well, that … " he tailed off, not liking to mention 'abduction'.

Jane reluctantly rang Sergeant Walsh; she knew he didn't like it when people wasted his time with things they could as easily sort out by themselves.

"Got on a bike?" he said grimly. He was just about to sit down to an early dinner before Fiona got the children ready and they went round to make a last minute check that everything was just right in the hall.

"John Benson said he saw her, or a girl he thinks might be her, but David didn't say anything about the bike."

"Okay, I'll check just what Benson saw."

Although Sarah Brumby wasn't someone he would pick for this kind of irresponsible behaviour he thought that family all tended to be a bit up in the air, that they rarely thought through cause and effect, and Sarah might've accepted an offer of the sort 'once round the block on my new bike and then I'll drop you at the club'; something like that.

John Benson wasn't a particularly good witness, his eyes weren't brilliant and he didn't know anything much about motorbikes, but when put on the spot by Sergeant Walsh he said he thought it was quite a powerful bike and although he wouldn't like to be definite he did vaguely think it might be one of the Scully boys riding it.

Dennis considered this. Both Damien and Denzil Scully now lived in Winville, to his relief, and one or both might have motorbikes. And one or both just might've come out to Buckton for the festivities—or to make trouble.

He thought rather gloomily that the peace and bonhomie and good behaviour so far was possibly too good to last. On the other hand the fact that Sarah had gone joy-riding instead of turning up to work was not in itself a crime; just letting down Wylie and her family and his customers … And then he re-thought that. Joy-riding. Was it one of the Scully boys on his own bike—or was it one of the Scully boys on a 'borrowed' bike? If they hadn't saved enough for wheels of their own had they been tempted to help themselves to something and come here for the evening to show off to their old mates?

It was a possibility.

He went round to the station where Brent was dealing with a couple of queries from visitors and rang Winville. "Any reports of a stolen bike?" he said to Constable Atkinson a minute later.

There was a brief silence while the young man checked. "Yep, one came in only half an hour ago. A Kawasaki 250. It disappeared from a garage over on Painter Street. I'll give you the description—" which he proceeded to do, along with the owner and the address.

"Is the owner young?"

"About twenty-four, I think. He works at the silos."

Dennis had heard on the grapevine that Denzil had got himself a job at the Wheat Board silos. He considered this possible connection in deep gloom. It would mean tackling Ma and Pa Scully—unless he simply went out and drove around—and although he found Chad Scully pretty much a broken reed Mrs Scully was a different matter. She enjoyed abusing him and didn't mind how often or what the facts might be. Her boys were always in the right and the cops were always in the wrong and hassling her little angels just to show off how nasty they could be. To her, police were the lowest of the low …

Chad came to the door, probably because his wife was busy getting herself into her best dress and jewelry, and said without much interest, "Yeah, Denzil's home for the weekend."

"On a motorbike?"

"Yeah, he just bought one. He's been saving for a while." Chad looked as though he was digging his toes in about getting spruced up and along to the hall.

Dennis found the image of Denzil *saving* pretty hard to accept but he only said, "What kind of a bike?"

"It's not a bad bike. It's red. It's a Kawasaki. I didn't take all that much notice. He said he bought it cheap off a guy that's leavin' Winville—"

"Did he mention a name?"

"Nah, not that I can remember. Why?"

"So where's he gone on it now?"

"Just out—round town a bit. I'd say he was goin' to show it off a bit." This seemed a perfectly natural thing for his son to do, Chad obviously thought, and he only said, "Has there been an accident?"

"Not so far," Dennis said grimly. "And it may not be Denzil I'm looking for. But if he turns up ring me and give me the rego."

Two and two finally came together in Chad's head. "You're saying the bike's—hot?"

"As I haven't set eyes on the bike or Denzil yet I can't say. That's why I want to see him and check. If it's not him—" But he was increasingly sure.

As he went out the gate, knowing there was no guarantee Chad would ring; he was more likely to tell his son to head back to Winville before the cops could set eyes on him, his mobile rang. It was Constable Atkinson.

"That bike. I got on to the owner. He says he was originally going to go away with some mates for the weekend. They were going to go after wild pigs in a mate's jeep. But he twisted his ankle and dropped out at the last minute. He says he knows Denzil because they see each other at work—and that Denzil knew he was going to be away and the bike would be sitting in the garage."

"Would Denzil know where he kept his keys?"

"There's a good chance. He was round to the hospital to get his ankle strapped up, then he was home watching a video, and the rest of the family were out. His keys were on a keyboard by the back door. Denzil only needed to open the back door and get them, not come right into the house."

"So the house wasn't locked?"

"It doesn't sound like it."

"Okay, thanks for that. It sounds like Denzil is swanning round here on the bike and telling his family he just bought it secondhand. I'll see if I can nab him before he heads back your way."

If nothing else it sounded like Constable Atkinson being keen to make his Saturday sheet look good and Dennis was quite happy for him to have the credit. But it didn't answer the question: where had Denzil gone and was it Sarah riding pillion—and without a helmet.

Chances were Denzil had headed either north or south so he could show it off on the longer straighter stretches of road. The Dinawadding side of Buckton was in poorer condition. Though Denzil might think it was fun to weave in and out between the potholes. It was a moment when an extra pair of eyes would come in very handy. Brent was busy. So how to check both routes? And it was always possible that Denzil had dropped Sarah off somewhere and headed back towards Winville …

He rang Kieran Dobbs who lived on the northern side of the town, explained what the problem was and asked if Kieran would come down to the corner of his street and keep an eye out. "If you see a bike that might fit, ring me."

Kieran was going to the hall later with Maria Preston and her kids but Dennis's brisk assumption that he would be willing to drop everything and go out and stand for however long in the hope a motorbike might come past reminded him of the things his previous partner used to say about Dennis. To Raelene Perry, Dennis was a crass human being, uncouth, rude, thuggish. She had never really forgiven Fiona for wanting to marry him. But Rae was gone and Maria had no such reservations about Dennis. If anything she thought they were quite lucky to have him. The agony and the contradiction in all this, Kieran sometimes thought, was that he still yearned for Rae. There was something about her, so alive, so droll, so full of vigour and fun; somehow it made it easier to overlook her many faults. Whereas Maria was a nice kind conscientious woman, but also a bit pedantic and plodding and lacking in humour. He wished, sometimes, that someone could sprinkle some fairy dust over him so that he could forget Rae and love Maria in the way she deserved to be loved.

Dennis parked the other side of town in a side lane. If there was no sign of Denzil, bike, or Sarah in the next twenty minutes or so he thought he would have to leave it. Denzil could be halfway to Winville by now. And although he had set Chris Pounder's bike on fire years ago he might think twice before he damaged a mate's bike—and more so if he thought the mate was away on a shooting weekend and he was merely and secretly 'borrowing' the bike …

But his patience paid off. After ten minutes a red Kawasaki shot past and slowed as it came by the cemetery. There was certainly a girl behind the leather-jacketed rider. Dennis nosed out quietly and followed the bike as it turned right and ran up towards the Bowls Club.

They must know he was just behind them, Dennis thought, so it was likely the rider was hoping to drop the girl and shoot off. If so he hadn't garnered enough lead time. Dennis came up alongside him and was out of the police vehicle while Denzil was still urging the girl to hurry up and get off. The youth might not be panicking but Sarah, if it was Sarah, was flustered and flat-footed in her clumsiness and growing a bit hysterical.

"You told me it was your bike!" She tried to smooth her blown-about-hair down.

"It is my fucking bike!" Denzil shouted. "But he's always had it in for me! You know that!"

Dennis moved swiftly, to try and grab the key before Denzil could gun the engine, but he missed and could only try and steer the machine off into the verge. Sarah gave a small scream, then turned and started to run up the street towards the Bowls Club.

Denzil, completely off-balance, hit the small ditch and the bike seemed to fall over on to its side in slow motion, pinning one of his legs under it.

"Denzil Scully, I am arresting you on a charge of stealing—"

"You've broken me fuckin' leg!" was the young man's response.

"I haven't touched you," Dennis said grimly. "Now get up and start behaving like a man instead of something that crawled out from under a stone."

He lifted the bike carefully. There was no sign of damage other than a small scrape across the petrol tank and that might already have been done before tonight.

"You'll get your summons," he went on. "Now get out of my sight."

"I can't walk!" Denzil stood up with an effort.

"Then you can crawl round to your mum's and dad's. I've got a bike to get back to its owner."

As Denzil hobbled away down the street, obviously milking the moment for its bathos, Dennis took out his mobile and rang Constable Atkinson. "I've got your bike for you. What d'you want to do?"

He spoke a couple of minutes. Atkinson could make the arrangements and finish off the paperwork. Then he rang Kieran. "Thanks mate. We caught him. I'll let you get home and get into your glad rags."

Kieran sounded relieved but just before he rang off he said, "By the way, thanks for the tip. That old garage is a gold mine." Dennis had told him a while ago that the closed garage at Norwilla had a paddock of old agricultural machinery sitting rusting behind it. Kieran already had a wonderful collection of farm items from fifty years ago and more but he was always on the look out for more. The pity of it, various people said, was that the only people who ever really got to see the stuff were friends and colleagues of Kieran's because most of it sat in his big shed or out in his back paddock.

"Good oh. Norwilla needs all the help it can get." Dennis was only referring to a bit of money from the sale of the old implements possibly being spent in the local store there. But Kieran said, "I've been thinking about that. If people there would run it I said I would be willing to loan them stuff to set up a little museum. It might bring in a few visitors. That Mrs Landy at the store there was all for it. They'd have to persuade the owner of those sheds to let them use the premises and maybe remove a bit of that top soil, I'd say it could be contaminated, but it wouldn't take all that much to get something up and running."

"Go for it." People in Buckton might be disappointed to hear that Norwilla was going to get a tourist venture, rather than them, but most people could see that Norwilla was in an even more desperate plight. "Now, I'd best go round and see what young Sarah Brumby has to say for herself."

The answer seemed to be: not a lot. She immediately burst into tears but managed to sob out that she had no idea the bike was stolen and that Denzil had just said 'come for a quick run' and she'd thought ten minutes wouldn't matter and instead he had gone nearly all the way out to Dinawadding and she was getting more and more upset about running so late for work ….

Dennis left it at that. At least she had put on an apron and was trying to make up for lost time. But Jane Brumby came out into the car park with him and said, "I never could see what she saw in

him—but she had this big thing for him when he was living here. I used to do my best to stop her going out with him the few times he rang home. And I was *so* relieved when I heard he'd moved to Winville. I thought she would forget him. But when David told me about her maybe getting on a bike—I was so worried that Denzil might've come back for the weekend … "

Dennis nodded. Superficially, Denzil was quite good-looking—when he wasn't going round with a scowl on his face; a sort of James Dean look of smouldering resentment—but he thought it wouldn't take long for a girl to get bored with him. And he could understand Jane Brumby believing a Scully wasn't good enough for her daughter. She was usually a cheerful kind-hearted chatty woman who would perm or cut Mrs Scully's hair with the same care (even if great skill or style wasn't her forte) as she gave to anyone else—but she would believe, along with most of Buckton, that a Brumby was better than a Scully any day …

As he drove back to the station and gave Brent the keys to the bike and told him to go up and wheel it back he mused on the thought. How would he respond if his children were attracted by the superficially exciting? By that faint whiff of the dashing anti-authority figure? Would he put every impediment in their way? Would he leave them to find out the hard way? Would he try to nudge them in a different direction? He didn't know the answer …

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Fiona had given a lot of thought and discussion, first to what kind of celebrity they should invite to open the festival and secondly whether they should keep their choice a secret or give people tantalising hints in the lead-up to the big occasion. In the end they had decided to keep their celebrity a secret until the night—but they had dropped little hints here and there in the hope of intriguing people enough to come along.

She had also debated about having something by which to remember Oliver Hone over the weekend. He didn't deserve to come all the way here only to be murdered. The family in Zimbabwe had sent Dennis some copies of his poems, some printed in small magazines, other still hand-written. And she had thought to ask their special guest to read one. But after discussing it with several people she thought it would be more appropriate to get George Hickman to print it in the *Buckton Bugle* along with a short obituary. The evening was to be a happy festive occasion. Bringing the dealth of Oliver Hone into the proceedings would inevitably dampen things.

Dennis had not been given any intimation as to when there might be a trial. But he thought impressing the victim in a sympathetic way on people's memories might be a help. It was a complicated business; Winville was still trying to sort out just how several of the employees at Japana had got in to Australia on false passports. And there was the added problem: one of the men had confessed to murdering Hone, the other hadn't, and the one who had still seemed to believe the evidence wouldn't stack up when tested in court. Daniel Wang was determined to get a result but the whole mess was giving him some late nights. Dennis could only hope Daniel would manage to see the case safely through the court system before he left for Sydney. There was no guarantee that his replacement would be a capable hard-working detective.

The poem Fiona had chosen for the *Bugle* was quite short though she thought it might say something about Oliver himself. She also thought it was no less effective for that. Though some of his Zimbabwe poems were better poems, in her view, she felt this one was far more relevant. He had called his poem, obviously about Japana, 'The Feed Lottery'.

A thousand cows mill up a grey grit cloud, that drifts; lots' signature;
I come and dump my things, where to next, what do I do?
They say: in there, and then 'Feed 'em', but never 'You're welcome.'

Dull days ahead, as dull as dust clouds and truncated conversations;
No one to say this is the way, the future, the perfect new,
And when the grim day is done, it's sit by the bench and write home

Because there's no fun, no joining in, no offer, 'take my car', 'come on—'
Nowhere here did any Lord say 'Feed my sheep', take your cue;

A tone of hardness and hate, instead, that makes of a steer a scape, a goat.

That makes of me, a part of a crime, that makes of me a lesser being,
One year, a training, no more than tractor-driving, apprentice in lieu
Of worthwhile things; I mark my calendar, day gone, day gone, God speed.

It was Dennis who read the poem with a clearer understanding and the sharp gaze of knowing something of what existed between the lines. But it also raised the question: had Oliver Hone's possessions been burnt, not because it was company policy, but because he had been in the habit of making notes on his calendar, his other belongings, perhaps slipping scraps of paper inside his camera cases or into pockets and seams? They had been playing safe? Maybe. And the poem suggested a strong church background; something which might not have endeared him to the hard men at Japana. He wondered whether Hone's one friend there, Chris Harper, shared it …

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The format for Saturday evening was quite simple. Graham Low as Shire Chairman would introduce their special star who would introduce Patrick Guest to say a few words about judging the competition and then hand back to their star who would read out the winners then say a few nice words about Buckton and their Dairy Festival and officially declare everything open. Then the band from Winville, The Barley Boys, would come onstage and the dance would commence.

At nine o'clock there would be an interval for supper then the music would go on until eleven. Yesterday there had been a showing of archival films. Tomorrow afternoon the Butter Factory would be open to visitors. And in the evening the Shire Council would put on a fireworks display at the showgrounds.

Long before the official starting time the hall was crowded. Some of the families with small children would probably leave after they had satisfied their curiosity and heard if anyone they knew had won a prize. Then there would be room for people to move about.

The Butter Factory was under no obligation to use any of the winning entries. They might not be deemed sufficiently commercial. But there was a general expectation that a new design would eventually take over from the current rather staid and uninteresting wrapper.

All eyes were on Graham Low at the microphone as he turned to welcome their special guest through the dressing room door at the side of the stage. Various people including Dennis Walsh secretly believed that Graham Low had decided against proffering his resignation as Shire Chairman, after he had been caught out having an affair, simply because he wanted to be the kingpin on this big night. Few such occasions came his way. But now there were nearly five hundred people crammed into the hall and hanging on his every word.

And a sigh and a rising noise that might be a long drawn-out squeal filled the hall as the door opened and Jason MacAvenue stepped out on to the stage and raised both hands and gave the audience his heart-dancing smile. Dennis Walsh had not known who he was but the reception Jason received suggested a lot of people did and that the committee had chosen wisely. And Fiona and Karen and the organising committee had understood young women in a small country town rarely got to meet celebrities in person. This would be a night they would always remember. A number of people had expected an old politician and were pleasantly surprised. Jason had made his name as lead singer with a group called The Tropicos who had had several hits with beach party style songs, a hint of sex and wild rides in dune buggies, tempered with a faintly bossanova style rhythm but he had now got a leading role in a popular soapie and people who had seen him on the small screen all agreed that he was much taller and much handsomer in real life.

He also had a pleasant friendly manner that suggested he really was delighted to be here, and an attractive voice as he introduced Patrick Guest. Quite a few people had got to meet Guest as he had been in town for more than two weeks. He turned and introduced his co-judge, Renata Bingham from Winville, and then said with his hands out-raised, "You good folk of Buckton have given me the hardest job that has ever come my way. I expected to find perhaps two or three hundred entries. When I was told there were over five *thousand* I thought I must need a hearing aid!" He went on in

this vein for several minutes. It was light and funny and he was complimentary about the town, the hospitality he had received, and the extraordinary variety and quality of the entries.

Then he handed back to Jason who started in on the long list of prize winners. The judges had given out three prizes in each section and a varying number of Highly Commended certificates each of which also came with a small ten dollar prize. The winner of the Open Section who would receive two thousand dollars was a man in South Australia. The Youth Section went to a teenaged boy in Taree in NSW but second prize went to local girl Elspeth Mackie which brought a round of enthusiastic clapping. The Junior Section went to an eight-year-old from Pittsworth with a quirky little design of dancing cows. And then as Jason read down the list to the Highly Commendeds he came to the name of Elise Walsh.

Elise had done several drawings and although her cows were only moderately like real cows she did have what many of the children lacked, a sense of design and composition fitted to the idea that the picture was going to go round a stick of butter. She had experimented at home by wrapping and unwrapping a small chunk of same-sized wood. When Jason went on to say, "and the information I have been given by Mrs Grumm is that Elise is only three-years-old. I think that's wonderful. So how about three cheers! You've got not one but two budding artists here!"

Then he went on to the three People's Choice lists, the Open prize going to a man in New Zealand—to many people's amazement as they hadn't really believed it when Fiona and Karen had spread it round that there were entries from as far away as across the Tasman. This was a lovely landscape, very simple, done in unusual colours, and very effective. But second prize went to Jasmine Sullivan in Winville. There was no sign of any of the Sullivan family and Fiona thought they had probably convinced themselves it was just nice that Jasmine was entering to help swell the number of entries; they were a very modest family when it came to their talents. She was also glad that Elise's award had been via the anonymous work of the judges and that Jasmine's award owed nothing to Renata Bingham who occasionally exhibited in the small art gallery in Winville where Jasmine worked. People might still want to point fingers and cry favouritism but it would be hard to sustain. After all, it was Anne Grumm, wife of the Butter Factory manager and part time office manager, who had logged in all the entries and who had walked round with the judges when they made their final selection. And Anne could be assumed to want the best designs to win prizes for the sake of the factory, not have lemons getting awards …

The Youth choice went to a girl from Goondiwindi and the Junior to a boy from Shepparton in Victoria. Karen Dalton caught Fiona's eye from across the room and gave her a swift thumbs-up. There had been no shortage of nay-sayers, sure that only a few local people would enter and then only because the prize money was too good to pass up. Now both women thought that the sheer geographical range of prizewinners was confirmation in itself of the interest the competition had aroused and the simple fact that thousands of people had taken the time to visit their little web-site or read the ads they had placed in various rural newspapers to let people know about the competition.

The TV crew took several minutes to get some extra footage of Jason and the prizewinning entries and then the band struck up. Jason had already met Fiona and both Karen and Anne had unstintingly said the whole exciting weekend would not have happened if it had not been for Fiona. Now he held out his hands to her and said in his sexy voice, "Shall we dance?"

Fiona had arranged for Mrs Tripp to take over the children if she was called away for any reason. Caro Tripp stood on the sidelines with the children and watched the surge of people on to the floor to join Jason and Fiona and in a minute they were nearly hidden in the crowd. But Karen before she stepped out with her husband Roland and Dennis Walsh who had been standing quietly in the doorway to watch events inside the hall both saw Fiona say something to Jason and a minute or two later they both came towards Mrs Tripp and the children.

Caro Tripp had had a fleeting moment of regret that she had nobody to ask her to dance, of a faint stab of envy that others would enjoy themselves and feel young again whereas she would simply go out to help with the supper once Fiona took the children home. She thought Fiona was bringing their special guest over to meet her children. Instead Jason reached her and held out his hands again and said, "We haven't met but I hope you'll come for a whirl with me?" It had been

very many years since anyone, and certainly any man, had smiled at her like that. And although the late Mr Tripp had been a very decent hard-working man not even his best friends or his wife thought of him as a loss to Hollywood.

For a moment she was flustered and tempted to say no, it had been years since she'd danced, but Fiona gave her an encouraging smile and next minute she had sailed out on to the dance floor, the envy of many of the older women in the room, if not her son Russell and her daughter-in-law Karina Barry who were here in the crowd. Somewhere. Dennis thought it was typical of Fiona, a nice little gesture, but he felt it was time to absent himself. There might be troublemakers somewhere outside—and there was also the uneasy feeling that if every other man in the room was being gallant enough to ask one of the women or girls there to dance he would stand out as a … he couldn't decide if they might think he was shirking or whether people would simply assume that cops not only should not drink on duty but also that they weren't expected to dance on duty …

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It was getting well on into the evening when Sergeant John Applegarth drove into Buckton. He could hear the band pumping away long before he turned and ran down past the hall. It didn't surprise him to see Dennis Walsh outside. It was hard to picture Dennis *dancing* … there was something too ponderous about him …

Dennis had been inside to hear the winners in the butter wrapper competition announced. But then he had walked down to the main street and looked around. People sometimes took advantage when everyone was preoccupied elsewhere. The pub was open and George and Bill were there; Maryann Dillon was also there on her usual stool but then it was equally hard to picture Maryann *dancing* … and she didn't seem to have any friends. A couple of unknown men had come in for dinner and were now sitting over a last drink before getting on the road again. Herb Wilkins and Johnny Wurth were sitting over a quiet beer in a far corner. Herb and Johnny, bandy-legged old stockmen, were both in their seventies at least and if they'd ever gone dancing in their distant youth they probably thought those days were long gone. And Paul Pickering sat unnoticed by the wall. He saw Dennis Walsh come in and an angry look crossed his face before he turned away and ignored the sergeant.

"You looking for anyone, Dennis," George Johnson said cheerfully, "or it's thirsty work, dancing?"

"Very funny. Just looking to see if you've got any troublemakers holed up here."

"I wouldn't think so." George dropped his voice. "Unless you count Paul."

"No, not if he's on his own. I'll see you later, George."

"Oh, by the way," George had one little bit of news to impart, "Maurie's going out to pick up that Dorita tomorrow. Emma says she'll try her out, see how she is on housework and round the kitchen. She reckons she'd like to cut back a bit, just do the bookwork and stuff. So that Mrs Martin *was* right."

"I think you're jumping to conclusions, mate," Dennis said rather drily.

He walked back slowly, checking cars, making a note of bald tyres, broken tail lights, looking at regos, making certain no one had left dogs—or children—inside any of the vehicles. He saw a police car turn in by the station and park behind Buckton's vehicle. He couldn't be certain from here but thought it was most likely to be John Applegarth. There looked to be someone else in the car. He upped his stride and headed for the station.

Sergeant Applegarth got out of the car and waited for Walsh to come up to him.

"John! What's happening?"

At the back of his mind was the hope that the dance would end peacefully, everyone would simply get in their cars or walk home, and he could close up shop for the night and go home to bed. The arrival of John Applegarth seemed to promise a late night.

"I've arrested Lewis Gruen for the murder of Harry Bellingham," John said soberly and without any lead-in. "And I've come to Buckton to arrest Craig Goodrick as an accessory. I'd like your help."

For a moment Dennis was startled. For years he had told himself that Craig was an almighty nuisance, a thug, a bully, a thief, but no worse than that. Now he was being asked to take the whole caboodle of vices a step further.

"You've got evidence you think'll stand up?" He said it calmly; if John said so he was pepared to believe him. But it was a serious charge. And Craig would be quick to cry 'Foul!' if the evidence *didn't* stack up.

"I'd reckon so. But we can run through it if you've got the time."

"Come on in." Dennis unlocked the station, turned on the lights, and put the jug on. "Is Sonny Jim okay out there?"

"He'll have to be." John, too, had struggled with the idea that the two men could not have set up a calculated premeditated murder of a harmless unarmed man … But, once accepted, something tough and cool had taken over. If Gruen felt hungry, tired, cold, in need of a toilet, John Applegarth found it hard to care one way or the other.

"Okay, shoot." Dennis handed his colleague a mug and sat down.

"I did what you said. I looked into the background of Meryl Brown and Lewis Gruen. And I found his mum was a Goodrick. Amelia. I think she was Stan's daughter. Mum would know. And then I got his phone account and checked all the numbers—and I found five calls to Craig Goodrick. So I got Craig's phone details—and I found he had rung Lewis at nine-oh-two on the night Harry died. I wasn't sure if it was enough. So I did a house-to-house along both streets, where Lewis lives and where Meryl lives. And several people swore black and blue that he hadn't been round at Meryl's when they went to bed that night. He has a habit of parking over people's driveways so he's none too popular—and a lady near there had got in the habit of checking just before she goes to bed. Her husband has a heart problem and she's a bit obsessed with the idea that she might have to run him into Winville in the middle of the night some time—and that she wouldn't be able to get out. She says he was parked near Meryl's flat only till about half-past-eight that night and then he left."

Dennis nodded. It was little things like that which could bring the cleverest plan undone. And Gruen was probably an arrogant young git who had thumbed his nose at an old lady's worries. If he even had bothered to listen to her complaints …

"So I tackled Meryl again. I said I had clear evidence that Lewis had only been with her until about half-past-eight and her alibi was not only worthless but a deliberate lie and why was she lying for a useless sod like that. She broke down then and said she had to do what Lewis wanted or both she and the baby would suffer. Several people had already told me they thought he was pretty jealous and possessive of her and didn't mind to use physical violence. Then she said it was like being in prison—that she can never do anything or go anywhere or see anyone without first getting his permission."

Again Dennis nodded. There were people like that. "And now her dad was going to come and stay with her—and Gruen's nose would be out of joint? Something like that?"

"I'd say she was hoping Harry could rescue her from a relationship she couldn't escape and which was making her absolutely miserable, not only her but the kid too."

"So with no alibi—"

"That's it. And when I asked round more broadly I found several people sure they'd seen Lewis heading out of Garra just after nine. He still kept saying it wasn't him, that lots of local men have utes, which is true but not a lot of black vehicles. I wasn't sure how I'd get him to confess. I went back out to the Drexlers and took a tyre cast where that vehicle had pulled off their laneway. And I went down to the bridge and waited there to see how far back you'd see the lights of a car coming from the Garra side. And I went down under the bridge and looked around and I thought it looked like someone had caught both hands round the metal strut there where the Council replaced the wood and sort of swung himself down and I managed to get two reasonable palm prints to compare."

"And he caved in then?"

"Not exactly. He said he drove out, just to make sure Harry could find the right turn-off and when he didn't turn up he went on down to the bridge—and he saw he'd turned off there for a brief kip—so he turned round and came back to Garra."

"And how did he know Harry was on his way?"

"Exactly. I said that wouldn't wash—so then he told me another yarn about how he'd planned to stop Harry on the bridge and get a lift into Garra with him—and he was going to make Harry have a bit of an accident so the police would be called and he'd be charged with drink-driving—and Meryl would see what a useless lying bastard her dad really was and she wouldn't want anything more to do with him. And I said, 'tell me another'—and then he gave me *another* yarn about going down to Harry's car and he could see he was drunk as a skunk and he thought he'd start a little fire—just enough to get Harry carted off to hospital and Meryl'd know he wasn't safe to have around the house with her and the bub because he regularly drank and went to sleep with a smoke in his hand—but it'd only be like a bit of an accident."

"But it looks like Craig Goodrick spilt something on him in the pub here. Emma Doig thinks it might've been lighter fluid."

"And Craig'll say it was an accident?"

"Oh, for sure."

"So Lewis hung around there putting together a plan to get Harry out of their lives once and for all—and then he saw lights in the distance and he put his plan into action. Lit his hanky, opened the car door, put it in. It caught whatever Craig had spilled, lighter fluid sounds like a good bet, and flamed up. Lewis scuttles along there, down low, and bunkers down under the bridge and watches the Mittons try to save Harry and the car—"

"You think he was there all the time we were there?"

"I wondered. But I think he quietly crossed the creek, went back up the far side, got his car and drove home and let himself into Meryl's flat and there he was next morning and it was easy for her to say he'd been there all night—and it got Mrs Little confused about which night he was there and for how long."

"Which would explain why the Mittons are fairly sure about something parked in the Drexlers' lane—"

"And I felt reasonably sure there was nothing there when I came by. He was back in Garra by the time I got on the road."

Dennis nodded thoughtfully. "And if his heart hadn't gone on him Harry Bellingham would still be alive but a bit scarred."

"And his daughter would think he lied to her when he said he was on the wagon and had quit smoking. Mmmm. They may knock it back but I believe it *was* murder, not a nasty joke that went wrong. I don't think Lewis cared two hoots if he killed Bellingham. But I think he wanted to be certain Harry was found while we could still see clearly he'd been drinking. Alive or dead, Meryl would still think he was a drunk. And I'd say Lewis made sure Harry could not recognise him—even if he did survive."

"I'd agree with that," Dennis said after considering how the DPP might look at the charge. A dark figure, never speaking, looming up out of the shadows of the creek bed. Harry might not even be believed if he lived long enough to try and say this mysterious stranger had set him alight. It might rather be seen as a result of Harry having too many drinks along the way. "It was an attempt on somebody's life—and if the Mittons hadn't been good Samaritans—or if they'd assumed it was just some lout burning an old wreck then there's a good chance Harry would've burnt to death. Or he could've laid there, badly burnt, without medical help for a day or more before someone investigated the wreck … "

This time it was John's turn to nod. "But Craig will say he knew nothing about Lewis's plans, just that he shouted the guy a couple of drinks out of the goodness of his heart and had a game of pool and accidentally spilt something on him because everyone was crowding round the table and not giving him enough room."

"And he pinched his wallet—"

"Are you sure he did?"

"Nope. Craig says he bought a few drinks because he'd done well out of the extra work on offer out at the caravan park. I don't buy it. But that's what he told me. And he said what about a game of pool because he was sick o' playing the same people all the time. And the bloke sort of hesitated then said, 'okay, just one game' or something like that. He reckons he never saw if the bloke had a wallet or not. And if he had one then maybe he set it down on the bar when he first came in or left it in the gents."

"Why do you think he went in the pub in the first place?"

"George reckons he came in to go to the toilet and then bought a soft drink. Sometimes people think they should buy a drink if they use the facilities. I don't know if Harry thought that. But I'd say he was feeling nervous. Here he was going to meet the daughter he didn't know and he wanted her to forgive him for not doing anything for her for the last twenty years—and he wanted to like her and to have her like him. It must have been a big temptation, just a couple of drinks to calm him down and give him a bit o' courage—and up comes Craig all friendly and back-slapping and says can he buy him a drink. He wanted to get on the road but it was probably a nice feeling, all these friendly folk, and he maybe thought it wouldn't matter, he'd still be there by half-past-nine."

"And he realised he stunk of grog and lighter fluid and thought he'd just pull over there by the bridge and let the smell wear off a bit, let the fresh air blow through, maybe try to get himself psyched up again, and he hadn't drunk for six months and next thing he dropped off to sleep."

John considered the sequence of events. It sounded very simple, put like that, but what would've happened when Harry woke up and realised he'd been asleep not for a few minutes but for several hours? Would he have headed straight on to Garra and his daughter hoping to get there before she gave up on him and went to bed? Or stayed where he was for the night? Or driven into Garra and tried to get a bed at the pub for the rest of the night?

"Okay, so how d'you want to handle Craig?"

John had vaguely been hoping Dennis would take over. Now he said rather tentatively, "I didn't really want to go into the hall and try to collar him there, it would spoil things a bit, and you know how rude and nasty Craig can be."

"I'm pretty sure I saw Craig's pick-up parked along there by the High School. With luck he hasn't headed home yet." Dennis got up heavily. "Is your sod okay to be left a bit longer?"

"I'd think so."

"You want to cuff Craig and stick him in with Lewis?"

"I—I think so. I'd like to get them both into the Watch House tonight."

"Okay, let's go." Dennis picked up handcuffs, mobile, torch, and cap and went on out. Lewis Gruen was still sitting slumped down in the car outside. But Dennis barely spared him a glance, not even to satisfy any vague curiosity he might have, instead striding out along the footpath with John almost needing to run to keep up.

The little pick-up was still where Dennis had seen it earlier. And to his relief Craig was standing beside it, smoking and chatting with a couple of other men. But as soon as he saw the cops heading his way Craig hoyed his smoke and fumbled for his keys.

"Not so fast, son," Dennis Walsh said grimly. For a moment Craig seemed to weigh up his options: stay and tough it out, run, counter-attack if they'd come to accuse him of drink-driving or anything else. But his hesitation was enough for John Applegarth to come up and say, "Craig Goodrick, I am charging you as an accessory to the murder of Harold Bellingham." He cautioned Craig and asked him to accompany them to the station.

"That's a fuckin' libel!" Craig, after a first stunned moment, had found his voice and more. "That's just bullshit an' you know it!" The other men, after a brief stay perhaps to satisfy their curiosity, why did the police want Craig this time, now melted away into the night.

"You also stole Harold Bellingham's wallet," Dennis said in an almost conversational tone.

"Like hell I did! And you can't prove I did!"

"Can't I just. When it's sitting right now on your kitchen counter."

Whether this was an inspired guess or a mere punt it had a disastrous impact on Craig Goodrick. Before he could pull himself together both officers saw his look of dismay. He hid it again but he was no actor. Kitchen counter, kitchen table, it didn't really matter. He had been

enough of a fool to keep it, probably planning to try out whatever credit cards it contained as soon as the fuss over Bellingham's death died down, and now he wouldn't be able to get home to hide it. Not with two coppers looming over him. Not with no good excuse leaping to mind—

He thought of saying he had to get home to his animals, that he had a sick dog, a heifer about to calve. But he knew they wouldn't buy it. He could break away and run. He was certain he could outrun Walsh but Applegarth was a different matter …

"Get him in the car, John, and we'll nip straight round and pick it up. It's supporting evidence."

If Lewis Gruen had no wish to look at anyone, not even his cousin, Craig mouthed obscenities at and about everyone on the brief drive out to his farm in the Garra vehicle. And it only took John and Dennis two minutes to walk in, see the wallet sitting on the shelf beside Craig's filthy stove, slip it into a plastic bag and come back out. Craig could put in a complaint. It might or might not be taken seriously. As his back door was standing open he had obviously felt very confident or … as they came out to the back gate it wasn't hard to see why Craig was confident no one would try to get in. His two pig dogs came charging round the corner of the house. John had a horrified moment as the big mongrels came at them. Dennis just turned and said "down boys, you're too late". It was a voice of calm authority and to John's astonishment both dogs slowed and stopped. He thought back to his childhood fears. Someone at school had told him Craig let his dogs out to roam at night and they didn't mind what they attacked. The image had given him secret nightmares. It wasn't until years later that he heard someone say Craig never let his dogs out because Wylie Low had told him he would shoot the lot of them if he found them anywhere near the Bowls Club. It might've been an empty threat, Wylie was a peaceloving man and he went home to the farm at Prickly Creek of a night, but Craig had apparently taken it seriously; or knew Wylie wasn't the only one who harboured such ideas. Even so, his dogs *had* wandered on to his neighbour's farm and attacked a new-born foal. So it wasn't a blanket ban—or it had more to do with Craig's varying state of inebriation when he got home from the Coolibah of an evening …

John dropped Dennis off at the station again, not looking forward to the long drive to Winville but feeling a certain degree of satisfaction.

"Would you ring Winville for me and tell them I'm bringing the two of them?" Dennis said he would and that he would ring Chad Scully or Dan Goodrick and get them to go round and check on Craig's animals in the morning. "Thanks." John walked over and opened the driver's door. It would be all hours of the morning before he got home to Garra and Megan and the children …

Dennis came over, put a hand briefly on his one-time-subordinate's shoulder, and said simply, "Good work. No, that was more than good. That was first-class, John."

For a fleeting moment, John felt he was a young constable just starting out, and this was the sort of praise which had given him the courage and confidence to get on in his career. Dennis didn't throw compliments around lightly. And when he offered one it seemed to come with an added weight, of truth, of sincerity …

After the tail lights had dwindled into the distance, then turned on to the Winville road and disappeared, Dennis looked around him. The lights in his own house had come on. Fiona and the children were home. But he would need to go back up the street and make sure that people were still behaving themselves at the dance and outside …

He couldn't hide a sense of satisfaction. It couldn't bring Harry Bellingham back. And the more he knew about Bellingham the more he thought vaguely he might've liked him; he usually found something to like in people who were good with animals. But there would be some justice at the end of the process.

And he thought Eric Dwyer would probably appreciate that aspect of it. He hadn't met or spoken to Meryl Brown but if a jealous, possessive, controlling man had been willing to destroy her life then she too would have a kind of justice. Even if a court eventually knocked it back to manslaughter she would at least get several years in which to get her life back on to some sort of track, maybe move where Gruen would never think of looking …

And Gruen himself, from thinking he had got away with it and probably feeling pretty smart and confident, now had to face the shocking details of what he had done—and all because he was jealous of his power and control over Meryl Brown and her baby son.

Dennis came back to the Hall, looked around, then stepped inside. He longed to be able to get home to bed. It was already nearly half past ten and the band was only booked till eleven but for sure people would stay on to talk, to mess around. People were obviously still enjoying themselves. It was still pretty crowded and the dancers showed no sign of flagging. Almost the first person he saw was his constable, Brent Kelly, dancing with Irina Tsoukilidis, and he thought rather wryly that Kelly almost without trying seemed to attract one pretty woman after another—whereas he had agonised for months, years even, over whether the one woman he wanted could possibly find anything in him to like, let alone love.

He couldn't see just what it might be about his junior that attracted the women to him. But Fiona would have had no difficulty in telling him it had a lot to do with that slightly waif-like aspect, that Brent struck women as being a bit lost and 'needy'. It didn't stop him having some very problematical attitudes to women and to family life, but she didn't doubt the attraction. And no one had ever regarded Dennis Walsh as lost or needy … even though she understood that there were unhealed hurts in his life too …

After standing there for several minutes looking over the dancers, the people clustered round the long trestles of food, the numbers of children still out and about though it was, in his estimation, long past any six-year-old's bedtime, the bustling women still serving tea, the band still looking fresh and energetic as though they would happily play on if people pressed them (or offered overtime pay), he stepped out into the fresh night air again and walked on down towards the pub and as he walked he thought back to his own family and their enjoyment of the events.

Elise would probably want to tell the world about her certificate and her ten-dollar-note. Rob had got himself a Dinky toy in the lucky dip and would no doubt play with it with serious dedication. And Fiona was probably just thankful that so far everything had gone very well.

The pub was still quiet and trouble free. Pickering and the two strangers had gone. He could hear George and Maurie talking somewhere, probably in the kitchen, and the bar was deserted except for Maryann Dillon still perched on her stool. She was a hard person to like. But for the first time he felt a vague sense of pity. He went over and sat down at the bar near her. "You're not a dancer I take it, Ms Dillon?"

"Who would dance with me?" She had moved on from her happy drunk state to something maudling and full of self-pity.

"Lots of guys—if you'd give 'em a chance."

"You're joking. They'd just call me fat and think it's funny."

He hadn't come in with the idea of telling Maryann to pull herself together and do something with her life. She had a teenaged daughter who seemed to have the courage and determination that Maryann lacked. Or the grog hadn't got to her … But Tracey boarded in town with a family and had plans to go on to TAFE next year. She apparently wanted nothing more to do with her mother and Dennis felt he couldn't really blame her.

"Your choice. There are things called diets. And you could occasionally try being nice to people."

"Like you do?" she said with a sour bark; perhaps it was meant to be laughter but it barely qualified.

George, having heard voices in the bar, came out to see if he had a new customer.

"Can I get you anything, cobber—or did you drop by to get some peace from the noise? Don't know what kids' hearing'll be like in a few more years."

"Yeah, it is a bit much." Dennis wasn't fussed on the way bands increasingly felt their one duty in life was to deafen everybody. "I'll have a coffee, George, I need to stay awake till they're all gone home. And get Ms Dillon a coffee and a piece of cake." He paid George for both and put his wallet away again.

But he didn't try to answer Maryann's question. It suddenly seemed too complicated, he really didn't know why various people liked him, loved him even, but he was sure 'niceness' didn't

come into it, and he was tired. But it came to him much later that Maryann came here simply because George and Bill always treated her with a cheerful kindliness. It gave her the illusion of being liked …

And perhaps for the sad people like her the illusion was better than nothing.

*

Notes: The Barley Boys and The Tropicos are fictitious bands. But Superintendent Roy Golledge and Deputy Superintendent Kolberg were part of the staff at the Westbrook Farm Home for Boys in that period. The Home was closed many years later by the Beattie Government.

THE END